

Public Unenthused by Constitution Poll

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Apathy and ignorance leaves many Baghdad residents ill-prepared for historic vote.

Many Baghdad residents are uninformed about the upcoming constitutional referendum because of failed public awareness campaigns and dire living conditions that are breeding apathy.

Residents interviewed in the capital said they remained uninformed - or didn't care - about the October 15 referendum, which will mark the first time in the country's history that the public will vote on a constitution.

Already marred by political and sectarian divisions - many Sunni Arab leaders are opposed to the document in its current state - analysts noted that the vote may also be affected by limited public awareness of the proposed constitution's content.

The vote "signals a major turning point in the history and future of Iraq", said Baghdad University sociology professor Adul-Qadir Hamdi. He argued that a referendum this crucial requires solid, clear-cut information.

But a recent nationwide public opinion survey conducted by the United Nations found the majority of respondents - slightly over 60 per cent - knew little or nothing about the constitutional drafting committee. Nearly 77 per cent had not seen a copy of the proposed constitution, and 91 per cent had never participated in constitutional discussions hosted by civic or non-governmental organisations.

On the streets of Baghdad, posters encouraging citizens to vote were torn down so often in some neighbourhoods that the government decided to stop replacing them. The UN began distributing five million copies of the proposed constitution for public distribution just a little over a week before the referendum. And a government-sponsored media campaign that was supposed to outline in simple language details of the draft has proved ineffective.

Instead, the media has focused almost entirely on the politics surrounding the referendum on the proposed constitution, Hamdi asserted, and has ignored explaining the document itself.

"The public only knows about the disagreements among the blocs drafting the constitution," he said.

Some residents are so unaware of the upcoming vote that they believe it is for a new Iraqi cabinet. Others are not registering to vote because they say the results are already fixed. And some argued they are too consumed in trying to survive to pay attention to the referendum.

"What vote are you talking about?" asked Amjad Sa'ad, a 31-year-old security guard. "When our basic daily needs are met and our security is restored, then we will care about such things."

Zuhra Abdu-Samad, 53, reacted angrily when asked about the upcoming referendum, indicating that it would not produce anything of value. "It is just like shaking a fruitless palm tree," she said.

Some who do care are walking through the process virtually blind. Seif Sa'ad, a 35-year-old vendor, said he

registered to vote "without having the least bit of information on how to fill in the registration form. Anyway, on election day there will be a lot of people who know how to fill in the form for me".

Politically aware and influential, religious leaders in particular enjoy the trust of many Iraqis who may vote, the UN study found. Forty per cent of those polled said a national religious figure or leader would most influence their decision to accept or reject the constitution

Ali Hussein, a sheikh at of one of the Shia Husseiniayah mosques in Baghdad, said it was his moral and religious duty to encourage people to participate in the referendum. He said he also explains to his people the constitution's "weak points", including the possibility that federalism could lead to sectarian discord.

Critics say the delayed printing of the draft constitution hindered awareness. Most Iraqis did not receive a copy of the document until October 6 because the UN, which warned that it needed weeks to translate, copy, print and distribute copies of the draft, did not start handing them out until October 4.

Iraqi leaders extended the deadline for approving the proposed constitution several times and continued amending it as late as early October.

"This delay hurts the Iraqi people," said Hamid Majid Musa, leader of the Communist Party and a member of the National Assembly. "They have the right to have time to understand the constitution, which is very crucial for the future of Iraq."

Referendum posters and the newspapers that have sought to communicate the central points of the constitution have had little influence over the public, said Nseif Sadiq, a Baghdad-based media analyst.

"People can't stand in the scorching heat of Baghdad to look at graffiti or read instructions on how to vote," he said. "Newspapers aren't effective considering many people can't buy them. All of these factors make the referendum process cloudy."

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Location: Iraqi Kurdistan
Iraq

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