

Some Just Voted for Food

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Voting in Baghdad was linked with receipt of food rations, several voters said after the Sunday poll.

Many Iraqis said Monday that their names were marked on a list provided by the government agency that provides monthly food rations before they were allowed to vote.

"I went to the voting centre and gave my name and district where I lived to a man," said Wassif Hamsa, a 32-year-old journalist who lives in the predominantly Shia area Janila in Baghdad. "This man then sent me to the person who distributed my monthly food ration."

Mohammed Ra'ad, an engineering student who lives in the Baya'a district of the capital city reported a similar experience.

Ra'ad, 23, said he saw the man who distributed monthly food rations in his district at his polling station. "The food dealer, who I know personally of course, took my name and those of my family who were voting," he said. "Only then did I get my ballot and was allowed to vote."

"Two of the food dealers I know told me personally that our food rations would be withheld if we did not vote," said Saeed Jodhet, a 21-year-old engineering student who voted in the Hay al-Jihad district of Baghdad.

There has been no official indication that Iraqis who did not vote would not receive their monthly food rations.

Many Iraqis had expressed fears before the election that their monthly food rations would be cut if they did not vote. They said they had to sign voter registration forms in order to pick up their food supplies.

Their experiences on the day of polling have underscored many of their concerns about questionable methods used by the U.S.-backed Iraqi interim government to increase voter turnout.

Just days before the election, 52 year-old Amin Hajar who owns an auto garage in central Baghdad had said: "I'll vote because I can't afford to have my food ration cut...if that happened, me and my family would starve to death."

Hajar told IPS that when he picked up his monthly food ration recently, he was forced to sign a form stating that he had picked up his voter registration. He had feared that the government would use this information to track those who did not vote.

Calls to the Independent Electoral Commission for Iraq (IECI) and to the Ministry of Trade, which is responsible for the distribution of the monthly food ration, were not returned.

Other questions have arisen over methods to persuade people to vote. U.S. troops tried to coax voters in Ramadi, capital city of the al-Anbar province west of Baghdad to come out to vote, AP reported.

IECI officials have meanwhile 'downgraded' their earlier estimate of voter turnout.

IECI spokesman Farid Ayar had declared a 72 percent turnout earlier, a figure given also by the Bush Administration.

But at a press conference Ayar backtracked on his earlier figure, saying the turnout would be nearer 60 percent of registered voters.

The earlier figure of 72 percent, he said, was "only guessing" and "just an estimate" that had been based on "very rough, word of mouth estimates gathered informally from the field." He added that it will be some time before the IECI can issue accurate figures on the turnout.

"Percentages and numbers come only after counting and will be announced when it's over," he said. "It is too soon to say that those were the official numbers."

Where there was a large turnout, the motivation behind the voting and the processes both appeared questionable. The Kurds up north were voting for autonomy, if not independence. In the south and elsewhere Shias were competing with Kurds for a bigger say in the 275-member national assembly.

In some places like Mosul the turnout was heavier than expected. But many of the voters came from outside, and identity checks on voters appeared lax. Others spoke of vote-buying bids.

The Bush Administration has lauded the success of the Iraq election, but doubtful voting practices and claims about voter turnout are both mired in controversy.

Election violence too was being seen differently across the political spectrum.

More than 30 Iraqis, a U.S. soldier, and at least 10 British troops died Sunday. Hundreds of Iraqis were also wounded in attacks across Baghdad, in Baquba 50km northeast of the capital as well as in the northern cities Mosul and Kirkuk.

The British troops were on board a C-130 transport plane that crashed near Balad city just northwest of Baghdad. The British military has yet to reveal the cause of the crash.

Despite unprecedented security measures in which 300,000 U.S. and Iraqi security forces were brought in to curb the violence, nine suicide bombers and frequent mortar attacks took a heavy toll in the capital city, while strings of attacks were reported around the rest of the country.

As U.S. President George W. Bush saw it, "some Iraqis were killed while exercising their rights as citizens."

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