

## **Pre-Election Hitches in Sulaimaniyah**

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In the Kurdish areas where people are the most receptive to democracy, they still find it hard to register to vote.

People in Iraq's Kurdish region have been voicing growing frustration over the process of registering to vote in the January elections, citing numerous mistakes in the registration forms and widespread confusion about how to correct them.

"I read the form three times, and only then could I figure it out," said Hiwa Ghareeb Muhammed, a lawyer in the city of Sulaimaniyah. "It is really difficult for people to understand. And if there are mistakes, no one knows how to correct them."

Iraqi voters are set to go to the polls in late January to elect a 275-seat National Assembly charged with writing a new constitution and appointing a transitional government. Voters in the three Kurdish-controlled governorates will also elect members to the Kurdish Assembly.

The northern region of Iraqi Kurdistan has enjoyed semi-autonomy since 1991, when the United Nations intervened to halt the Baathist regime's attacks on the Kurds. As a result of a more than a decade of separate existence, the region has remained largely free of the violence now plaguing the rest of the country.

Consequently, the area should be one of the easiest places for election officials to prepare for the January poll, but voters here say the registration process has been fraught with problems.

Registration forms were handed out together with monthly food rations, and prospective voters then had a chance to get errors fixed at local registration centres. As well as people's names and genders being confused, some people found they had been left off the register entirely.

The Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq has already moved to correct some of the errors identified early on. Registration centres discovered that the youngest voters, born in 1986, had been left off their lists, while the idea of logging people's sex was scrapped after the complaints about mistakes became too numerous to deal with.

Other problems, however, have proved more difficult to solve.

"My daughter is 22 years old, she lives at her brother's home in Erbil but her name isn't on either list," complained one woman at a registration centre in Sulaimaniyah. The registration manager told the woman to come back when she had proof that her daughter was not registered in Erbil.

Voters who have moved to another area say it is unreasonable that they should have to go to the registration centre in their original neighborhood.

"I can't travel to Erbil, I just can't afford to get there or stay there," said Rizgar Abdullah Hama-Karim, a manual laborer. "If that's how it is, my family and I won't be able to vote."

Language issues are also presenting a problem in Sulaimaniyah. While Iraq's interim law recognises Arabic and Kurdish as Iraq's two official languages, the registration centres are only making changes to documents written in Arabic.

"The forms were produced in Switzerland where they only had access to Arabic fonts," explained Soran Ibrahim Arif, training director for the local branch of the national election commission. "Since the names were registered in Arabic from the beginning, the forms need to be filled out in Arabic so as to avoid confusion."

Kurdish uses a modified version of the Arabic alphabet that requires extra letters. Using only Arabic-language forms means that some Kurdish surnames are distorted, so that the name Chia has become Jia on the voter list, with potentially confusing consequences.

Anyone with a long surname also presents a problem because the forms only provide space for ten letters. The registration centres say they are either writing the extra letters in the last space or just dropping them altogether.

Arif admits that problems with the forms have created confusion among some voters, "Generally, the forms are not at a level that people can easily understand, but it is hard to make them simpler."

Voter confusion over the electoral process is only to be expected in a nation that has not seen a democratic election in decades.

Many people said they had not been able to find out the location of their local registration centre, nor did they know when deadline for registration passes, or how to recognise mistakes on their forms.

Some registration officials blamed the media for not giving the issue enough coverage.

"Media channels did give some exposure to the program, but it wasn't enough, they could have been made more active," said Sidiq Sadraddin Bahzad, who manages one of the 11 registration centres in Sulaimaniyah.

But the head of Sulaimaniyah's electoral commission said he was satisfied with the media's efforts. "They published whatever we sent them, and I held interviews and press conferences with all the local TV channels," said Hama-Salih Hama-Amin.

A limited budget for advertising also played a role. Electoral officials say they received only part of the budget due them from Baghdad headquarters. The money covered the setup of the Sulaimaniyah office, but was not enough to cover staff salaries or running costs.

Others claims the registration process was flawed from the beginning. For Bahzad, the system of tying voter registration to food ration forms failed to take basic human nature into account.

"If a family member has travelled abroad, or is dead, or another fictitious family member was registered, people do not want to bring it to anyone's attention in case they lose their food ration."

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**Location:** Iraqi Kurdistan  
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