

# Iraqi federalism vote: Behind the contradictory numbers

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The Iraqi parliament voted (Wednesday, October 11) 140 to nothing, in a more-or-less routine vote, to approve the federalism-procedures bill. Or did they? The New York Times said so. But the Iraqi paper Azzaman said the vote was 138 to nothing, the figure representing exactly one-half of the membership (275) plus one, moreover it said a lot of people thought there was something funny about the vote. Al-Mada, another Baghdad paper, agrees with Azzaman on both points. The pan-Arab al-Hayat, another standard source, says the vote was 148 on the yea side, out of 175 attending. And yes, says al-Hayat, there were indeed complaints about how it was done, quoting the leader of one of the opposition groups who said the whole procedure was a put-up job (mu'amara).

The Iraqi papers saw this as part of a fight for the soul of the country, and not a clean fight either. None of them has an integrated story about what happened, but they all, or most of them, say people saw lots of problems (of which the bizarre discrepancy in the numbers is only one indication).

First on the differences in the reported numbers. Al-Mada provides the only real leg-up for understanding this. Their reporter says Parliament Speaker Mashhadani ordered everyone but the parliamentarians themselves out of the chamber before the vote, including the members' staff; and he ordered the direct electronic transmission to the outside to be cut, creating a hermetically sealed environment for the voting. So journalists certainly didn't get a chance to count the votes. Why there wasn't at least an official tally afterwards, perhaps no one can tell us.

Azzaman says some people also questioned the legality of the voting procedure. Apparently the main complaint is that it took so long to pressure the necessary numbers to come in and vote (several hours), that the statutory period for this was exceeded.

Who voted (for the bill) and who didn't (by boycotting the session)? Reidar Visser, the meticulous authority people turn to in cases like this, describes the boycotters of the bill as follows:

The boycott was largely inter-sectarian and Iraqi nationalist: it united all the Sunni parties of both secularist and Islamist colours and Shiite nationalist-Islamists, primarily supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr, as well as the Fadila. At least one Turkmen representative also joined the main group of active boycotters, whose combined parliamentary strength is around 105 seats. Their objections range from virulent opposition to the principle of federalism (as seen among the Sunni groups), via preference for a system that would avoid sectarian federalism (Fadila; they also considered the adoption of the law at this time unhelpful to the process of

national reconciliation) to rejection of federalism in a context of occupation (supporters of Muqtada-Sadr). A conspicuous common denominator for many of these factions is their background as the “domestic” resistance to the former regime – as opposed to those deputies who are returnees from exile.

And he describes the proponents of the bill as follows:

The principal backers of the bill were the Kurdish parties and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), who together account for 88 seats. The balance of some 50 seats is believed to have come at least partly from Iyad Allawi’s secularist alliance of 25 representatives – whose principal figures reportedly took part in the vote (Hamid Musa, Mahdi al-Hafiz, Wail Abd al-Latif, Safiyya al-Suhayl and Mufid al-Jazairi have all been specifically mentioned). The remaining votes that were required – perhaps between 30 and 40 (an unspecified number of Allawi supporters protested against their leaders and stayed away from the vote) – must have come primarily from the “grey” middle segment of the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the 54 or so deputies who are neither SCIRI nor Sadrist and label themselves “independents” or come from one of the two main Daawa factions. Lately the Daawa faction called Tanzim al-Iraq has changed its traditionally anti-federal rhetoric, and with its party mouthpiece now attacking those who “reject federalism on the pretext of national unity” it is very likely that they are drifting towards a pro-SCIRI position. On this particular vote they may have been joined by some members of the main Daawa branch as well as by independents, but the numbers make it clear that there must have been additional Shiite resistance to the bill on top of the protests by Fadila and the main Sadrist faction – despite the fact that there was reportedly enormous pressure on deputies to turn up for the vote.

At the very least it is worth emphasizing Visser’s main point (or one of them anyway), namely that the core of the opposition came from groups that had stayed in Iraq to resist the Saddam regime, while the proponents were by and large from the exile groups. People were not just voting about nice political-theory models.

This was by no means just another vote. Azzaman, in addition reporting allegations of illegality, and calling this a black day in the history of Iraq, quotes a Fadhila person who said this will mark the end of the latent and partial civil war, and the entry into open civil war. Azzaman actually points the finger at four members of the Allawi group (so-called Iraqi List) as responsible for tipping the balance, in a separate article headed in dramatic fashion “The four who changed history”. The writer takes the trouble to name each of them, adding that they did this in the face of “vehement popular opposition” to the measure.

My point is that NYT reporting of this as a routine vote and another small step in the right direction, is about as misleading as it can be.

I was hoping for a more scientific verification of my hypothesis that foreign coverage in the New York Times is the voice of the State Department, but unfortunately the State Dept website hasn’t issued its fatwa on this yet. Fearless prediction: They’ll say the vote was 140 to nothing, no particular problems, rather a reflection of the strength of the Iraqi democracy.

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