

Shia Campaign Bears Fruit

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Voter turnout in parts of the Shia south was as high as 80 per cent.

Voters in the mainly Shia south spoke with a loud voice on election day, after years of suffering in silence under Saddam Hussein's regime.

Voter turnout in some areas neared 80 per cent, as people waited in long lines to cast their ballots. In Diwaniyah Province, electoral officials said that 77 per cent of registered voters turned out.

"The Iraqi people love freedom and this big turnout proved that," said Saad al-Madhloom, head of the Diwaniyah branch of the Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq, IEI. He added that transportation problems kept some voters in remote areas from reaching polling sites.

Shia, who make up 60 per cent of Iraq's population, saw the ballot as a chance to overturn decades of Sunni rule. Saddam Hussein, who favoured the minority Sunnis, led a brutal campaign of oppression against the Shia.

In the southeastern city of Kut, there were reports that Sunnis there largely defied a boycott called by the Muslim Scholars Association, and turned out widely.

"Some parties boycotted but that doesn't mean that we should boycott as well," said Salim Ghanim, a Sunni. "On the contrary, my family, my neighbours and I voted and we didn't have any difficulties at all."

Voters in Kut generally were slow to get to the polls, but voting steadily increased over the course of election day. Sometimes, entire families came to polling stations together, carrying political banners and Iraqi flags.

Several people said that they were encouraged by the security crackdown before election day. They also expressed hope that the elections will lead to peace in the country.

"How can I not participate in the rebirth of the new Iraq? Saddam has killed two of my sons," said Salima Abbas, who leaned against the shoulder of her grandson outside a polling site.

In Babil province south of Baghdad, an overall figure at least 75 per cent of registered voters participated in the election, although turnout was noticeably lower in mainly Sunni areas.

Shatha Abbas, the assistant chief of the IEI in Babil, said that turnout was low in towns such as Jarf al-Sakhr and al-Hamiyah, but it was higher in al-Musayyab and al-Iskandariyah, hovering around 60 per cent. No polling violations were reported.

"The separation and counting of the votes and the percentages were determined with a high level of transparency, with monitors in attendance from different parties as well as a number of journalists," said Qays Al-Hasnawi, an IEI spokesman in Babil.

Voters in Babil expressed optimism as the ballots were being counted.

"I did not expect that the elections would be conducted so wonderfully," said Star Al-Ma'moori. "It is a success for Iraq, a success for democracy and it is a big achievement for the Iraqis."

In Basra in the south, election officials predicted that the turnout would top 80 per cent.

Bassem Ali Khanjar, director of a polling site in southern Basra, said the only problem there were delays caused by illiterate people showing up without the helpers they were supposed to bring along.

"The turnout was good, and during some hours of the day more than expected," he said.

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