

TheNational

'Great confusion' at Iraqi polling stations

Phil Sands, Foreign Correspondent

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Sunni Muslim men have their papers checked at a polling station as they wait to vote in provincial elections in Fallujah, on Jan 31 2009. AFP

BAGHDAD // Electoral registration problems led to “chaos” at a series of polling stations in Ninewa province where hopeful voters were turned away and unable to cast their ballot, according to a European election monitor working in Iraq.

Afram Yakoub, who visited eight different election centres in the northern Iraqi province during Saturday’s vote, said he was compiling a report detailing fraud allegations that would be submitted to the United Nations and Iraq’s Independent High Election Commission.

“In every centre we went to, we always encountered great confusion about voting,” he said in an interview. “In one of them we were surrounded by an angry group of families who thought we were election officials and were responsible for the problems. They wanted to know why they were not allowed to vote.”

At each polling station a list of names was pinned to the wall, showing who was registered to vote at that particular site. These names were then cross-checked against a second list inside the polling centre. Only those on both lists were able to participate in the election.

“There seems to have been something seriously wrong with the voter registration lists,” he said. “We spoke to people who had their names on the outside lists, but not on the inside lists, so they were not allowed to vote.

“This mainly appears to have affected Sunni Arabs.

“It might be a nationwide problem with the lists not matching up. It’s difficult to say at this stage how widespread or significant it is.”

Those primarily affected were internally displaced people, Iraqis who have fled from other parts of the country seeking safer areas.

Some are likely to have been registered on lists in their hometowns, rather than at the polling stations in areas where they live in internal exile.

Ninewa remains one of Iraq’s most dangerous places and its capital city, Mosul, still suffers the kind of insurgent attacks that have been so drastically cut back elsewhere.

It is also scene to one of the January elections’ most acrimonious political contests: between Arabs and Kurds.

The Kurdish minority controlled the provincial council after an Arab boycott of the 2005 elections and had sought in this election to cement its control of outlying zones close to the Kurdish autonomous area. Arabs turned out in large numbers to vote last week, but are believed to have divided their vote between the secular Hadbaa list and the Iraqi Islamic Party. The former is vehemently anti-Kurd while the latter has close ties to the Kurdish national leadership.

During the run-up to the election, allegations of corruption were commonplace with both sides accusing the other of stoking ethnic tensions and of trying to steal votes.

Minority communities, including Assyrian Christians, Yazidis, Turkomans and Shabbak, were to a large extent caught in between, either trying to walk a delicate path of independence or cautiously siding with the group most likely to offer them security.

Mr Yakoub, of the Assyrian Council of Europe, a group advocating for the rights of Iraq’s minority community, said Saturday’s election was much better organised than that of 2005, but that there were still outstanding problems.

“It was much, much better than the last election, but there was still confusion, again mainly from the IDPs,” he said. “One polling station was allowing people to vote if they had a certain piece of identification, while other polling stations wouldn’t allow it. The election officials appeared to have been given conflicting information about what the procedures were.

“With more elections due to take place this year, it’s important that we learn as many lessons as we can from this.”

His monitoring team did find some other irregularities on election day. “We think there was an attempt at vote rigging in one polling station,” he said.

More significant were reports that one of the Assyrian political groups, list number 513 of the Ishtar Party, which has close relations to the Kurdish bloc, had been pressuring people into voting for it.

“Time and again we heard allegations that this party had used its economic influence to push

people to vote for them,” Mr Yakoub said. “In the Hamdaniya area, the party employs almost 1,500 people as guards and pays their salaries and it appears they were told that unless they voted for 513 they would be sacked.

“Given the economic situation in Iraq that’s something people take very seriously and it’s a good way to spread fear. If the family of each guard contains three eligible voters, that’s 6,000 votes you’ve just brought.”

He stressed that it was too soon to confirm any of the allegations and that further inquiries would be needed. If true it would amount to a serious violation of Iraqi election rules.

Similar claims against list 513 were made by a refugee from Baghdad, living in the Ninewa plains. He claimed he had been given a cash handout with instructions that if he took the money he had to support them.

The National asked for an interview with representatives of 513 last week at their offices in al Qursh, Ninewa, to discuss the allegations, but the request was turned down.

Another of the major issues arising from Saturday’s vote according to Mr Yakoub was a low turnout by the Assyrian Christian community. He said about 20,000 registered voters in the Hamdaniya area alone had not bothered to vote, equal to about 70 per cent of the electorate there.

“Security was good and the election was widely advertised – there were posters everywhere; it was impossible to miss,” he said. “That means people knew there was an election, but didn’t want to vote.

“Those we spoke to about it were disillusioned with the process or thought their vote would make no difference.”

Iraqi election laws guarantee Assyrian Christians, Yazidis and Shabbak one seat each on on Ninewa provincial council, even if turnout is low.

Election results are not due for several days, but early indications are that turnout was good, if not exceptional. Officials told the Associated Press that between 55 per cent and 60 per cent of voters cast ballots, with turnout at the higher end of that range in Ninewa, Diyala, two areas characterised by a Kurd-Arab conflict.

psands@thenational.ae

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