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Iraq From the Inside

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The Ballot: Inside Iraq's Voting Booth

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A sample ballot is [available here](#) in PDF form.

BAGHDAD — What do you get when you take 14,300 candidates vying for 440 seats in a nascent democracy where suicide bombings are a daily threat?

One answer is potential chaos.

But in addition to what has become the traditional ratcheting up of the nation's already formidable security quotient in the days preceding an election, Iraq's leaders have sought to simplify the ballot as much as possible for the nation's January 31st provincial elections.

Although the website of Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission, the nine member panel charged with overseeing the balloting, has not yet posted detailed voting information, this is how it will work, according to interviews with commission members and their staffs, representatives of the United Nations, and the manner in which Iraqi elections have been held in the past:

A voter, who has been registered automatically based on information provided at the time he or she was issued a ration card, will make his or her way to one of the nation's 37,000 voting centers, which in the past, have been open between 7 a.m. and 5 p.m.

Along the way, he or she will likely pass throngs of watchful security personnel (Iraqi national police, local police, Iraqi Army, American military, etc.) equipped with body armor and automatic weapons trying to ensure a peaceful vote.

After waiting in line and undergoing a thorough body pat down at a checkpoint outside the voting center, voters will make their way inside, where they will give their name and photo identification to a voting monitor at a table. Many of the monitors will be school teachers.

The monitor will find the name on a list and the voter will sign underneath.

The voting station is likely to be very crowded – not only with voters, but also with monitors: At least 125,000 of them, according to the Iraqi government and the United Nations.

There will be monitors from Iraqi and international NGOs (46,000 individuals from 519 organizations had registered as of late December), including the Arab League and the

International Islamic Conference; monitors from political parties (at least 77,000 registered individuals, also as of late December); and journalists, all watching to make sure every vote is counted – once.

Those voters who have decided to pick an independent candidate will find the corresponding number of their candidate on a wall chart before going to the voting booth. Inside the booth, they will place a check mark next to the number of their candidate on the ballot.

Those who have chosen to vote not for an independent candidate, but for a list (sort of the equivalent of a political party), can go directly to the booth and check the name and number of their favored list.

If the voter also wants to select a specific candidate from their preferred list, they will be allowed to check a second box next to that candidates' name as well. Otherwise, the list will decide which of its candidates to award the vote to.

Next, each voter will place his or her ballot inside a locked box - and then the piece de resistance of Iraqi elections will take place: Voters will dip their index finger into a vat of indelible ink, which is done to try to prevent people from casting multiple ballots.

In the past, Iraq has used purple ink for this purpose. This time, the color is literally a state secret. Members of the election commission will only say the ink will come from outside the country.

After the polls close for the evening, and as the monitors watch, the station manager of each voting center will tally the votes. The manager will then announce the results to the assembled before transmitting the data to a centralized election point.

That's it, if it all works, how democracy grows in Iraq.