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Abstract: The article presents developments related to the political situation in Iraq. The National Assembly will elect a president and two deputies, who in turn will select a prime minister. The United Iraqi Alliance, Shiite religious parties backed by Iraq's most revered Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, was expected to win about 140 seats. Many insurgents are Sunni Muslims who fear that democracy in Iraq will result in a country ruled by the majority Shiite population that was suppressed under Saddam, The Association of Muslim Scholars, an influential Sunni clerical body, had called for Sunnis to boycott the election.

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DEMOCRACY'S NEW FACE

Dateline: BAGHDAD, Iraq —

When Batool Al Musawi awoke on January 30, the windows and walls of her Baghdad home shook as mortar shells exploded nearby. The blasts almost made the 22-year-old reconsider her plan to vote in Iraq's historic election later that day, but her desire for democracy dwarfed her fear.

"Hearing those explosions, it occurred to me — the insurgents are weak, they are afraid of democracy, they are losing," she told The New York Times. "So I got my husband, and I got my parents, and we all came out and voted together."

Musawi and her family were among the millions of Iraqis who cast ballots for the nation's new 275-member National Assembly. Election officials estimate that 8 million Iraqis — about 57 percent of the 14.2 million eligible voters — took part in the country's first multiparty election in more than 50 years.

The National Assembly will elect a president and two deputies, who in turn will select a prime minister. The assembly will create a constitution and decide what role Islam will play in the government.

About 97 percent of Iraq's population practices Islam. The country's Muslims are divided into two groups: Sunnis and Shiites. Shiites make up the majority of Iraq's population, but Sunnis controlled the country under Saddam Hussein.

When CE went to press, the United Iraqi Alliance, Shiite religious parties backed by Iraq's most revered Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, was expected to win about 140 seats. Ethnic Kurds were expected to take about 55 seats. The ticket of interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, a secular Shiite, was expected to win about 40 seats. Smaller parties were expected to take the rest of the seats.

Rocking the Vote

Many Iraqis risked their lives to make their voices heard. Days before the vote, insurgents threatened to "wash the streets" with voters' blood. In Mashtal, an ethnically mixed neighborhood in Baghdad, young men tossed sinister leaflets out of a car's windows before the election. "To those of you who think you can vote and then run away, we will shadow you and catch you, and we will cut off your heads and the heads of your children," the leaflets warned.

Insurgents carried out nine suicide bombings in Baghdad and attacks elsewhere in the country that killed at least 50 people on election day. But the violence did not stop determined voters. After the carnage from the suicide bombings was cleaned up, voters returned to polling places in even greater numbers.

"[Terrorists] directed a message to us: the message of killing. And we directed to them the message of elections and freedom and democracy," election official Farid Ayar declared.

Overcoming Differences

Many insurgents are Sunni Muslims who fear that democracy in Iraq will result in a country ruled by the majority Shiite population that was suppressed under Saddam. The Association of Muslim Scholars, an influential Sunni clerical body, had called for Sunnis to boycott the election. The clerics said it was wrong to hold an election while Iraq is under U.S. military occupation and fighting continues in major Sunni areas such as Fallujah.

Experts estimate that less than 25 percent of Sunnis voted. In Sunni-dominated areas such as the Adamiyah district of Baghdad, very few people cast ballots. "In this part of the city, there was no election," Wamid Nadhmi, an Adamiyah political leader, told The New York Times.

U.S. and Iraqi officials worry that the Sunnis' boycott could hinder the National Assembly's success. Under the rules guiding the creation of the new Iraqi state, a two-thirds vote against the constitution in three provinces would defeat it. Sunnis hold a majority in three provinces. A constitution must be approved before voting for a popularly elected government can occur in December.

Shiite officials have reached out to moderate Sunni leaders to encourage their participation in the process, promising them senior posts and a role in writing the constitution.

"I think most of our differences can be solved with talk," Shiite Humam Hammoudi, of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution, told The Christian Science Monitor. "We're determined to build a coalition government."

At the polling places, Iraqis said religious differences must be put aside for the good of the country. "Yes, I am Shiite, but I am an Iraqi before I am anything," explained Ahmed Dujaily, 80, to The New York Times. "Religion, it is myself. The vote is for my country."

Consider This ... What are some of the challenges that Iraq's new government might face? Why?

PHOTO (COLOR): Dalia Alkhatat shows off her purple finger after voting in Iraq's national elections. Voters had to dip their fingers in ink so they could only vote once.

PHOTO (COLOR): Iraqis wait to vote in Zubayr, a town in southern Iraq. An Iraqi man (above) casts his vote.

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