

2023 Iraqi Provincial Elections: Analyzing Mosul's Political Landscape

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Provincial elections, a contentious and protracted issue in Iraqi politics, were finally held on December 18. After a decade, these provincial elections provide a window into the country's demographic and political changes at a local level. Specifically, as an international elections observer in Mosul for both the latest elections and the previous parliamentary elections in 2021, these visits have provided an opportunity to gauge the recovery of Mosul after suffering from immense destruction due to its occupation by ISIS in 2014. Likewise, it has provided a window into one of the provinces where the post-ISIS political balance is of high domestic and international interest.

The provincial elections, which took place in Mosul province and throughout Iraq, were finally held after years of delays. While originally scheduled for 2018, ISIS' prior capture of a significant part of its territory in Iraq prevented elections. Although it was declared that ISIS had been defeated in Iraqi territory by 2017, the Iraqi government was left with a devastated country still reeling the following year. In 2019, widespread protests broke out, pushing the government to delay elections further and prompting the parliament's subsequent decision to dissolve the provincial assemblies. With Iraq entering a period of relative stability, parliamentary elections took place in 2021, and the previously deadlocked provincial assemblies elections were finally held last week.

Snapshots of Mosul from 2021 and 2023

Upon arriving in Mosul for these most recent elections, it became evident that there have been some developments in the city's commercial life since 2021. New businesses have opened towards the city center that lines the banks of the Tigris River, contributing to both the city's commercial activities and local social life.

Young Iraqis have started to travel to Mosul regularly from surrounding provinces, such as Kirkuk and Erbil, to participate in this developing social life. However, there is still significant destruction on the western side of the city. It is clear that the redevelopment of Old Mosul still requires serious funding and reconstruction efforts, efforts that the central government and international participants are currently unwilling to provide. Much of the debris and rubble remains, and there have been no significant changes in the area's redevelopment since my visit in 2021.

It has been frequently heard that Mosul's demographic structure has changed in the post-ISIS period. There are signs in Mosul that suggest this claim has validity; the Shia Arab population in Mosul—known along with Anbar province as the stronghold of the Sunni Arab population in Iraq—has increased not only in the context of security forces but also as a civilian population.

Increased security due to the elections was also evident. Before the elections, there were concerns about two fundamental security issues. One of these is the simmering conflict between the United States and Iran-backed militias in Iraq; the other was the increase in ISIS attacks before the election. These worries led to higher security measures compared to the 2021 general elections. There were much larger crowds in front of polling stations in central Mosul—the army, police, and members of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) were therefore on joint duty in front of the election centers to thwart the security threat posed by these crowds. It was possible to see that the presence of PMF has increased at the checkpoints at the entrance and exit of Mosul districts and sub-districts.

In light of the potential threats, body searches were meticulously carried out at the election center entrances before voting. In addition, there was a 50 to 100-meter security perimeter around the election center in order to prevent possible bombing attacks from ISIS. Election day was also quiet in terms of the conflict between the United States and Iran-backed militias, suggesting that PM Mohammed Shia Sudani's government ensured the security of the election day. The relative calm on election day was a great relief to voters and election officials alike.

Election Results

According to official data announced by Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), the 'For the People of Nineveh' list received the most votes in Mosul, with 148,769 votes. This political group—led by former Mosul Governor Najm Cuburi—ensured that Sunni Arabs became the bloc with the most votes in the province.

With 141,052 votes, The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) became the political group with the second most votes in Mosul. It is noteworthy that a Kurdish political party obtained this position in Mosul, which is known for its predominantly Sunni Arab population.

The National Contract Alliance—formed by Shia Arab parties under the coalition's umbrella and includes PMF leader Falib Fayyad's party—came in third, receiving 87,391 votes. This result shows that while the Shia Arabs in Mosul are getting growing as a proportion of Mosul's total population, they are not yet able to reach political parity with the city's Sunni population.

Interpreting the Results

Political results are clearly divided along identity politics, yet intra-communal political rifts are also evident. Based on the elections results, it appears that Iraqi Defense Minister Thabet Mohammed Abbasi is a rising actor in Mosul. Abbasi, elected as a member of parliament in the parliamentary elections in 2021, served as the Minister of Defense in the new government formed in 2022 under Sudani. In the 2023 provincial elections, Abbasi participated with his own list, which claimed two seats. His son Hassan Sabit Abbasi also secured a seat on the local council after his father nominated him from the list of former Mosul Governor Necm Cuburi. Abbasi emerged from the election as a clear rival to Muhammed Halbusi, who is generally viewed as the political leader of Iraq's Sunni Arab population.

It is necessary to make an important point about the rivalry between Halbusi and Abbasi in Iraq: the competition

between the two actors is a “regional competition” centered in Mosul. Halbusi wields considerable influence in all of the provinces with a large Sunni Arab population –such as Kirkuk, Mosul, Saladin and Diyala. In contrast, Abbasi’s influence is currently limited to Mosul, and he has yet to acquire enough influence to challenge Halbusi in other Sunni Arab provinces. Halbusi, via the Takaddum Party, won 19 provincial council members across the country in the last elections, according to preliminary projections. Takaddum also received the most votes in the province of Baghdad, the heart of Iraqi politics. The fact that the Takaddum Party won two seats in Mosul once again revealed the Mosul-centered rivalry with Thabet Mohammed al-Abbasi.

In terms of Kurdish politics, the Erbil-based KDP maintains its power in Mosul. In the 2021 parliamentary elections, the KDP won the most seats, sending ten MPs from Mosul to the parliament. In this election, it won four seats in the provincial council. Even though they are no longer the largest party, the current four seats can be read as a significant success for the KDP due to the implementation of a different election system in Iraq from the election system in 2021. The new election rules, based on the Sainte-Lague method, award seats based on the overall votes received by a list in a given province, rather than individual candidates being elected directly by constituents.

The Sulaymaniyah-based PUK gained two seats, bringing the total Kurdish votes in the provincial council to six and unable to reach a majority. In this respect, it can be expected that Kurdish parties will seek alliances based on agendas such as determining the new governor—a prerogative of the provincial council. However, although they must seek to form a coalition in the Mosul provincial council, Mosul nevertheless stands out—along with Erbil, Duhok, Sulaymaniyah, and Kirkuk—as provinces where Kurdish political groups have a firm foothold in broader Iraqi politics.

Although Shia Arabs participated in the elections with various political groups, the most effective political list proved to be the National Contract Alliance, supported by the President of the PMF Faleh al-Fayyad, which received 87,391 votes. The political group ‘National Identity’ became the second most important Shia Arab group with 54,791 votes. However, these results should not be viewed as a success for the Shia Arab bloc, especially as Mosul has experienced a demographic change after 2017. Shia parties likely expected to gain more seats in the province in this context.

Mosul's social and security environment has witnessed a significant change after 2017. Taking advantage of the gap in the city, Iran-backed militia groups under the umbrella of the PMF have gained a significant area of dominance in Mosul, especially in security checkpoints. They also had influence in local security institutions in Mosul. The increase in the militia presence in Mosul brought about a change in the population in favor of Shia Arabs. From 2003 to 2017, Mosul was largely devoid of any Shia symbols in the streets, except for a few specific areas. Now, the presence of Shia groups in the city is impossible to miss. Despite their growing influence in the area, Shia parties—like other political groups—will need to forge alliances with other factions in order to effectively exert influence and manage the city. ❖

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