



STATEMENT BY THE NEXT CENTURY FOUNDATION:

International observers of the 2021 Iraq parliamentary elections

Iraq's national parliamentary elections took place on October 10 2021. Prior to this on October 8, there was a 'Special Election Day', on which the regular armed forces, security services responsible for providing security on the day of the election itself, prisoners sentenced to under five years, and displaced persons cast their vote.

The Next Century Foundation (NCF) was accredited as an election observer by the Independent High Electoral Commission for Iraq (IHEC). The NCF observed election campaign activity during the two days prior to Special Election Day, observed voting on that day and on General Election Day, and then remained in Iraq for a further ten days to conduct follow-up meetings.

NCF's Findings and recommendations

The Next Century Foundation believes that the 2021 elections in Iraq provided - by and large - a fair reflection of the view of the electorate and should be regarded as credible. *We say this based solely on our observing of actual voting practise*, including the behaviour of election officials and other citizens of Iraq within the vicinity of, and inside, polling stations; our observance of the multi-layered and largely hi-tech process involved in voting; and our isolated experience of checking an election result.

However, the Next Century Foundation believes the following issues require action to be taken well in advance of the next election:

- The Independent High Electoral Commission of Iraq (IHEC) should make its detailed results publicly available on its website within hours, at most, of the polls closing. The right of candidates to complain about a particular result for up to three days after the election should not prevent IHEC from publishing and standing by its satellite reading of all of the votes. Prior to IHEC's prompt publication of the results, this could be backed up, if necessary, by a prior checking of all the results contained on the memory sticks of each ballot box. The publication of the election result should include voter turnout, nationally and in each province.
- The basis of how IHEC has arrived at its turnout figure should be explained clearly in any IHEC media or website statements. The calculation of the turnout should be based on all eligible Iraqis who have either previously registered to vote using the Electronic Card exclusively used in 2018, or those who successfully re-registered for a Bio-Metric Card (BMC). Turnout should not be calculated by excluding those who have not collected their

BMC after having successfully registered for it. In common with widespread international practise, we recognise that the size of an electorate cannot simply be calculated on the basis of how many Iraqis are 18 or over, but needs to reflect actual voter registration. The latter though must include all those Iraqis who have registered as per the 2018 system, whether they have sought to register for the BMC or not.

- The use of ten fingerprints as the default requirement in each polling station for those who had not undertaken the new bio-metric registration process was highly restrictive and may have disenfranchised a significant number of voters. A thumb and finger print from each hand is sufficient for secure, on the spot, biometric registration.
- The existing discretionary waiver, able to be deployed by a Voter Centre manager, of this procedure should be used sparingly, throughout the whole voting day, and only apply to those in possession of an old EC and only after at least one failed attempt.
- Every effort should be made to ensure that all citizens of Iraq aged 18 and over have a BMC in time for the next election. However, only being in possession of an old EC should not prevent any of Iraq's citizens from voting because voting is a constitutional right.
- Members of the armed forces and/or security services should not be allowed to carry weapons into voting centres *under any circumstances*. This bad practise, believed to be contrary to existing IHEC rules, has been noted in Iraq's elections from 2005 and is particularly egregious in tense regions such as Kirkuk. It played its part in NCF being unable to complete a planned programme of observing on Special Election Day (October 8).
- IHEC's failure to keep an accurate record of the numbers of those individuals who attempted to vote inside a polling station, but were unable to do so due to a registration or other technical issue, was a severe shortcoming.
- Those who complete their BMC registration inside the polling station should have their old ECs destroyed immediately by an IHEC staff member cutting across the SIM card contained within it, and the resultant pieces should be sealed in a dedicated 'safe bag' and the number of ECs so destroyed should be recorded electronically.
- Entry to a Voter Centre should be impossible without an individual showing security personnel their own individual biometric card (BMC) or electronic (voter) card (EC), or, in the case of every individual international election observer, their IHEC accreditation and passport.
- In order to be present as a domestic election observer 'representing' a political party or faction, the 'representative' should be a proven party official knowledgeable of the voting process and interested in putting reasonable queries or questions to the local IHEC officials.
- The media should not be present inside a Voting Centre (VC) during the hours that voting is taking place. IHEC local officials should ensure that the priority inside a VC is to ensure an individual citizen's ability to vote in an unimpeded and discreet manner. The supposed media attractiveness of filming any particular VC is irrelevant in this context.
- The taking of photographs via any device inside a VC by **any** individual – security personnel or otherwise – must be totally banned and its conduct should lead to the individual's instant dismissal from the premises. Concerned parties – voters, monitors or observers – should have the right to raise such illicit practise with the VC manager or other senior IHEC personnel on the spot.
- IHEC should insist on the observance and enforcement of the existing ruling that there be no party-political election material visible within 100 metres of any part of the VC.
- The reports of the independent audit conducted into the technical aspects of the vote should not be kept confidential at the behest of UNAMI (The United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq) but should be a matter of public record.

- UNAMI should make greater effort to facilitate the work of international election observers, for example by facilitating in coordination with IHEC the availability of secure transport. That facility is available on the election days but not on days prior to or subsequent to those days which is a shortcoming, as effective election observation is a process which includes pre and post-election interviews both with the public and with officials.

NCF report summary

IHEC's failure to release the full election results, constituency by constituency including local and national turnout, in a timely and comprehensive fashion was highly unsatisfactory and totally inexplicable. There was a major disconnect between the high level of technical sophistication in the voting and counting procedure, and the time taken to provide the comprehensive results including turnout information. The confusing, partial and contradictory information that was periodically released by IHEC was hard to reconcile with the fact that each vote was electronically measured and that the outcome of the vote in every single ballot box was directly communicated via satellite to IHEC headquarters as soon as each polling station closed. We noted that, as back-up, the same results contained in each ballot box's memory stick were transferred to IHEC's regional office or directly to its HQ in Baghdad.

The procedure for on the day biometric voter registration is unnecessarily highly complicated. Our observing suggested that its technical and practical problems may have disenfranchised a significant number of voters. A simpler form of 'conversion' to biometric voting needs to be introduced. Whilst every effort should be made to encourage those still in possession of the old Electronic voter Card (EC) to register for the Biometric Card (BMC) prior to the next election, making existing possession of a BMC a prerequisite for taking part in that poll would be an unnecessarily tight restraint on the exercise of the right to vote. Conversely, simplification of the BMC registration process once a prospective voter is in the polling station would ensure that many more citizens could vote.

To discourage allegations of bad or even fraudulent practise, there are steps that IHEC could take to further tighten procedures and to enhance its accountability. We witnessed several ways in which voters had sought to vote but were unable to do so. These included having previously but only partly completed registration for a BMC and technical difficulties in registering for a BMC when in the polling station. Any such consequent 'failed' vote should be registered on the Voter Verification Device in order that an exact local and national tally of such 'failed' votes be available as an inherent part of the election results.

The right of domestic election observers to be present inside each polling station is a potentially valuable further form of accountability (alongside the right of international observers such as ourselves to be present). Whilst we had a very positive encounter with an NGO representative who was serving as a productive domestic observer, our interaction with the, much more prevalent, observers from the political alliances contesting the elections was generally negative. We found many of them to be bored, apathetic and prone to issuing platitudes to us about the conduct of the election in the particular polling station they sat in. None were observed taking notes. Our assumption was that many of them were simply paid observers, not party officials, and were in practise not performing a meaningful observing role.

We were impressed by the attentiveness of IHEC managers and staff at the Voter Centres (VC) we visited. They were keen to explain procedures and to answer any questions that we

had. On the downside, the procedures for destroying old ECs (following a successful BMC registration) was in most cases unsatisfactory. Upon inspection many such ECs were found to still be, variously, intact, not cut across the SIM in the card, not stored in a sufficiently secure manner, or inexplicably stored in the same bag as the ECs or BMCs that belonged to IHEC staff members. We noted that IHEC staff were willing to assist voters when asked to by the latter, but otherwise did not interfere with voters in the exercise of their vote. We also witnessed that an IHEC staff member was prepared to remonstrate with a voter interfering with another in the conduct of his vote.

The ability to enter the VC without showing voter ID is a potentially significant flaw in IHEC procedures. We do not suspect that this led to any significant fraud but witnessed one occasion when it played its part in what looked like an attempt by a senior male family member to guide the voting activity of his daughters/female siblings.

There is no reason why members of the media should be present in significant numbers outside a VC and they should certainly not be present at all inside a VC let alone a polling station. We observed these features at one VC where it created what in our assessment was an infringement in the free and private exercise of the right to vote, especially when TV cameras were present right inside a polling station. In the same VC we ourselves were filmed, unannounced, by two individuals, almost concurrently, using their mobile phones as we carried out our observing. The experience was intimidating. If the requirement that mobile phones are given up upon entry to the VC was properly and totally enforced, for all those who entered the VC, then this would not have occurred. It is also illogical to officially ban mobile phones from VCs but to allow in TV cameras.

The security presence outside and around VCs was thorough. However it should be subject to tight and properly enforced rules. These must definitely include the uniform exclusion of all firearms in the possession of any security personnel entering the VC. Any failure to hand over, subject to adequate storage procedures, or to return such a weapon to their own vehicle, should in our view automatically deny the individual(s) entry to the VC. The fact that we were accompanied by armed personnel who insisted on retaining their guns inside the VC was a factor in us being unable to complete our planned observing of voting in Kirkuk on Special Election Day.

In support of the above report summary, and of the specific policy recommendations at the top of our report, we provide the following observations on what we witnessed of the conduct of the election:

Procedure

Throughout our observations of VCs, whether in Baghdad or Kirkuk, we were impressed by the diligence of IHEC staff and, in general, of the rigour of the verification process. We cannot obviously quantify how much the diligence of IHEC VC managers and of other officials when in front of us was typical or a display for our benefit. Managers were routinely friendly; some even wanted us to pose for photos with them inside the VC (in apparent contravention of IHEC rules). We were shown the use by holders of a BMC of thumb and card 'entry' to the polling station via the Voter Verification Device (VVD), the prospective voter's location by IHEC staff on a physical register and the prospective voter's marking of it with their ink-stained finger, their hand-signing of a receipt book in order that they could then be given a voting sheet to be marked by an indelible ink pen, and the

VVD's scanning of each sheet's QR code. It added up to what looked like a thorough and fool-proof process. This was the procedure for the 17m who had already been issued with a BMC, out of the estimated total of 21m or so Iraqis assumed to be *able* to vote.

Voters with BMCs needed only have one finger recognised by the VVD, and, in our experience, such voters rarely encountered a problem in using it. We noted too that in practise the official requirement that prospective voters show their National Identity Card (in addition to one of the two forms of voter card) was not enforced in a significant minority of cases.

Biometric voter registration on Election Day

For the estimated 4-5m Iraqis still in possession of the Electronic voter Card (EC), the only means to vote in the 2018 election, the procedure for in effect re-registration created problems at times. It should be noted that for the majority of those such voters whom we observed, who, having entered the process via an EC, then had to 'convert' to a biometric procedure on site via the VVD, the process was successful. This was despite the relatively slow procedure of the VVD 'reading' ten separate digit prints in order that the EC holder could vote. If the VVD was not successful at first then the prospective voter could repeat, IHEC officials told us, the exercise up to two more times at half-hour intervals. On some occasions a cut lemon was provided in order to ensure that a voter's digits were sufficiently clean for the VVD to read them successfully. However there was a significant minority of EC holders (of those we observed) who were unable to vote because the VVD had not accepted the conversion (some may of course have returned to try again later).

In the VC at Al-Muthana School, Al-Adhamiya, Baghdad, a lady in her sixties who possessed an EC was denied a vote because the VVD accepted the imprint of nine of her fingers but failed to 'recognize' the little finger on one of her hands, in spite of the efforts by IHEC staff to assist her efforts. Having attempted, and failed, the verification process three times the lady was now automatically disqualified from voting. The lady was frustrated, and insisted on her right to vote. We asked her why she was so insistent. She replied: 'In order to choose my representative.' When we asked her why she had not already updated her electronic card to a biometric one, she replied: 'This should not deny me my right to vote!'

We also encountered a few cases of prospective voters who had apparently sought to obtain a BMC before the election (as publicly encouraged to do so by IHEC), but had not successfully uploaded all of their information. This appeared to make it impossible to complete their 'conversion' to a biometric procedure inside the polling station. For the two million Iraqis who, according to a government adviser, had apparently successfully registered before the election for their BMC, but had not physically collected it, they had no way of voting. One such person, a soldier seeking to vote in Marjayoun School in Al-Karada, was visibly angry and remonstrated, to no effect, with the VC manager.

For a total of only 20 voters per polling station, the station manager, according to one such individual, has the discretion to allow specifically disabled voters to be excused identification of themselves via thumb and/or all ten digits if this had proven physically difficult. At a polling station in An-Neel School, Al-Mansour, the manager, Mohamad Abdalrazzaq, told us, in relation to how many voters with electronic cards were denied a vote as a result of technical issues with the fingerprint scanning, 'Very few'. The reason, he said, was that he used what he called the 'skip fingerprint' function. He said that he had the capacity to use this for 5% of voters registered to vote at his VC.

At none of the VCs that were visited were the IHEC staff, or VC director, able to tell us how many EC holders had been unable to vote so far that day. The VVD does not register any such ‘failures’. While one VC director was, seemingly encouraged by our enquiry, intent on keeping a log of each prospective voter who had ‘failed’ such a procedure, no other VC director we encountered appeared to be doing so. In any case such ‘logs’ take the form of a hand-written note book of the director’s observations about the vote, and it was unclear how such commonly used ‘records’ could be properly processed by IHEC.

A member of IHEC staff at the second polling station we visited at Um Al-Mumineen School VC in Al-Dura, Baghdad told us that the failure to upgrade a voter to a biometric procedure on the spot has been a ‘problem’ implying that it had been happening a lot. However he wasn’t able to quantify how many had been ‘rejected’ so far that day. An IHEC staff member at a polling station in Um Al-Mumineen School VC in Al-Dura said that the situation where VVD machines aren’t able to ‘read’ all 10 digits was ‘very bad.’

In all cases ‘used’ ECs from a voter’s successful conversion to the biometric process had been placed in a so-called ‘safe bag’; a sealable plastic bag kept typically behind where staff sat. In most cases this included the ECs having been cut in some form, although not always in the most fool-proof way: directly across the SIM card that forms part of the EC. In the Al-Muthana School VC in Al-Adhamiya, an IHEC official told us that they had not cut the cards but were keeping them, in line with ‘regulations’ that they be cut after 6pm when the voting ended. In some cases we heard complaints from IHEC staff that they wanted to cut the cards straight away but had not been given scissors. In several cases successful ‘cuts’ had occurred because of IHEC staff bringing their own scissors from home. Throughout the day, many of the managers and staff told us that they were not issued with scissors. Some brought them from home and others had sought to improvise by bending the cards.

Media and other inappropriate personnel outside and inside the VC

When we arrived In Al-Dijla School VC in Al-Mansour, Baghdad in the late afternoon there was a large media presence outside. TV cameramen were also position inside one of the polling stations (‘Number 1’). It is inappropriate that voters are filmed in the conduct of what is supposed to be a private and discreet activity. When we asked VC manager Hussein Sadeq about the extensive media presence, he stated that IHEC had chosen Al-Dijla School as a ‘media centre’ in Baghdad among 133 such ‘centres’ throughout Iraq allowed to have a media presence.

Inside a polling station in Al-Dijla School VC Baghdad on General Election Day, at one point we were openly filmed almost simultaneously by two Iraqis using mobile phones while standing in the entrance. They were not IHEC staff nor, we believe, were they voters or members of the media.

Political parties’/candidates’ interference/conduct inside and outside the voting centres

We saw no evidence that anybody had sought to interfere with voters on their way into a VC for any apparent malign reason. We only witnessed one occasion when a voter tried to influence another voter’s decision inside. At the 1st VC in Sadr City we witnessed a father (of the IHEC official who was explaining procedures to us) interfering with another (younger) son’s conduct of his vote. The IHEC

officially remonstrated with the man, his father, who had already voted, to move out of the polling station and allow the younger son to conduct his vote unimpeded.

Inside the entrance to the first VC we visited in Sadr City (Khadija Al-Kubra School), we witnessed a man leading a group of ten women in to vote. It was assumed that he was the father or brother of the women. He had been holding all of their biometric or electronic voter cards, and, on consultation with a polling station staff member, and possibly having noted our presence, had distributed the cards to each woman on the basis that their first name (and the card itself apparently) indicated in which specific polling station inside the VC they should vote. By definition he wasn't able to be present in every one of the polling stations that the women voted in, but his conduct created the impression that the women were present under his instruction and would probably be voting on the same basis as him.

We did note a very obvious infraction of the IHEC requirement that there be no campaign material of any kind within a 100 metre distance of the voting centre. Outside the VC in Dijla School in Al-Mansour an enormous banner promoting Haider Al-Mulla and Mohammed Al-Halbousi (candidate and leader, respectively) of the Taqaddom alliance overlooked the entrance to the VC, and another such banner could be clearly seen by voters inside the VC's open internal area as the politicians' visages peered down on the proceedings. This image of Al-Mulla and Al-Halbousi was clearly much closer than 100 metres and was presumably deliberately intended to influence those about to cast their vote.

There were several occasions that we witnessed voters marking the voting sheets in consultation with IHEC officials; and at least one VC manager was happy to admit that they provided assistance but only if asked. In terms of what we witnessed it was clear that the voters concerned had usually sought assistance over what to do and/or with understanding the (huge number) of candidate choices before them. This appeared to be related to illiteracy and/or decrepitude. For those confused by the actual voting process they were also referred to a larger poster behind them (in the two modestly discrete) voting booths. There were a few occasions where we witnessed an elderly man needing physical help from an IHEC staff member in order to get to and from the booth, including, on one occasion, help with holding the marker pen (but not with actually marking the paper).

The role of domestic election observers

In every VC we visited there were several local election observers. These would, in our experience, only occasionally include a representative from an NGO. One such individual we encountered in Kirkuk was highly organised, conscientious, and seemed to be playing a valuable role in upholding the accountability of the election process. There was always though a plethora of observers in each VC from the political alliances contesting the election. On two occasions in Baghdad a domestic election observer did not know what political alignment he was supposed to be observing the election on behalf of. The party's name would eventually emerge after the observer had racked his brains at some length. Generally, observers representing political alignments did not generate to us any sense of taking their role especially seriously. They usually looked apathetic. When asked if they had encountered any issues of concern there was a routine rejection of any such notion, although appreciation expressed by some observers that this election's procedures were better than those experienced in 2018 was common and seemed genuine. At one VC in Baghdad an observer from one of the party alignments went through effusive praise for the vote, even lauding the director of the

VC as a ‘great person.’ The latter comment seemed more for us than a serious appreciation of the manager’s role.

NCF’s ability to observe the election

On Special Election Day (SED) our security to, from, and within Kirkuk was provided by a force described by its commander as the ‘defence forces’ (or military branch) of the Ministry of the Interior (MoI). Upon entering the second VC, the head of the MoI unit antagonised a uniformed officer from the local Mukhabarat (largely uniformed internal intelligence service). Part of the Mukhabarat’s grievance was apparently that the MoI officer in charge of our security had refused to hand over his gun upon entering the area immediately outside the VC. This eventually led to an extended stand-off in the middle of the VC. We were then told to leave the VC before further vociferous exchanges in the street outside the VC ensued between senior officers from two distinct security bodies. They were plainly engaged in a clash of personalities as well as an ingrained sense of their own power and were thus, as officers and organisations, unwilling to submit to the other’s authority. In microcosm the dichotomy between, on the one hand, an exercise in electoral democracy and, on the other, a state riven with a welter of competing security forces, some state and some semi-detached, was visibly on display. In a Mukhabarat facility opposite the VC it was extensively asserted to the NCF team by the plain clothes head of the Kirkuk Mukhabarat that we could not come into an area that was his responsibility without a clear and authorising letter from another security body, Qiyada Al-Amaliyat Al-Mushtaraka (literally translatable as the ‘Joint Operations Command’), outlining our plans and our security detail, who in turn, he said, would have informed the Mukhabarat. An extensive verbal assault ensued from the Kirkuk Mukhabarat leader. Our polite reference to those who had facilitated our security did not assuage his anger. We were obliged to terminate our planned visit of more VCs including some in another province, Al-Diyala, and, after a brief stop for lunch, we headed back to Baghdad.

On General Election Day (October 10) our security was provided by the Facilities Protection Force, also part of the MoI. Everything went smoothly; there were no incidents that interfered with our ability to conduct our observing of the election in the different parts of Baghdad that we had chosen to visit.

Security at Voter Centres

At a rough estimate there were between 30-50 security force members outside each voter centre that we visited, including a presence on the roof or proximate to it. Access to the Voter Centres for voters was unimpeded other than by the welcome requirement that they hand over any mobile phones outside for collection after they had voted. We had originally assumed that there would be a curfew throughout Iraq on the General Election Day (October 10). However in practise we found that there was no such curfew other than, we were advised, between provinces. Presumably a curfew within a province would have been feasible on the basis that the sheer volume of Voter Centres in local areas meant that most Iraqis could walk to vote (although this would make no allowance for the less able-bodied, elderly etc.).

The count

From each of the VC managers we spoke to we received careful explanations of the processes involved once polling stations closed across Iraq. These consisted of:

1. The physical transfer of the 'USB' (i.e. the memory card or thumb-stick) contained in each voting box to either the province (for example in the case of Kirkuk) *en route* to IHEC's central office in Baghdad, or direct to the latter in the case of the VCs in Baghdad
2. The immediate satellite transfer of voting data from each polling station to IHEC's Centre in Baghdad
3. The production of a 'report' from each polling station, either sent to the province or to Baghdad (as above)
4. Random check involving the hand counting of all voting sheets contained in one ballot box per VC (see below). If there was more than a 5% discrepancy from the electronic result then all of the ballot boxes in the VC would have to be hand-counted. The check was for the tally per candidate and of sheets classified as void.
5. The physical transfer of all ballot boxes to the province or direct to Baghdad as relevant (see above).

We were able to verify the removal of the memory stick ('USB') from the one ballot box we observed being randomly checked, and its deposit in a sealed envelope for transfer to IHEC's Centre in Baghdad. It was not clear to us whether the 'report' on the vote from each polling station was the transfer of the hand-written report referred to above or something else.

An hour after the polls closed on October 10, we witnessed the production of a paper print-out from a random IHEC check of a voter box in a polling station in the VC in Al-Dijla School in Al-Mansour, Baghdad. These were apparently conducted by IHEC officials in every one of the nearly 58,000 polling stations in every one of the 8,962 voter centres in Iraq. Journalists, election observers (including from other polling stations in the VC) and others crowded round the print-out we witnessed in Al-Mansour, and many took photos (including ourselves).

A total of ten copies of the electronic results were in fact printed out at this VC. The manager of the polling station distributed around seven copies to the local observers in his station and from other polling stations, keeping three copies for himself.

Assuming the public witnessing and photographing of these print-outs occurred at each of the designated random checks of the box containing voting slips in each voter station in every voter centre in Iraq, then this could potentially provide an indication, at least, of how accurate the IHEC election results were, including voter turnout. Many activists and analysts were presumably involved in informal monitoring via uploaded photos of these paper print-outs.

Then followed the required hand-counted check of the voter sheets inside the same ballot box at Al-Dijla VC, Al-Mansour. It was led by Mohammed Bahjat, a calm, confident young man who oversaw the physical process with his colleagues. The hand-counted results matched the print-out exactly.

Official turnout

Within two hours or so of the election closing on October 10, IHEC gave the Iraq media an 'initial turnout' figure of 41%. It was 'initial', we were told privately by a Government adviser, because 6% of boxes had not been checked, while the results from Special Election Day (held two days earlier on October 8) had not yet been included (see below). It was not definitively stated by IHEC what the

total prospective i.e. registered voter total, was on which this turnout figure had been calculated. As of the morning of October 12 the IHEC website said that there had been just under 9m voters. As a proportion of the 25m Iraqis who are 18 or over, a figure given to us by the Government advisor, based, he said, on ministry of trade data, this was only 36%. However the same government adviser informed us that the 41% 'initial' result reflected the fact there were 21m registered Iraq voters (the 'registered' total was based on the number possessing one of two voter cards).

On October 17, 2021, the Iraq Electoral Commission announced that voter turnout was 43 percent, with a total of more than 9.6 million voters. According to these figures, the percentage boycotting the election had exceeded that recorded in 2018. The official turnout in the 2018 elections was 44.5 percent. However the latter tally remains highly contentious at best, as that election's disputed electronic calculation could not be challenged after so many paper ballots were destroyed in a highly suspicious fire. Analysts observing the election on the ground in 2018 and those whom we spoke to in the few days prior to the 2021 election, said that 2018 turnout was actually around 16%; a widely believed figure in line with the comment of the Iraq Government advisor that turnout in 2018 had been 'less than 20%'. This was itself in line with the figure of 16% that a well-connected Iraqi told us IHEC itself had actually acknowledged, despite the official turnout figure for 2018 still being published on its website.

On October 13 IHEC revised down the turnout figure to 8,377,382, perhaps reflecting the number of hand recounts being conducted but this was unclear. More positively, for the first time since the election, the total voter base, the number of those entitled i.e. *registered* to vote was also published – 22,118,368. This meant that official turnout was now 38%, according to IHEC's own, again for the first time, published calculation.

As of October 17 the IHEC website was stating that turnout was 43%, based on a final voter tally (unchanged since) of 9,602,876 and the same number of registered voters as above.

Our sense of the turnout

Our own sense of the turnout can obviously only be based on the observing we conducted. On October 10 this took place in Baghdad, specifically in Sadr City, Al-Adhamiya, Al-Dura, Al-Karada and Al-Mansour. These areas together constituted what for us was a calculatedly wide variation of communal and social characteristics. The utility of our observing in terms of assessing turnout in these districts was obviously affected by the time at which we made our visit.

We visited two voting centres (VC) in all five of the above Baghdad districts. In each of the VCs that were visited per district, we typically observed voting in two– three out of what, normally, were five to eight polling stations per VC. We visited all five of the polling stations in the final VC we visited, which was in Al-Mansour. We had begun the day at around 8am in Sadr City. The first VC we visited in Sadr City was held at the Khadija Al-Kubra School. Here, and then at Majd Alsilam School VC, one hour and two hours respectively after polls had opened, voting levels were modest.

In predominantly Sunni Al-Adhamiya, we visited the Voting Centre at Al-Nu'aman School at mid to late morning. One of the six polling stations on site had seen a 10% turnout by around 10.30am.

At Al-Muthana School (Voting Centre) in Al-Adhamiya, voting was being conducted at a modest pace at the 6 polling stations on site. Not untypically, one registered a turnout at that point of just over 9%.

In Al-Karada, an essentially Shia middle class area, we visited the Marjayoun School VC around late morning. We observed five of the 8 polling stations on site. At one the turnout had only reached 4.4%.

At another Voting Centre – Alwiyah School – one of the polling stations had seen a 4.5% turnout as it approached midday.

In the mixed Sunni-Shia area of Al-Dura district, an area where income levels appeared more mixed than, say, Karada, we visited Um Al-Mumineen School Voting Centre. At the three voter stations we visited at this VC the turnout was 24.3%, 25.7% and 26.4% respectively. In the second Al-Dura Voting Station we visited – Saqr Quraish School – there were 5 polling stations. One of the stations had seen a 30.8% turnout by this stage. The other had seen a turnout of 32.6%.

We arrived in Al-Mansour district, an essentially well-heeled and largely Shia area, at late afternoon. We first visited the An-Neel School (containing eight polling stations) where the turnout in three polling stations we observed was 22.7%, 21.5% and 19.6% respectively.

In the Al-Dijla School in Al-Mansour, we observed voting in the five polling stations. The turnout was, respectively, 19.2%, 18.7%, 16.7%, 18.9% and 23.8%. The director of the Voter Centre in Al-Dijla School commented to us that this was a wealthy area where most people aren't particularly bothered by elections or living abroad. His remark may have been based on an embarrassment that in reality a number of voters were boycotting the election.

We cannot conclude anything about Baghdad turnout other than to say that *by mid to late afternoon it was ranging very widely in the limited number of VCs we visited*: two polling stations had seen an over 19% turnout, one had seen an over 32% turnout.

In contrast to the above, our observations of voting in Kirkuk were on Special Election Day (October 8). This is an election confined to the regular Iraq armed forces and those official security forces expecting to be on duty away from their homes on October 10. Unsurprisingly perhaps, given their collective state function and being encouraged with time off to vote, there was brisk and voluminous voter activity that included a number of Iraq military/security members waiting outside to vote.

We were only able to observe voting at two Kirkuk voting centres on Special Election Day (for explanation see above), both located in the Wasati area of the city: Asmaa School and the Masjid Al-Aqsa School. In Asmaa School, where we were present late morning, we observed that some of the polling stations were already quite crowded with members of the armed forces, while others were relatively quiet. This was explained by the manager at the second Centre we visited early afternoon (Masjid Al-Aqsa School) as because they had organised distinct military units to all vote in one polling station. We cannot conclude anything definitive regarding the turnout in Kirkuk on Special Election Day as we do not possess specific data for the turnout at the two centres were observed. However we can note the significant difference in the volume of voters compared to Baghdad on General Election Day. That said, the armed forces and official state security forces, while numerous, are a decided minority of the overall total of 25m Iraqis who are, formally speaking, 'entitled' to vote. Their proportion of the overall electorate has been estimated at 10%.

NCF's comment on allegations

In the course of our meetings in the aftermath of the Election we heard a number of allegations of electoral fraud. These ranged from suggestions that there had been a 'trade' in ECs which could, it

was claimed, be utilised by supporters of one faction committing identity fraud or, more simply, bought en masse in order to be held back on the assumed basis that their owners would vote a certain 'undesired' way. From those connected to political factions who had not fared well in the 2021 election, we heard allegations of vote manipulation including claims that VCs in areas consisting of many supporters of strongly performing parties had stayed open for several hours beyond the official closing time. We were told by one disgruntled politician that the seemingly 'correct' and 'proper' conduct of the election that we witnessed in an area like Al-Mansour was not what happened in, for example, Sadr City. We also heard criticism of the 'losing' factions on the basis that they had not adjusted their election campaign to the needs of the new system of electoral constituencies. More malignly perhaps, we also heard the suggestion from several and very wide ranging sources that IHEC's internet server was in the UAE, and thus that vote manipulation of the kind that might suit this country's political leadership was only to be expected.

NCF feels reasonably confident that IHEC's server was in fact in its Baghdad HQ. However we are not in a position to make comment on the more focused kinds of alleged manipulation outlined above, other than to emphasise what we directly witnessed.

NCF observers

- Jaafar El-Ahmar
- Neil Partrick
- Lori Šramel Čebular
- Khalid Waleed Khalid Taha

.../ends