



# BULLETIN

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## COMMENTARY

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### Parliamentary Elections in Iraq

Patrycja Sasnal

*Free parliamentary elections held in Iraq for the second time since the intervention in 2003 could be a breakthrough in the country's political development. All of the ethnic and religious groups took part in the elections. Continued stabilization of the country will depend on a ruling coalition being formed quickly.*

On 7 March in Iraq a general parliamentary election was held for the Iraqi Council of Representatives. More than 6 thousand candidates from 86 factions were competing for 325 seats. Regardless of the final results, which will not be known for approximately another two weeks, the new government will be a coalition formed by groups jointly controlling at least 163 parliamentary seats. As a result the coalition and government-building process could last several months. During this time the risk of terrorist attacks will no doubt rise. On the day the election was held more than 35 people were killed in attacks which were probably organized by Sunni extremists. Despite this estimates show the turnout to be over 50%. According to the pre-election polls incumbent Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's centrist Shi'ite faction and the secular faction of former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi are tipped as favorites to form a future coalition.

In contrast to the 2005 parliamentary elections, which were boycotted by most Sunni Iraqis, all of Iraq's ethnic and religious groups took part in this year's elections. In spite of disqualification of more than 500 candidates for their suspected links to the Baas party that governed Iraq prior to the 2003 intervention, the election campaign slogan was national reconciliation, and many election factions were created on the basis of common political views, and not on the basis of origin or religion. Provided that Iraqi and independent observers (UN, EU and others) do not report any major irregularities in the election process, the Iraqi public should not question the results. In the long term the risk of widespread social conflict will probably decrease—after the last elections there was a considerable increase in the level of religion-based and ethnic violence. In the short term however, particularly if the negotiations to form a coalition are prolonged, a rise in the number of terrorist attacks is possible. One factor destabilizing the situation will be the still considerable public dissatisfaction with the continuing poor level of security inside Iraq, unemployment of more than 40 percent, widespread corruption, and limited supply of electricity and water. Among the country's problems there is also the dispute concerning the status of Kirkuk, a region rich in natural energy resources, and the fate of around 2 million Iraqi refugees in Syria and Jordan.

Any potential rise in the number of terrorist attacks after the elections could complicate the US's plans to pull out most of its 95 thousand troops stationed in Iraq over the next six months. The US authorities need the situation to stabilize quickly so that President Barack Obama can keep his pre-election pledge to withdraw all US forces from Iraq by the end of 2011. An adverse development for the USA would also be an increase in Iran's influence in Iraq, which could happen if a Shi'ite or Shi'ite-Kurdish coalition was formed. This would also impede the national reconciliation process. In the most likely scenario—that Al-Maliki or Allawi form a coalition—Iranian influence in Iraq will remain noticeable but limited.

It is thought that a coalition between Al-Maliki and Allawi would be the most beneficial outcome for the stabilization of Iraq. A coalition made up of only Shi'ites—Al-Maliki with the pro-Iranian Iraqi National Alliance—would be less fortunate. If a truly democratic government with a strong social mandate is elected as a result of the elections, Iraq could become a model for the populations in other countries in the region, which is what the mostly authoritarian regimes in the Middle East fear.