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# THE 2018 IRAQI FEDERAL ELECTIONS

## A POPULATION IN TRANSITION?

Renad Mansour  
Christine van den Toorn



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# The 2018 Iraqi Federal Elections: A Population in Transition?

Renad Mansour and Christine van den Toorn

## About the Authors

**Renad Mansour** is Research Fellow in the Middle East and North Africa Programme at Chatham House, and at IRIS. His research explores the situation of Iraq in transition and the dilemmas posed by state-building.

**Christine van den Toorn** is Director of IRIS, AUIS. She has nearly fifteen years of academic and professional experience in the Middle East, nine of which have been spent in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

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## Acknowledgements

This report was written with the assistance of Kristina Bogos, Junior Fellow, IRIS; and Emily Burlinghaus, Programme Officer, IRIS. AUIS student research assistants Mera Jasm Bakr, Rebaz Majeed, Muhammed Balisani, Hawar Shafeq and Abdullah Imad conducted fieldwork for the report.

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The Middle East Centre is leading the research on drivers of conflict in Iraq and the wider Middle East. Our partners in Iraq are the Institute of Regional and International Studies at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, and Al Bayan Center for Planning and Studies, Baghdad.



This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK government; however, the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK government's official policies.

If you would like more information about the Centre's work on the CRP, please contact Sandra Sfeir ([s.sfeir@lse.ac.uk](mailto:s.sfeir@lse.ac.uk)).



## Key Findings

- Low voter turnout at the 2018 Iraqi federal elections (at 44.5 percent) reflects a malaise in the overall Iraqi population and a rejection of the political class that has governed the country since 2003.
- Most Iraqis have decided that the old political elite cannot combat corruption or improve government services. They have yet to identify a new political leadership that they feel can do so.
- The top two winning coalitions, Muqtada al-Sadr's Saairun Coalition and Hadi al-Amiri's Fateh Alliance did well because they were perceived to be outside the system.
- The split of the historically powerful Da'wa Party into two meant Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's Victory Alliance (I'tilaf al-Nasr) and Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition (I'tilaf Dawlat al-Qanun) did less well than expected.
- Despite prior talk of post-sectarianism, most Iraqis voted along identity-based lines, but the coalitions were more cross-sectarian than in previous elections. The ability to mobilise a large portion of the Shi'a base was key to successful election campaigns.
- Large-scale allegations of fraud marred the elections especially in the Kurdish provinces of Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Dohuk, and the disputed territory of Kirkuk. The subsequent investigation into electoral fraud, while problematic constitutionally and tainted by political interests, is a positive trend for the democratic process in Iraq.

## Introduction

On 12 May 2018, Iraqis went to the polls to vote for their next parliament, prime minister and cabinet. Compared to the previous elections of 2005, 2010 and 2014, the sectarian-based political blocs were fragmented and competed for the same constituencies. The election also delivered a surprise, with Muqtada al-Sadr's Saairun Coalition (an alliance between Sadr's Shi'a Islamist followers and the Iraqi Communist Party) winning the most seats of any bloc, although not enough to form a government alone. Sadr's bloc was closely followed by the Fateh Alliance, headed by the Badr Organization leader Hadi al-Amiri and a number of leaders from the predominantly Shi'a Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF). Incumbent Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's Victory Alliance placed third. Post-election manoeuvring will determine the shape of the next administration, with a broad coalition government the most likely outcome.

The elections delivered a number of clear messages about the state of Iraqi politics, not least the low turnout and the decision of many Iraqis to boycott the elections, reflecting a general malaise and disillusion with the current political leadership and bloated bureaucracy. Economic, political and social problems continue to plague the country. Iraqis don't have access to basic services – such as water and electricity – and to jobs. They blame the corrupt political system and governing elite for these deficiencies. In addition, millions are still displaced, Islamic State (ISIS) followers continue to plan and carry out attacks, and political leadership continues to fracture. The latter was evident in the pre-election fragmentation of traditionally larger ethno-sectarian-based blocs and the subsequent

emergence of new opposition parties. However, the impact on government remains to be seen, with the established elite seemingly determined to preserve its prerogative and the ethno-sectarian system that underpins it.

The emergence of new parties split a once-united Shi'a vote, and Abadi's decision to run members of the established elite against Sadr's reform candidates contributed to unexpected electoral results. Likewise, in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), Kurds used boycotts to express apathy and dissatisfaction with the duopoly of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). This abstention – paired with electoral irregularities that spurred post-election accusations of fraud – contributed to a continuation of the status quo. These outcries were especially notable in the disputed territories such as Kirkuk, where the PUK, a party criticised by local Kurds for betraying the city by allowing forces from Baghdad to take over in October of last year, won six of the twelve contested seats. Allegations of fraud, coercion and intimidation again signal the elite's continued hold on power and accompanying growing civic disengagement in the Kurdistan Region.

The elections served as a gauge for measuring the post-ISIS trajectory of Iraq's political class, citizenry and civil society. The revelations of electoral fraud and the very low turnout (estimated to be around 30% in Baghdad and even less in Basra) indicate that it will be difficult for the political class to overcome its reputation for maintaining the status quo – and for the citizenry to accept it.

This report is the second in a series of three produced by IRIS on the 2018 Iraqi federal elections. The first, published in May 2018, analysed campaign mobilisation strategies.<sup>1</sup> The final report will be published after government formation. It will look at what the composition means for reform and assess political and conflict dynamics.

## Iraq

### Elections Results

The winner of the 12 May elections was Muqtada al-Sadr's Saairun Coalition, gaining 54 seats. Hadi al-Ameri's Fateh Alliance (Tahalof al-Fateh) won 47 seats, and incumbent Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's Victory Alliance (I'tilaf al-Nasr) came third with 42 seats. Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law Coalition (I'tilaf Dawlat al-Qanun) won 25 seats, and Ammar al-Hakim's National Wisdom Movement (Tayar al-Hikma al-Watani) won 19 seats. As a result, the previously united Shi'a Islamist vote was split. The leading non-Islamist list Ayad Allawi's National Coalition (I'tilaf al-Watania) won 21 seats. Masoud Barzani's KDP was the most successful Kurdish party with 25 seats, while the leading Sunni list, Osama al-Nujaifi's Iraqi Decision Alliance (Tahalof al-Qarar al-Iraqi), won 14 seats (see Table 1).<sup>2</sup>

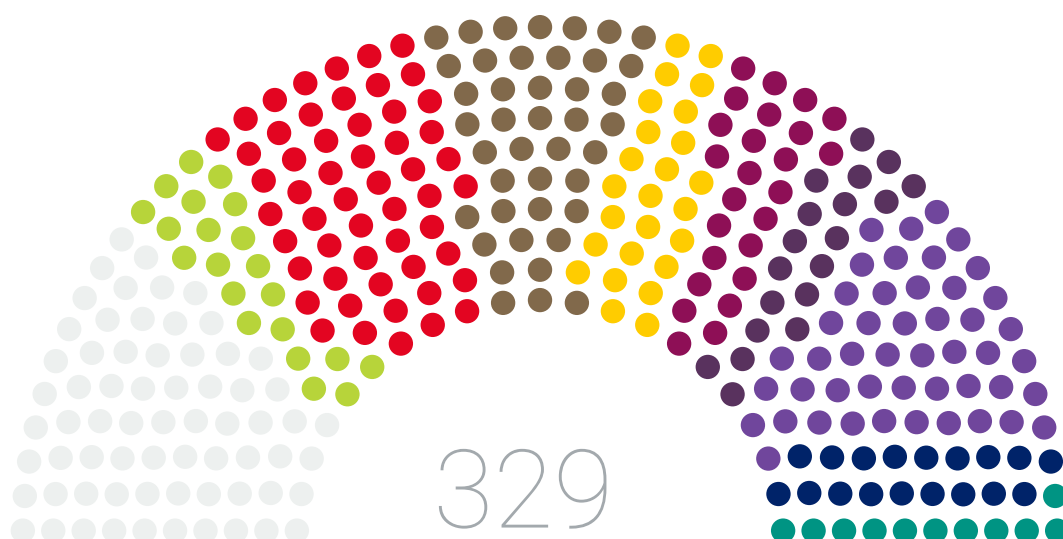
<sup>1</sup> 'Iraq Votes 2018: Election Mobilization Strategies', *Institute of Regional and International Studies*, 11 May 2018. Available at [http://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/IraqVotes2018\\_MobilizationStrategies1.pdf](http://auis.edu.krd/iris/sites/default/files/IraqVotes2018_MobilizationStrategies1.pdf) (accessed on 17 July 2018).

<sup>2</sup> Sonam Abdullah Khoshnaw, 'Distribution of Parliamentary Seats in Different Iraqi Provinces', *Rudaw*, 19 May 2018. Available at <http://www.rudaw.net/arabic/middleeast/iraq/1805201816> (accessed on 17 July 2018).

To the Iraqi voter, the priority was not simply to reconcile ethno-sectarian differences, but rather to bridge the gap between elite and citizen. As a result, 65 percent of the successful candidates were newcomers to Parliament.<sup>3</sup> However, the leaders of the main blocs remain the same, challenging the hope for change via elections.

Table 1. Key Winners of the Iraqi Parliamentary Elections 2018

Party	Leadership	Seats
 Saairun Coalition	Muqtada al-Sadr	54
 Fateh Coalition	Hadi al-Ameri	47
 Victory Alliance	Haider al-Abadi	42
 State of Law Coalition	Nouri al-Maliki	25
 KDP	Masoud Barzani	25
 National Coalition	Ayad Allawi	21
 National Wisdom Movement	Ammar al-Hakim	19
 PUK	Kosrat Rasul Ali	18
 Iraqi Decision Alliance	Osama al-Nujaifi	11



2018); 'Final Results: Saairoon Alliance Led by al-Sadr Tops Parliamentary Elections in Iraq', *RT Online*, 19 May 2018. Available at [https://arabic.rt.com/middle\\_east/944882-البرلمانية-في-لاتخابات-مقعدا-54-تفوز-الصدر-كتلة](https://arabic.rt.com/middle_east/944882-البرلمانية-في-لاتخابات-مقعدا-54-تفوز-الصدر-كتلة) (accessed on 17 July 2018).

<sup>3</sup> '65 Percent New Faces in the Parliament', *MIQPM*, 29 May 2018. Available at [http://www.miqpm.com/new/News\\_Details.php?ID=364](http://www.miqpm.com/new/News_Details.php?ID=364) (accessed on 17 July 2018).



Table 2. Seat Distribution per Province

**Anbar**

Party	Seats
Anbar is our Identity	6
National Coalition	3
Iraqi Decision Alliance	2
Abiroom Coalition	2
Victory Alliance	2

**Babil**

Party	Seats
Fateh Coalition	4
Saairun Coalition	4
Victory Alliance	3
National Wisdom Movement	3
State of Law Coalition	3
Coalition of Competencies for Change	1

**Baghdad**

Party	Seats
Saairun Coalition	17
Fateh Coalition	9
State of Law Coalition	9
National Coalition	8
Victory Alliance	8
National Wisdom Movement	4
Iraqi Decision Alliance	4
Baghdad Alliance	4
Others	6

**Basra**

Party	Seats
Fateh Coalition	6
Saairun Coalition	5
Victory Alliance	5
State of Law Coalition	4
National Wisdom Movement	2
Assembly of the Men of Iraq	1
Movement of the Will	1

**Dhi Qar**

Party	Seats
Saairun Coalition	6
Fateh Coalition	5
State of Law Coalition	3
Victory Alliance	3
National Wisdom Movement	2

**Diyala**

Party	Seats
Fateh Coalition	3
Iraqi Decision Alliance	3
National Coalition	3
Saairun Coalition	2
Victory Alliance	1
National Wisdom	1
PUK	1

**Dohuk**

Party	Seats
KDP	10
Islamic Party of Kurdistan	1

**Erbil**

Party	Seats
KDP	8
PUK	2
New Generation	2
Coalition for Democracy and Justice	1
Movement for Change	1
Kurdistan Islamic Group	1

**Karbala**

Party	Seats
Fateh Coalition	3
Saairun Coalition	3
Victory Alliance	2
State of Law Coalition	2
National Wisdom Movement	1

**Kirkuk**

Party	Seats
PUK	6
Kirkuk Arab Coalition	3
Turkman Front of Kirkuk	3

**Maysan**

Party	Seats
Saairun Coalition	5
Fateh Coalition	2
National Wisdom Movement	1
Victory Alliance	1
State of Law Coalition	1

**Muthanna**

Party	Seats
Saairun Coalition	2
Fateh Coalition	2
Victory Alliance	1
National Wisdom Movement	1
State of Law Coalition	1

**Najaf**

Party	Seats
Saairun Coalition	4
Fateh Coalition	3
Victory Alliance	3
National Wisdom Movement	1
State of Law Coalition	1

**Nineveh**

Party	Seats
Victory Alliance	7
KDP	6
National Coalition	4
Nineveh is our Identity	3
Fateh Coalition	3
Iraqi Decision Alliance	3

**Qadisiyyah**

Party	Seats
Fateh Coalition	3
Saairun Coalition	3
Victory Alliance	2
National Wisdom Movement	1
State of Law Coalition	1
Eradaa Movement	1

**Saladin**

Party	Seats
National Fortress Coalition	3
Fateh Coalition	2
National Coalition	2
Victory Alliance	2
Iraqi Decision Alliance	2
Saladin is our Identity	1

**Sulaymaniyah**

Party	Seats
PUK	8
Change movement	4
New Generation	2
Kurdistan Islamic Group	1
KDP	1
Coalition for Democracy and Justice	1
Kurdistan Islamic Union	1

**Wasit**

Party	Seats
Saairun Coalition	3
Fateh Coalition	2
Victory Alliance	2
National Wisdom Movement	2
State of Law Coalition	1
Coalition of Competencies for Change	1

## Explaining the Low Turnout

The Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) officially placed turnout at 44.52 percent, which was lower than that of 2014 and 2010 (both at 60 percent). However, to many residents in Baghdad, the turnout – at 33 percent – was still higher than expected.<sup>4</sup> As one civil society activist told the authors, ‘if you would tell me that 1 out of 3 people showed up to vote, I would not believe you’. The intention not to vote was clear in the mood of many residents prior to the elections, despite the lack of a full-fledged boycott campaign. Even Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who previously told Iraqis it was their duty to vote, ruled that the decision to participate was that of the citizen.<sup>5</sup> This lack of participation was indicative of the general mood in Iraq, where after 15 years, many citizens had lost trust in the post-Ba‘athist leadership.

Evidence of voter unhappiness has been present for some time. The turnout reflected to some extent the protest movement. Beginning in the summer of 2015 in Basra and then spreading throughout the south and centre, demonstrations emerged demanding systemic change to the political system. The movement was inspired by the civil trend, which includes a number of leftist, secularists and communist thinkers who have argued against the so-called ‘Green Zone elite’ since 2010.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the protests erupted in the middle of the war against ISIS is indicative of the priorities of many Iraqi citizens, who began equating the terrorist to the corrupt leader. Baghdad, the centre of the protest movement for the past few years, had the lowest turnout of 33 percent at the elections. In Basra and many of the southern provinces, where the movement began, the turnout was also lower than the national average.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the established electoral lists, namely Abadi’s Victory Alliance and Maliki’s State of Law Coalition, lost votes, whereas the Sadrist (linked to the protest movement) maintained votes.<sup>8</sup>

The low turnout is indicative of a gap between the ruling leadership and the population. In an election where citizens demanded systematic change, deploying the same elite and parties – our previous report argued that over 90 percent of the competing lists were not new<sup>9</sup> – to seek votes missed the mark. As a result, many Iraqis did not believe that genuine change could come from voting for the same leaders.

<sup>4</sup> Interviews with residents post-elections in Baghdad.

<sup>5</sup> Renad Mansour, ‘What to Expect from Iraq’s Election on Saturday’, *Washington Post*, 7 May 2018. Available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/05/07/what-to-expect-from-iraqs-post-islamic-state-elections/?utm\\_term=.74ec4f1799ee](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/05/07/what-to-expect-from-iraqs-post-islamic-state-elections/?utm_term=.74ec4f1799ee) (accessed on 17 July 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Faleh Jabar, ‘The Iraqi Protest Movement: From Identity Politics to Issue Politics’, *LSE Middle East Centre Paper Series* 25, June 2018; ‘Sadr–Communist Alliance and Iraq’s 2018 Elections Interview with Benedict Robin’, *Musings on Iraq*, 22 May 2018. Available at <http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.com/2018/05/sadr-communist-alliance-and-iraqs-2018.html> (accessed on 17 July 2018).

<sup>7</sup> One author argues that the turnout was as low as 14.4 percent in Basra. See: Matthew Schweitzer, ‘Protests in Southern Iraq Intensify, Is Instability to Follow?’, *The Global Observatory*, 24 July 2018. Available at <https://theglobalobservatory.org/2018/07/protests-southern-iraq-intensify-is-instability-to-follow/> (accessed on 31 July 2018).

<sup>8</sup> Fateh was also able to do well in the south because it was not linked to the ruling class.

<sup>9</sup> ‘Iraq Votes 2018’.

### Sadr Outperforms and Abadi Underperforms. Why?

In most public opinion surveys, Abadi was the pre-election favourite, with his alliance the choice for 24 percent of Iraqis. Saairun only had 8 percent and Fateh 7 percent of the vote.<sup>10</sup> What could explain the discrepancy between the polling data and the results? The answer lies in the pre-election mobilisation strategies that each leader chose in order to best convince the disillusioned voter that his list could bring about change.<sup>11</sup>

A main pre-election mobilisation strategy employed primarily by Abadi and, to a lesser extent, Ameri, was the stressing of cross-ethno-sectarian policies – or issue-based over identity-based politics. Under this strategy and the guidance of international advisors, Abadi campaigned in Kurdish and Sunni areas to demonstrate that he was an Iraq-wide candidate. However, Abadi decided to run electoral candidates who came from the established elite, including current and former cabinet ministers. He could not convince Iraqis that the list of establishment elite was serious about bringing systemic change.

In contrast, as the IRIS pre-election report argued, ‘Saairun, inspired by Shi’a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and the civic protest movement, focused on an electoral base of disenfranchised citizens. This base seeks systematic change in the political system and includes a wide mix of Shi’a urban and rural lower class citizens, as well as Islamists and secularists – all in opposition to the ruling elite.’<sup>12</sup> Saairun ran the highest number of new candidates and focused its campaign messages on change and anti-elitism. Through this strategy, Sadr was able to maintain his base by convincing his supporters that he will be able to create change. The core of his electoral base also ran a strong get-out-to-vote campaign on the day of the elections. As a result, Sadr received a similar number of votes in each province as compared to the 2014 elections.<sup>13</sup> The low turnout hurt his opponents however, allowing him to gain an extra 20 seats with the same number of votes.<sup>14</sup>

Fateh also benefited from the anti-establishment vote to a varied degree. Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq, for example, went from 1 to 15 seats because it was seen as non-establishment; whereas Badr maintained the exact same number of seats because it was seen as establishment. Fateh’s focus on members of the PMF, their families and the families of martyrs, made it the most popular group amongst the Shi’a Islamist electoral base. This included a pitch to help returning fighters find employment.

Ultimately, the decision came down to a leader who could bridge the gap between Shi’a, Sunnis and Kurds, versus a leader who could bridge the gap between citizen and elite. For many Iraqis, the latter was more appealing.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Results of a Nationwide Public Opinion Poll on Iraq’s Upcoming Parliamentary Election’, 1001 Iraqi Thoughts, 1 May 2018. Available at <http://1001iraqithoughts.com/2018/05/01/results-of-a-nationwide-public-opinion-poll-on-iraqs-upcoming-parliamentary-election-2/> (accessed on 17 July 2018).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Iraq Votes 2018’.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> ‘65 Percent New Faces in the Parliament’.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



## Implications for Government Formation

The most critical impact of the fragmentation of the different blocs is the lack of an out-right winner, with no list able to form a majority government, even Sadr still requiring 111 seats. As a result, the government formation process necessitated compromises with other established elites, hurting Sadr's promise for change. For instance, weeks after the vote, on 7 June, Sadr entered into a government formation alliance with Allawi's National Coalition and Hakim's National Wisdom Movement.<sup>15</sup> Then, days later, on 12 June, Sadr reached a government formation alliance with Ameri's Fateh.<sup>16</sup> This move upset several Sadrist supporters who hoped for a new trajectory away from the established elite. Sadr also continued to engage with incumbent Prime Minister Abadi's alliance.<sup>17</sup> The reality of government formation reveals that any leader must compromise in order to form a majority government. The consequence of this process is a number of compromises that put promises of change and bridging of the gap between the rulers and the ruled at risk. This is why Sadr's party offices were attacked in Babil during the protests that swept the south of Iraq in July 2018.

## Iraqi Kurdistan

The KRI was not spared protests against the ruling elite prior to the elections. Indeed, after the failed referendum on independence last year and subsequent demonstrations against the backdrop of widespread financial hardship and accusations of corruption and maladministration, the duopoly that has run Kurdistan since the early 1990s was expected to face tough competition.<sup>18</sup> However, due to patronage networks and a determination to hold power, the two government parties performed relatively well while the opposition lost ground. The results also show a Kurdish population 'in transition' that is increasingly rejecting the old parties but also unsure of, apathetic towards or not ready for, the new opposition.

## Results

Kurdish parties won a total of 60 seats in Iraq's 329 seat parliament in the 2018 elections. Sixteen of the seats are for representatives from Erbil, eighteen from Sulaymaniyah and

<sup>15</sup> 'With Proof: The Agreement between Saairoon and the National Wisdom Movement', *Al Sumaria*, 7 June 2018. Available at <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/238777/> (accessed on 17 July 2018).

<sup>16</sup> 'Press Conference by Muqtada al-Sadr and Hadi Al-Amiri', *YouTube*, 12 June 2018. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7ylRUL3rhM> (accessed on 17 July 2018).

<sup>17</sup> 'Abadi Meets Sadr in Najaf', *Al Sumaria*, 23 June 2018. Available at <https://www.alsumaria.tv/news/240049/> (accessed on 17 July 2018).

<sup>18</sup> There were widespread protests in Sulaymaniyah province in December 2017, violently suppressed by security forces (see: 'Protests rage in Iraqi Kurdistan', *DW*, 19 December 2017. Available at <https://www.dw.com/en/protests-rage-in-iraqi-kurdistan/a-41868334> (accessed on 18 July 2018)), and in Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Dohuk in March 2018, also violently put down by security forces (see: 'Kurdistan Region of Iraq: Protesters Beaten, Journalists Detained', *Human Rights Watch*, 15 April 2018. Available at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/04/15/kurdistan-region-iraq-protesters-beaten-journalists-detained> (accessed on 17 July 2018)).

twelve from the Dohuk province. Kurdish parties won fourteen seats in the disputed territories, a decline of two seats from 2014 and a result of the KDP's decision not to run in Kirkuk.

Electoral lists in the KRI for the 2018 federal elections were dominated by the usual players, the KDP, the PUK and oppositionists Gorran. Newer 'protest' parties, such as Barham Salih's Coalition for Democracy and Justice (CDJ) and Shashwar Abdulwahid's New Generation (NG) contested the poll, seeking to capitalise on widespread discontent in the Kurdistan Region. However, pre-election expectations that Gorran, CDJ and NG would eat into the support of bigger parties failed to materialise, with all performing less well than expected, though serious allegations of fraud cast doubt on the veracity of this 'failure'.

Salih, a reform-minded former Deputy Prime Minister of Iraq and Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), split from the PUK in August 2017 after three decades with the party, to form CDJ, whose broad goals are good governance and economic reform.<sup>19</sup> Abdulwahid is a Sulaymaniyah-based real estate developer and head of Nalia Group, which owns NRT TV station.<sup>20</sup> It was known to be a mainly independent outlet over the years, and provided an important challenge to the mainstream KDP and PUK media outlets.

As with previous elections, the KDP and the PUK won in the provinces under their respective control. The KDP received the most votes in Erbil and Dohuk, where they maintain large electoral bases and extensive patronage networks. Similarly, the PUK led the vote in Sulaymaniyah; votes for the PUK tripled in the governorate of Halabja despite the party's unpopularity there for years.<sup>21</sup> Of the opposition parties, Gorran came in first with five seats, NG in second with four seats, and CDJ in third with two seats. The Islamic parties, the Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG), and the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) both lost seats (see Table 3).

<sup>19</sup> CDJ's Facebook page (in Kurdish) is the largest source of information on the political party, available at <https://www.facebook.com/hawpaimani/>. See also an interview with Dr Rebwar Karim, the spokesman and head of the list in Sulaymaniyah for federal elections, available at <https://www.iraqoilreport.com/news/qa-rebwar-karim-mahmood-of-the-coalition-for-democracy-and-justice-party-29415/>; and the following articles: 'Barham Salih Elected Head of CDJ, Pledges to Fight Corruption', *Rudaw*, 10 January 2018. Available at <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/100120185>; 'Coalition for Democracy and Justice Pushes to End Corrupt Ruling System in Iraq's Kurdistan', *Middle East Online*, 22 January 2018. Available at <https://www.middle-east-online.com/en/coalition-democracy-and-justice-pushes-end-corrupt-ruling-system-iraq's-kurdistan>.

<sup>20</sup> For more information on New Generation's political platform, see Shashwar Abdulwahid's homepage, available at <http://shaswar.net/default.aspx>; and 'New Generation "Naway Nwê" Political Platform Announced in Iraqi Kurdistan', *Ekurd Daily*, 2 October 2017. Available at <https://ekurd.net/naway-nwe-political-kurdistan-2017-10-02> (accessed on 19 July 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Christine McCaffray van den Toorn, 'Was Iraq's Recent Election a Democratic Success? Depends who you ask', *Washington Post*, 23 May 2018. Available at [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/05/23/was-iraqs-recent-election-a-democratic-success-depends-who-you-ask/?utm\\_term=.fobbb1be83cc](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/05/23/was-iraqs-recent-election-a-democratic-success-depends-who-you-ask/?utm_term=.fobbb1be83cc) (accessed on 14 July 2018).

In the disputed province of Kirkuk, the PUK surprisingly held on to all six of their seats, despite losing control of the city to Iraqi forces in October 2017. The loss of the city further impaired the KRG's economy as the oil-rich city had served as its economic backbone, and was expected to cost the PUK votes in the 2018 elections.<sup>22</sup> However, the PUK won 183,283 votes, a gain of 26,681 from the 2014 elections.<sup>23</sup>

Table 3. Seats Won by Kurdish Parties in 2010, 2014 and 2018 Elections

	2010	2014	2018	Difference 2014–2018
KDP	26	25	25	–
PUK	17	21	18	-3
Gorran	8	9	5	-4
NG	–	–	4	+4 (new)
CDJ	–	–	2	+2 (new)
KIU	4	4	2	-2
KIG	2	3	2	-1

### Low Voter Turnout

In the KRI, widespread disillusion with establishment elites, recent political failures, territorial losses and economic mismanagement affected turnout levels. All governorates in the KRI experienced lower voter turnout than in both the 2010 and 2014 elections. Turnout plunged from around 70 percent to just over 40 percent in Erbil and Kirkuk, and to 50 percent in other provinces (see Table 4).

Table 4. Elections Turnout by Province in the KRI in 2010, 2014 and 2018 Elections

Year	2010	2014	2018
Sulaymaniyah	73 percent	72 percent	50 percent
Erbil	76 percent	70.6 percent	43 percent
Dohuk	80 percent	73.9 percent	51 percent
Kirkuk	73 percent	65 percent	40 percent
Nineveh / Mosul	66 percent	49.4 percent	53 percent

<sup>22</sup> Even though Kirkuk is traditionally a PUK area, the KDP gained two seats in the city in the 2014 elections.

<sup>23</sup> 'Distribution of the Winners in the Elections of the Iraqi Council of Representatives 2014', *Iraq High Electoral Commission*, 2014. Available at <http://ihec.iq/ihecftp/ntaij2014/karkook.pdf> (accessed on 17 July 2018).

More than anything, voting patterns reflect an electorate in transition of which a majority decided not to vote for traditional elites but was also not yet willing to throw its support behind new parties. Of those who did not vote, IRIS fieldwork showed that the most common reason was a strong feeling that voting would not change the political status quo. Many Kurds believe that the PUK and KDP will continue to maintain power through formal and informal means, such as security, intelligence and border forces, as well as private sector businesses, in addition to a wide patronage network of political and familial ties. Anger towards politicians and parties perceived as corrupt, combined with the view that neither opposition parties nor civil society groups had the ability or leadership to usurp the power of elites through democratic processes, drove low voter turnout.

In addition, the voting patterns show a population divided between old – tribal, patronage-based, nationalist politics – and new – focused on jobs, education and reform. The ‘old’ predominantly vote for the PUK and KDP, and many for Gorran, though some likely abstained or switched back to the PUK since Nawshirwan Mustafa’s death in 2017. The politically active ‘new’ have voted for Gorran en masse, but now also cast ballots for CDJ and NG. Those that are not voting are stuck in between. While they did not vote for the opposition parties, and whether they do depends on the opposition’s ability to mobilise in future elections, they are unlikely to go back to the traditional elites.

Anywhere from 60 to 70 percent (combining those who did not vote and those who voted for the opposition parties) of the Kurdish population is no longer voting for the PUK and KDP, which is significant. Attitudes among the boycott vote range from outright and deep anger towards the ruling elites for their corruption and failure to govern, to a more passive rejection of their rule. That said, the KDP and PUK maintain and benefit from their historic, core, loyal bases sustained through extensive patronage networks, as well as traditional, steadfast tribal and familial connections.

Growing feelings of discontent are also directed at opposition parties – both as a result of their inability to implement their reform agendas and efforts by ruling parties to undermine the leadership of opposition parties. The status Gorran once enjoyed as a reformist party, for example, has declined as a result of their failure to meet the expectations of many of their Kurdish supporters. Similar sentiment is evident towards CDJ. A number of factors contributed to its low vote, including its late formation, just months before the elections, and perception that if Gorran and Nawshirwan Mustafa could not use his opposition party to improve the opportunities of Kurds, it is unlikely that Salih’s party would.

In a similar ‘new vs. old’ vein, many Kurds hoping for fresh faces still viewed Salih as a PUK establishment figure and wondered how his party could make changes he had been unable to make as both Prime Minister of Kurdistan and Second Secretary General of the PUK. Both Gorran and CDJ struggle internally with the divisive dynamic that plagues the wider population. New Generation, whose image resonated with the youth angry at the establishment and hoping for a non-establishment figure, attracted some votes. Shaswar Abdulwahid was a new face to politics, was liked for his more pointed and targeted attacks on the elites, as well as his anti-referendum stance. Votes for NG showed people desperate

for something new, but he too was tainted by accusations of corruption in past business dealings, and widely criticised for running with PKK-affiliated groups, and even delivering them their first seat in Iraqi Parliament.

### **Allegations of Fraud**

While low voter turnout in the KRI explains much of the results that favoured traditional parties with loyal core bases, the large discrepancies between results for the status quo vs. opposition parties and allegations of widespread electoral fraud have led many in the Kurdish public, opposition leadership, Iraqi federal government<sup>24</sup> and in the international community<sup>25</sup> to believe there was foul play.

As soon as the polls closed, reports of small-scale fraud and intimidation, as well as larger-scale fraud evidenced by irregularities in new electronic voting machines and the misuse of old biometric cards resulted in national calls for a recount. Kurdish opposition parties submitted formal complaints to the IHEC in the weeks after the elections,<sup>26</sup> calls that were echoed by members of the international community, most significantly UNAMI,<sup>27</sup> and contributed to the decision to implement a partial recount.

Small-scale fraud and intimidation appear to have ranged from cash handouts to physical intimidation and threats, with civil servants and local security commanders instructed to vote for PUK and KDP candidates or risk losing their position and placement.<sup>28</sup> Widespread violations and irregularities were reported on the day – in over 80 percent of polling stations – by the independent monitoring organisation, the Kurdistan Institute for Elections (KIE).<sup>29</sup>

In the Nineveh and Dohuk provinces, reports claimed that the KDP intimidated and coerced internally displaced people (IDP) voters in camps, and tampered with and even discarded hundreds of ballot boxes.<sup>30</sup> In rural areas and locations with high populations

<sup>24</sup> Raya Jalabi, 'Iraqi PM Abadi Says Election Fraud Allegations to be Investigated', *Reuters*, 24 May 2018. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-election-fraud/iraqi-pm-abadi-says-election-fraud-allegations-to-be-investigated-idUSKCN1IP2Z2> (accessed on 16 July 2018).

<sup>25</sup> UN Assistance Mission for Iraq, 'UN Special Representative Kubiš calls on IHEC to promptly and thoroughly investigate all complaints concerning the electoral process', *Reliefweb*, 17 May 2018. Available at <https://reliefweb.int/report/iraq/un-special-representative-kubi-calls-ihc-promptly-and-thoroughly-investigate-all> (accessed on 18 July 2018).

<sup>26</sup> IRIS Interviews with Gorran, CDJ electoral offices (May 2018); Campbell MacDiarmid, 'Angry Iraqi Kurds file election complaints with Baghdad', *The National*, 22 May 2018. Available at <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/angry-iraqi-kurds-file-election-complaints-with-baghdad-1.733005> (accessed on 18 July 2018).

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> IRIS interviews in Sulaymaniyah, Ranya and Kirkuk (May 2018), as well as election research conducted during and after 2014 federal elections.

<sup>29</sup> 'Monitors Final Report on the Iraqi Council of Representatives Elections', Kurdistan Institute for Elections, 19 May 2018. Available at [http://kie-ngo.org/newdesign/wenekan/421012252018\\_KIE\\_percent-20monitoring\\_percent20Report-Eng.pdf](http://kie-ngo.org/newdesign/wenekan/421012252018_KIE_percent-20monitoring_percent20Report-Eng.pdf) (accessed on 12 July 2018).

<sup>30</sup> IRIS interviews with IDPs and locals in Ninewa and Dohuk provinces (May 2018).



of IDPs, ruling parties were also accused of intimidating displaced Iraqi families to vote for Kurdish parties.<sup>31</sup>

Voters and parties alleged more large-scale fraud across the KRI. Multiple cases of irregularities suggest electronic vote tampering through the pre-programming of machines and flash drives, and tampering with the online transmission of data. Reports from collection centres and polling stations, including by members of the IHEC, allege that machines that counted ballots were pre-programmed to give particular parties more or less votes than had actually been cast.<sup>32</sup> A report by IHEC member Saad Kakeyi found discrepancies between results that were transmitted and results reported on flash cards.<sup>33</sup> A Kurdistan Institute for Elections report found that 80 percent of stations and observers were not allowed to watch how data was transferred with flash drives.<sup>34</sup>

Opened ballot boxes showed sustained discrepancies between manual counts and electronic tallies. Manual counts also revealed thousands of duplicate ballots. There are multiple centres and stations where candidates voted that have no record of any vote for them. In Kirkuk, the same five candidates received the same number of votes at multiple stations.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover the new biometric cards system that was introduced appears to have been abused, with over a quarter million voters in Sulaymaniyah not receiving their new cards,<sup>36</sup> while others used old cards to register multiple votes.<sup>37</sup> The old cards were supposed to be moved to an IHEC office in Baghdad, but opposition parties accused the KDP and PUK of hiding them in order to create the allegedly fake national ID cards.<sup>38</sup>

The introduction of new biometric cards and reports of their manipulation also suggest electoral fraud that an election monitor from Kurdish Human Rights Watch (KHRW) described as ‘widespread’.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>31</sup> See for example Kristina Bogos and Mohammed Fatih, “‘Our Voices will go Unheard’: Displaced Iraqis Claim Threats on Election Day”, *Middle East Eye*, 23 May 2018. Available at <http://www.middleeast-eye.net/news/electoral-fraud-iraqi-krh-leave-displaced-iraqis-want-greater-representation-1325167018> (accessed on 14 July 2018).

<sup>32</sup> IRIS elections research conducted in May and June 2018 in the provinces of Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Kirkuk.

<sup>33</sup> Al Sharqiya TV, ‘With One Letter: Once Again, Serious Information is Documented Episode 1’, *YouTube*, 20 May 2018. Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TWtpchNYxto&feature=youtu.be> (accessed on 17 July 2018).

<sup>34</sup> ‘Monitors Final Report on the Iraqi Council of Representatives Elections’, *Kurdish Institute for Elections*, 19 May 2018. Available at [http://kie-ngo.org/newdesign/wenekan/421012252018\\_KIE\\_percent20monitoring\\_percent20Report-Eng.pdf](http://kie-ngo.org/newdesign/wenekan/421012252018_KIE_percent20monitoring_percent20Report-Eng.pdf) (accessed on 18 July 2018); Al Sharqiya TV, ‘With One Letter’.

<sup>35</sup> IRIS elections research conducted in May and June 2018 in the provinces of Sulaymaniyah, Erbil and Kirkuk and extensive interviews with electoral offices of Gorran and CDJ.

<sup>36</sup> ‘More than 268 Thousand People in Sulaymaniyah will not Have the Chance to Vote’, *Peregraf*, 11 May 2018. Available at <http://peregraf.com/political/535> (accessed on July 2018).

<sup>37</sup> Interviews conducted in Sulaymaniyah with head of CDJ and Gorran election offices (May 2018).

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> The monitor from Kurdish Human Rights Watch stated that, ‘the process started slowly from the beginning because the devices did not start working on time. They entered the codes multiple times until they started operating. Then the IHEC employees voted. There were two issues. Some IHEC employees

## Recount, Recourse?

With both opposition parties and PUK claiming to deserve more votes than received, a sampling of ballot boxes have now been recounted in all provinces of the KRG but results have not been officially released.<sup>40</sup> It remains to be seen what comes next in the process and what the outcome will be – whether there will be a further recount or new elections, and whether any seats will change hands. While the process and outcome should follow a legal process, it is certain that politics and political deal-making will ultimately determine whether the campaign to expose fraud will continue, and whether seats will change hands.

The process will be a key test of the KRG's legitimacy and the strength of opposition in the region. A manual recount is not without its own problems, but the key will be whether it changes the results in any substantive way, and whether the Kurdish population accepts the final results. Given the extent of the fraud allegations, simply confirming the results is likely to heighten popular discontent with, and disengagement from, politics. However, for the two main parties, any confirmation of fraud – and implicit political weakness – is likely to be seen as the beginning of a slippery slope.

## Conclusion

Iraq's 2018 parliamentary elections reflect a nationwide fatigue brought on by years of corrupt politicians, inefficient bureaucracy and a lack of faith in civil society's ability to restore political and economic agency to citizens. In the months leading up to the elections, political gridlock plagued the country despite Prime Minister Abadi's declaration of victory against ISIS. Internal political squabbles fractured major political parties whose leaders' were marred by accusations of corruption, sectarianism, political scandals, or, in the case of the KRG, turning 'Kurdish' lands over to Baghdad. Growing public awareness of the vast economic divide between the general population and political elites who promised – but failed – to deliver reform contributed to the high abstention rate.

Unmet expectations of basic service provision, such as water, electricity and public healthcare, especially in regions such as Basra and Kirkuk, whose lands offer oil wealth but whose populations complain of unfair redistribution of revenues, culminated in boycotts of both establishment and opposition parties. While there was some mobilisation around reformist candidates and opposition parties, the overall mood – even among many citizens who did decide to vote – was one of disaffection.

While abstention rates were high nationwide, outcomes differed between federal Iraq and the Kurdistan Region. In Baghdad, election results came as a surprise, defying pre-election

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were told that they only were allowed to vote from 7:00 am to 8:00 am. But some others believed that everyone should start voting from 7:00 am. Here [Sirwan Voting Centre] between 7:00 am and 8:00 am, only IHEC employees voted. Other problems that we faced were that some people who attended did not have their electronic cards, therefore couldn't vote. Their votes will not be counted. The electronic cards of some others are not readable by the machines, so they were able to just sign and vote.'

<sup>40</sup> Interviews with Gorran and CDJ officials (11–12 July 2018).

predictions that incumbent Prime Minister Abadi's Victory Coalition would have decisive success, given his popularity following the defeat of ISIS and reacquisition of disputed territories from the KRG. Nevertheless, his party came in third, behind a coalition whose leader had reinvented himself as a reformist, and another who benefited from martyrdom rhetoric and victories against ISIS.

While new parties competing in non-Kurdish areas did indeed benefit from their choice of non-establishment figures, the effect in the KRI was the opposite. Despite the existence of several opposition parties, including some who emerged less than a year before the elections – notably CDJ and NG – the abstentions ultimately benefited the ruling parties. Nevertheless, accusations of fraud through ballot stuffing, misuse of new voter technology and intimidation remain particularly acute in the Kurdistan Region, and the recent recount shows that fraud may indeed be responsible for the comparatively high levels of support for KDP and PUK.

The low voter turnout, unexpected victories and ongoing accusations of fraud and corruption outlined in this report reflect not only the disenchantment Iraqis feel towards the current political process and its leaders, but also the challenges faced by new MPs and cabinet ministers in restoring public trust. Despite lofty campaign promises to eliminate corruption, the patronage networks upon which many political leaders rely – both inside and outside Iraq – paired with the challenge of negotiating competing ideologies, policy platforms and priorities, offer just a peek into the uphill battles the next government will face.

## Appendix

Table 1. Votes and Seats Distribution in Sulaymaniah

	2014 Votes	2014 Seats	2018 Votes	2018 Seats	Votes Difference
KDP	93,410	2	48,820	1	-44,590
PUK	294,265	6	267,442	8	-26,823
Gorran	347,799	7	156,973	4	-190,826
CDJ			46,967	1	
NG			64,339	2	
Komal	57,102	2	51,763	1	-5,339
Yegertu	81,392	2	30,297	1	-51,095

Table 2. Votes and Seats Distribution in Erbil

	2014 Votes	2014 Seats	2018 Votes	2018 Seats	Votes Difference
KDP	354,735	7	321,883	8	-32,852
PUK	168,688	4	79,727	2	-88,961
Gorran	104,059	2	40,914	1	-63,145
CDJ	-	-	50,561	1	
NG	-	-	70,848	2	
Komal	80,492	2	36,855	1	-43,637
Yegertu			24,564		

Table 3. Votes and Seats Distribution in Dohuk

	2014 Votes	2014 Seats	2018 Votes	2018 Seats	Votes Difference
KDP	340,977	8	353,177	10	+12,200
PUK	37,457	1	25,575		-11,882
Gorran	-	-	3,797	-	0
CDJ	-	-	25,656	-	0
NG	-	-	18,026	-	0
Komal	-	-	3,483	-	0
Yegertu	84,464	2	43,417	1	-41,047

## Traditional vs. Opposition Parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Table 4. Sulaymaniyah

	Traditional Parties	Opposition Parties
Total Votes 2010	350,283	404,770
Total Votes 2014	387,675	404,901
Total Votes 2018	316,262	320,122
Change 2010–2014	+37,392	+131
Change 2014–2018	-71,413	-84,779
Total Seats Won in 2018 Elections	9	9

Table 5. Erbil

	Traditional Parties	Opposition Parties
Total Votes 2010	458,403	166,103
Total Votes 2014	523,423	184,551
Total Votes 2018	401,610	199,170
Change 2010–2014	+65,020	+18,448
Change 2014–2018	-121,813	+14,619
Total Seats Won in 2018 Elections	10	5

Table 6. Dohuk

	Traditional Parties	Opposition Parties
Total Votes 2010	332,951	–
Total Votes 2014	278,434	–
Total Votes 2018	379,000	50,218
Change 2010–2014	-54,517	–
Change 2014–2018	+100,566	+50,218
Total Seats Won in 2018 Elections	10	1



Table 7. Kirkuk

	<b>Traditional Parties</b>	<b>Opposition Parties</b>
Total Votes 2010	206,542	–
Total Votes 2014	273,040	20,000
Total Votes 2018	183,283	13,775
Change 2010–2014	+66,498	+20,000
Change 2014–2018	-89,757	-6,225
Total Seats Won in 2018 Elections	6	0

**Middle East Centre**  
London School of Economics  
Houghton Street  
London, WC2A 2AE



@LSEMiddleEast



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lse.ac.uk/mec

#### **Publications Editor**

Ribale Sleiman Haidar

#### **Cover Image**

A woman walks past a poster of Iraqi Shi'a cleric Muqtada al-Sadr in the Sadr City district of Baghdad, 19 May 2018.

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