

## **Kurds Stage Unofficial Independence Vote**

**Author:** [Talar Nadir](#)

Organisers of poll fear Iraqi Kurdistan will lose its autonomy if local leaders become too deeply embroiled in Baghdad politics.

A small orange tent and a simple box covered with a Kurdish flag was set up 100 metres from a polling station in Sulaimaniyah on election day. Outside the tent, young volunteers were asking voters to take part in an unofficial referendum.

Each voter was given a card with two sentences: Do you want Kurdistan be part of Iraq? Or do you want an independent Kurdistan?

The tent was one of dozens set up by the Referendum Committee movement outside polling stations in cities with large Kurdish populations such as Sulaimaniyah, Arbil, Kirkuk and Dahuk.

The Referendum Committee was established by a group of Kurdish intellectuals and independent politicians last year, in response to the main Kurdish parties joining the Iraqi government.

Ethnic Kurds, who make up 20 per cent of Iraq's population, have governed themselves since Saddam Hussein lost control of northern Iraq after the 1991 Gulf War. The region is administered by a joint government formed by the two main Kurdish parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdistan Democratic Party.

Members of the Referendum Committee worry that the Kurds will lose their autonomy, and hopes of an independent Kurdistan, if they become too deeply embroiled in Iraqi politics.

Kner Abdullah, a senior member of the Referendum Committee, said the referendum voting cards will be scanned and sent to the United Nations and the European Union.

"This is a preliminary step for Kurds' self-determination, so that the UN can come in the future and hold an official and legal referendum, as has been held for many oppressed peoples in the world," she said.

Last year, the movement collected almost two-million signatures in support of a referendum on Kurdish self-determination. Copies of those signatures also were sent to the UN and the EU.

Voters in Sulaimaniyah voiced support for the referendum effort.

"So far we cling to the Arabs and they oppressed us, it is now the time to tell them we no longer want you," said driver Ibrahim Qadir.

Some voters said they thought the referendum could turn out to be more important than voting for the Iraqi National Assembly.

"If the result of the referendum shows that the majority of the people want independence for Kurdistan, it will be more important than the current elections," said policeman Najmaddin Omer.

Others thought it simply was not the right time to push the issue of Kurdish independence.

"As we take part in the Iraqi national elections, it means that we want to stay part of Iraq," said civil servant Hussein Muhammed. "This referendum is a demand of our long-term future."

Talar Nadir is an IWPR trainee journalist in Iraq.

**Location:** Iraqi Kurdistan  
Iraq

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**Source URL:** <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/kurds-stage-unofficial-independence-vote>