
VOTERS IN IRAQ'S KURD REGION HAVE LITTLE FAITH IN POLLS

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In the run-up to May 12 parliamentary polls, would-be voters in northern Iraq's Kurdish region appear apathetic -- due largely to an ongoing economic crisis and a lack of faith in their political leaders.

In Iraq's last general election in 2014, political parties based in the Kurdish region clinched a total of 62 seats in the country's national assembly.

Forty-four candidates from Kurdish parties were elected in the provinces of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Dohuk, while another 18 were elected in territories disputed between Baghdad and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), including Kirkuk, Mosul and Diyala.

Previously, Kurdish parties had enjoyed considerable influence in disputed areas, where standards of living had been relatively higher than in other parts of Iraq.

The situation, however, has taken a turn for the worse in recent years due to chronic economic problems, the emergence of the Daesh terrorist group and mounting tensions between the Erbil-based KRG and Baghdad.

First, Erbil suffered from budget cuts imposed by the central government. It sustained another major blow in 2013 with the emergence of Daesh, which overran much of northern and western Iraq the following year.

Already reeling from chronic financial problems and the new terrorist threat, the Kurdish region suffered another setback last year when the KRG conducted an unconstitutional referendum on regional independence.

Following the illegitimate poll, federal forces moved into disputed parts of Iraq -- including Kirkuk, Mosul and Diyala -- while Peshmerga forces loyal to the KRG withdrew from these areas.

Many people in the Kurdish region blame the referendum debacle on the region's two main political parties: the Erbil-based Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Sulaymaniyah-based Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

Voter apathy

Anadolu Agency spoke to several would-be voters in the Kurdish region, most of whom voiced distrust in their politicians and put little stock in the upcoming polls.

Surkey Selim, the owner of a bookshop in Erbil, said most of the regions people had lost faith in the regional government.

The KDP and PUK, he said, incessantly attack one another rather than doing anything positive.

Salah Abubakar, who manages a restaurant in Erbil, said that the regions political parties lacked credibility.

This is because the main Kurdish parties have failed to fulfill the promises they made to the people, he said.

They couldn't even protect the gains we made, Abubakar asserted in reference to the recent loss of disputed areas.

Kurdish political parties -- both on the left and the right -- have forfeited the peoples trust, he added.

Shukru Mohamed, a painter who fled to the Kurdish region four years ago after Daesh overran Iraqs western Anbar province, said there was little enthusiasm in Erbil -- unlike in other parts of Iraq -- for the upcoming polls.

He said the savage competition observed in Baghdad and Anbar was hardly in evidence in the Kurdish region.

The crisis over [disputed] Kirkuk and the salary cuts [recently imposed by Baghdad on the Kurdish regions public-sector employees] have led to a loss of trust among Kurds, both in the central government and Kurdish political parties, Mohamed said.

Aydin Maruf, an Erbil-based lawmaker for the Iraq Turkmen Front, for his part, cited several reasons for the lack of electoral enthusiasm in the region.

The economic crisis is a significant factor, as local people are having a hard time making ends meet, he said.

Another factor is the lack of trust in the [regions] ruling parties, while the ongoing Daesh threat -- and the bitter dispute between Erbil and Baghdad -- have also served to dishearten the electorate, Maruf added.

Yet another factor, the lawmaker said, is the fact that many people in the region care more about elections for the Kurdish parliament in Erbil, which are scheduled to be held in September.

Disputed areas

Murad Hakim Mohamed, a sociologist at the political science department at Erbil's Salahaddin University, said the loss of Kurdish influence in the disputed areas would likely have a negative

impact on election results.

Kurdish parties in Kirkuk, for example, can be expected to lose votes, he said.

Following the recent clashes [over disputed areas], Kurdish political influence in the region was severely diminished, he explained.

Whats more, many Kurds were displaced from their homes [in disputed areas], Mohamed said. Those who remained have lost faith in the political parties.

Noting that Kurds previously had 18 elected MPs from the disputed areas, Mohamed predicted that this number would fall dramatically in the upcoming polls.

Of Iraqs 24 million registered voters, 3.7 million are in the Kurdish region.

According to Iraqs electoral districting, Erbil will elect 16 MPs, Sulaymaniyah 18 and Dohuk 12. As for the disputed parts of the country, Mosul will elect 34 MPs, Diyala 14, Kirkuk 13 and Saladin 12.

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