

## Voting in Iraq

## God takes a back seat

Feb 5th 2009 | BAGHDAD  
From The Economist print edition

## Encouraging signs from the country's provincial elections

THERE were, perhaps inevitably, a few reminders of the country's recent past. Allegations of foul play threatened a return to violence in Anbar province, for instance, once the heart of Iraq's Sunni-led insurgency. Tribal sheikhs there accused incumbent Sunni politicians of rigging the polls. But for a few incidents, though, the voting was largely peaceful in all 14 of the provinces that held local elections on January 31st (four did not). That alone is being hailed as a great success.

The comparison with the polls in 2005 certainly offers hope. The threat of terrorism then made it too dangerous to deploy any foreign monitors. This time observers were present in all 712 voting districts. In 2005 more than 200 candidates were killed; this time only eight died. That is progress, Iraqi-style. Peaceful polls were seen as essential if America's 142,000 troops were to start pulling out. After the vote, President Barack Obama indicated that he plans to bring a "substantial" number of troops home over the next 12 months.

As to the results, first returns showed that allies of Nuri al-Maliki, the Shia prime minister, did well, particularly in the south. If confirmed—the final results are not expected for several weeks—Mr Maliki will be well placed to run for a second term in the general election due within a year. His success, though, did not reflect a trend towards voting along religious lines. Quite the opposite. The prime minister, who leads the Dawa Party, a Shia religious movement, seems to have benefited from his party's decision to join with others to form the State of Law Coalition, which campaigned, in a non-religious way, on themes of national unity, law and order. Mr Maliki thus managed to profit from an apparent shift to secularism.

The list of secular parties backed by Ayad Allawi also appears to have made gains, increasing the chances of Iraq's first post-invasion prime minister making a political comeback. And religious parties, such as the Supreme Iraqi Islamic Council, seem to have suffered corresponding setbacks, at least if anecdotal evidence is a guide. These parties were blamed for the culture of corruption that many Iraqis detect in the provincial councils.

In the northern province of Nineveh, Sunni Arabs seem to have taken seats from Kurdish parties. The paucity of their previous representation in Mosul, the provincial capital, has been blamed for much of the turmoil in the region over the past four years. Sunnis throughout the country have come to regret their decision to boycott past elections, in protest at the American occupation. Now they will at last secure fairer representation.

The main disappointment for the authorities was the number of people who turned out to vote. At 51%, or 7.5m of the eligible voters, this was lower than expected, and much lower than Mr Maliki's forecast of up to 80%. Confusion over registration will have depressed turnout in some places, as will a curfew that meant many old and disabled people had difficulty getting to the polls. A more worrying cause was the indubitable sense of disillusionment with the political parties that have come to power since the 2003 American-led invasion.



Whatever the final outcome, the election must be seen as legitimate to ensure a smooth transition of power. More than 14,400 candidates were vying for just 440 seats on the 14 councils up for election. Despite the general air of optimism about the voting, widespread mutterings about fraud could still precipitate a new cycle of violence. And that in turn could derail Mr Obama's plans to pull all American combat forces out of Iraq within 16 months.

Copyright © 2009 The Economist Newspaper and The Economist Group. All rights reserved.