

# Between Power Sharing and Power Consolidation: The Impact of Iraq’s Provincial Elections Results

by [Shaima Ali \(/experts/shaima-ali\)](#)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Shaima Ali \(/experts/shaima-ali\)](#)

Shaimaa Ali is an Egyptian journalist and researcher in Iraqi and Iranian affairs. She holds a master’s degree in political sciences from Cairo University.



**The Coalition Framework’s overall electoral successes in Iraq’s provincial elections is playing out in governor appointment decisions across much of the country, including in Baghdad and Basra. The ongoing competition in Kirkuk, however, highlights just how complicated power-sharing dynamics can become.**

On December 18, 2023, Iraq conducted its first local elections in a decade. Held in fifteen provinces, these elections have tangible implications for both local and national politics, as provincial government in Iraq is responsible for appointing governors, determining budgets, and planning local infrastructure. However, provincial councils are hotbeds of corruption and nepotism, with many Iraqi voters viewing the institutions with contempt and frustration.

The importance of the elections for the provincial councils in Iraq lies in the fact that the Iraqi constitution has granted these councils significant administrative and financial powers. The provincial councils in Iraq serve as the legislative and oversight authority for each province. Each council has the authority to issue local legislation and approve the local budget in accordance with federal laws.

Each provincial council consists of at least ten members, and it may increase to reach 35 members in each council. Additionally, each council has several branches known as district councils, affiliated with each province. Elections for district councils usually take place six months after the end of the provincial council elections. The district council consists of seven members, with a total not exceeding thirteen members. These councils are responsible for electing the governor and deputy governors through an absolute majority vote of the council members within 30 days from the date of the inaugural session of the council after the local elections.

According to the Iraqi Provincial Councils Law, the provincial councils consist of 285 seats. In the recent elections,

approximately 6,000 candidates from 134 electoral lists and 39 electoral alliances competed, along with around 60 independent candidates. These elections covered fifteen out of the eighteen provinces, as the elections did not include the three autonomous provinces located within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

Another significant importance of these elections lies in their role in determining the fate of the disputed areas between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Region. Therefore, these elections have the potential to shift the balance of political power in these regions. Consequently, the election of the provincial council and governors will have a significant impact on the destiny of these areas, whether they will remain under the control of the Baghdad government or become part of the Kurdistan Regional Government. Therefore, it is expected that the debate will continue until the elections of the provincial councils and governors in the disputed areas to determine their fate; whether opening a new chapter of conflict between Baghdad and Erbil or achieving relative stability in these areas.

Although provincial councils are an extremely important facet of Iraqi politics, authorities have consistently delayed or canceled elections. The last local elections held in Iraq were in May 2013; 2017 provincial elections—along with national parliamentary elections—were postponed until the following year, only for the provincial elections to be delayed once again. In 2019, the work of the provincial councils was suspended in response to the demands of the "Tishreen" protest movement, which viewed provincial councils as emblematic of the country's widespread corruption. After years of setbacks, Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) set the final date for the elections for December 18.

### **A Significant and Expected Victory for Iran's Allies**

In these recent local elections, about 6,000 candidates from all Iraqi political parties competed for 285 seats in fifteen provinces, excluding the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region. In the weeks following the elections, the Independent High Electoral Commission announced the final results. As predicted, Iran-allied parties scored a significant victory, adding to their gains in the 2021 parliamentary elections and cementing their control over the current government.

The "We Build" coalition, part of the ruling Shia Coordination Framework, secured the largest share in the recent local elections, winning 43 seats in ten Shia provinces. This bloc is led by Hadi al-Amiri of the Badr Organization, one of the oldest Tehran-backed militias.

The State of Law Coalition, led by former Iraqi Prime Minister and prominent leader of the Shia Coordination Framework Nouri al-Maliki, came in second, securing 35 seats with a total of 567,000 votes, including 144,000 votes in the capital Baghdad, enabling it to gain significant control over the provincial council.

Third place was taken by the National State Forces Alliance, led by former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and prominent Shia cleric and politician Ammar al-Hakim, securing 24 seats.

The recent local elections in Iraq were characterized by weak voter turnout, a reflection of the widespread disillusionment with the current political process. Only 6.6 million Iraqis cast their ballot, resulting in a participation rate of 41% among eligible voters, as announced by the IHEC.

### **Boycott by the Sadrist Movement and Absence of Opposition**

The Shia cleric and politician Muqtada al-Sadr, leader of the Sadrist Movement, announced his boycott of the local elections after declaring his final withdrawal from political life in August last year. His formal departure followed a year-long struggle between him and the Shia Coordination Framework for control of the government. Some attributed the low turnout in the elections to the Sadrist Movement's boycott, but this did not prevent a significant number of his supporters from voting for candidates loyal to the Sadrist Movement. Although Sadr's withdrawal was

meant as an act of protest, his opponents have benefited from the boycott, both in solidifying their control over the Iraqi parliament and in subsequently increasing their control over the provincial councils.

Iran-aligned parties also benefitted from opposition parties' refusal to participate in the election. Born from the Tishreen movement, independent parties rose to prominence in the 2021 elections, forming a substantial opposition bloc for the first time in Iraqi parliamentary history. Amid the previous struggle between Muqtada al-Sadr and his opponents to form the government in 2021, both sides attempted to woo these young parties to join their parliamentary bloc. However, Sadr's withdrawal and the resignation of his deputies from the parliament tipped the scales in the favor of the Shia Coordination Framework, allowing them to control the government formation and removing the chance for serious inroads by independent parties.

In the recent local elections, many opposition parties were notably absent, with the "Imtidad" party, a product the Tishreen protest movement, announcing its non-participation in the local elections due to internal divisions and disputes. Therefore, a lack of alternatives for Iraqi voters—especially in predominantly Shia areas—at the ballot boxes enabled traditional Shia parties to achieve a significant victory in the provincial council elections.

### **Power Sharing and Security Impact**

After the significant victory of the Shia parties close to Iran, many are speculating as to how the majority bloc will govern. It remains to be seen if these parties will share power with their Shia political rivals or attempt to dominate. Additionally, there are concerns that the recent electoral success will embolden these parties and lead to increased marginalization of other ethnic and sectarian groups.

### **Tussle for Governor in Baghdad**

In regards to potential power-sharing agreements, such cooperation seems highly unlikely after the recent local elections. Shia Coordination Framework leaders have shown that they are interested in consolidating power and marginalizing political opposition, be it Sunni or Shia. One example is the fate of former Parliament Speaker Mohamed al-Halbousi, the most prominent Sunni politician in Iraq.

Halbousi earned the ire of the Shia Coordination Framework after allying with Muqtada al-Sadr following the 2021 parliamentary elections. During a recent parliamentary session, he was shocked to learn that the Supreme Federal Court had dismissed him from his position on charges of forging official documents. Despite the dramatic nature of the ordeal, this end was to be expected given the course of the conflict between him and the leaders of the Shia Coordination Framework, who have not forgotten his alliance with their strong opponent Muqtada al-Sadr.

Despite his personal political setbacks, Halbousi's Progress Party list performed well in the provincial elections, securing eight seats in Baghdad province, bringing the total seats of the Sunni component in the capital to nineteen seats compared to 30 seats for the Shia component. This raises possibilities about a potential conflict between Sunni and Shia parties over the Baghdad provincial council.

Looking forward, the substantial Sunni presence on the council will be seen as a political threat, and it is likely that the Shia Coordination Framework will be looking to remove Halbousi and his party from the Baghdad provincial council, especially since the We Build coalition is strongly competing for the governor's position.

According to the norms in the Iraqi political process, the head of the Baghdad provincial council is typically Sunni. Thus, it is likely that Shia parties will maneuver to control the council by making political deals with Shia rivals from other alliances to remove the Sunni coalitions from the council. If that happens, Sunni political power will be diminished, threatening the stability of political life in the country and leading to new conflicts after years of power-sharing that satisfied all parties.

### **Intra-Shia Competition in Basra**

But the Shia Coordination Framework's ambitions will likely not be limited to curbing Sunni power. Another possibility is the entry of Iran-aligned Shia parties into competition with their Shia opponents, specifically Muqtada al-Sadr, over the oil-rich province of Basra. Basra province—considered the economic capital of Iraq—has long witnessed a conflict between the Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq led by Qais Khazali, who is close to Iran, and Sadr's Saraya al-Salam for control over the province's rich resources

In Basra province, the "Design" (Tasmeem) coalition, led by the current governor and Sadr ally Asaad al-Eidani, won twelve seats, followed by the We Build coalition with five seats, the State of Law coalition with three seats, and the State Forces with one seat.

The Sadiqoun bloc, affiliated with Asa'ib Ahl al-Haq and part of the We Build coalition, is now struggling to control the province and remove the current governor Asaad al-Eidani. Before the local elections, pro-Iran parties launched a campaign against him, accusing him of being a traitor for allegedly selling Iraqi lands to Kuwait.

The competition over Basra province threatens security and stability in Iraq, so Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani, supported by the Shia Coordination Framework and specifically by Qais Khazali, requested to leave the province to the Sadrist Movement by keeping Asaad al-Eidani as governor to avoid clashing with Muqtada al-Sadr and fearing the potential problems and protests by Sadr's supporters against Sudani's government. However, Nouri al-Maliki and Qais Khazali insist on replacing all members of the Basra provincial council.

### **The Kirkuk Dilemma**

In the recent local elections, all eyes were on Kirkuk province, a multi-ethnic ancient province hosting its first local elections since 2005, where Arabs, Turkmen, and Kurds competed for control over the oil-rich city with complex dynamics.

The two main Kurdish parties in Iraq—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—competed over Kirkuk's sixteen provincial council seats, with the former winning two seats and the latter five. Arab parties won six seats, Turkmen two, and the Christian quota seat went to a Christian party close to Shia parties loyal to Iran.

Iraqi Kurds seek to control the position of Kirkuk governor after having lost this position in 2017 as part of the fallout from the Kurdistan independence referendum. The ill-fated vote prompted the Iraqi federal government to expel Kurdish Peshmerga forces, which had controlled Kirkuk since 2014. The central government in Baghdad then replaced the Kurdish governor with an Arab, Rakan al-Jubouri, to serve as acting governor until the recent local elections.

According to Article 122 of the Iraqi Constitution, forming Kirkuk's local government requires participation from Arabs, Kurds, Turkmen, and Christians. Article 35 of the 2018 election law, amended in March 2023, requires fair representation and inclusive participation of all ethnic components in Kirkuk, regardless of local election outcomes.

Although Kirkuk's three main ethnic groups—Kurds, Arabs, and Turkmen—are all vying for control of the local government, the conflict is most intense between Kurds and Arabs, especially since Kirkuk is among the disputed areas between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil.

Before the local elections, PUK leader Bafel Talabani told his supporters in Kirkuk, "Today, the independence of Kirkuk is in your hands; you decide who becomes the governor of Kirkuk." Kirkuk has long been a stronghold for the PUK, but internal disputes and competition with the KDP have diluted its influence in the province.

Given Kirkuk's special constitutional status, political agreements and deals among the three ethnic groups will determine the fate of Kirkuk's local government. However, no meeting has yet been held between Kurdish, Arab, and Turkmen political parties in Kirkuk to reach a political agreement, and all three components consider the position of

Kirkuk governor a legitimate demand.

A deal might be struck where the two main Kurdish parties ally against Arabs and Turkmen, or Arabs and Turkmen might try to reach a deal with either the KDP or the PUK. The situation in Kirkuk is highly complex, and any deal must provide more benefits to all involved parties, without overlooking interventions from Iran, Turkey, and other regional actors that could complicate matters further.

In conclusion, looking at the results of both local and parliamentary elections, it's clear that the Shia Coordination Framework has been able to significantly and quickly seize power. The bloc's political dominance will likely have ramifications for Iraq's relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries. For example, if the Shia Coordination Framework succeeds in controlling the local government in Basra province, Kuwait will certainly feel endangered, risking a border crisis, and potentially damaging Iraq's relations with Gulf countries. However, as in the case of Kirkuk, many power-sharing arrangements over the key role of governor remain up in the air, and will have additional political implications as they unfold.

If the Shia Coordination Framework imposes its will on the Iraqi political scene, especially with the upcoming parliamentary elections scheduled for 2025, the likelihood of marginalizing Sunnis and Kurds will increase, threatening Iraq's stability, enhancing Iran's influence, and certainly affecting Baghdad's relations with the West and the United States amid a regional conflict. ❖

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