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THE ELECTORAL ENVIRONMENT AND PARTY WORK IN IRAQ: CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

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Strategic Goals

- Preparing a youth elite that rises to its social responsibilities through studying problems, proposing policy alternatives, and working towards their implementation.
- Utilizing knowledge outputs and encouraging youth to work towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals
- Presenting statistics and issues that occupy the political arenas and societal circles to reflect a deeper understanding of the Iraqi reality.
- Creating a network of active, informed, and committed citizens dedicated to the project of building the Iraqi government.

About the Center

The Platform for Sustainable Development is a registered center with the Non-Governmental Organizations Department at the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers under the number (1S2106012). It serves as a space for thought, dialogue, and action towards positive change.

Vision

We seek to establish a platform for dialogue and policies that contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals in Iraq.

Mission

Filling the gap between the state and society to ensure the essence of democracy by engaging citizens in the decision-making process through training, monitoring, analysis, research, awareness, and advocacy.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The electoral environment is one of the most important indicators for measuring the success of democratic experiments in countries, especially emerging ones that have recently entered the field of democracy. Through it, all the rights guaranteed by constitutions are exercised within the context of elections that regulate the path of the democratic political environment. This includes pre-election procedures, during the electoral process, and the post-election phase. It is closely related to party work, which relies on party competition in elections based on the conducive atmosphere provided by the electoral environment, which should ensure fairness among competitors.

This paper aims to review the relationship between the electoral environment and party work in Iraq over the past two decades. It does so by presenting the reality of this relationship and clarifying the most important aspects through which the nature of the electoral environment in Iraq can be understood. It also highlights the challenges faced by electoral experiences in Iraq, resulting in deep political disputes among participating parties. Finally, it attempts to reach a future vision by discussing the electoral law and the political environment supportive of elections and electoral participation.

The paper concluded with several recommendations that could lead to stabilizing the electoral environment. Among these is working towards stabilizing the electoral law by agreeing on a specific mechanism for the electoral system that aligns with the political, social, and economic realities in Iraq. Additionally, it emphasizes the need to provide a supportive political environment for the electoral process. Furthermore, it stresses the importance of reaching out to the demographics that boycotted the elections and convincing them of the significance of participating in the electoral process.



FIRST: THE ELECTORAL ENVIRONMENT AND PARTY WORK

The political environment encompasses various aspects of the political process within a specific country during a known timeframe. It involves all influential actors in the political scene, whether within official institutions or outside of them, including opposition figures. Often, the term "political environment" is used to describe the nature of the relationship between political players. As a result, the political environment varies depending on the circumstances of each country. It can sometimes be described as stable, while at other times, it may be unstable. It can be competitive in some instances but non-competitive or closed to certain parties in others(1).

Based on this understanding, the electoral environment represents the competitive aspect of the political environment, encompassing all the atmospheres within a specific country to ensure the success of the electoral process. This includes election campaigns, voting day, the announcement and validation of election results. The quality of the electoral environment is linked to the procedures of the electoral process, which should lead to the belief that the environment was conducive to achieving electoral justice if the procedures are transparent. Conversely, if the procedures lack transparency, it can undermine the quality of the electoral environment, representing one of the most significant reasons for the durability of the democratic system.

The birth of democratic authority through democratic rotation requires serious consideration of mechanisms for its continuity within a sound electoral environment. It is not sufficient to merely discuss how this authority is born and acquires legitimacy; it is essential to understand democracy in its truest sense: the horizontal meaning, based on the relationship among members of society, and the vertical meaning, which regulates the relationship between society and authority based on communicative action that fosters democratic dynamics with standards applied in tangible institutions for specific cases by specific individuals.

However, maintaining democratic authority requires the presence of an electoral environment capable of achieving political stability even in the presence of governing and opposition parties through the guarantees provided by this environment. This environment allows the use of electoral slogans as peaceful mechanisms for democratic exercise. Slogans have become one of the most important means of accessing power and are sometimes used by opposition parties to express their rejection of the ruling party's approach. Consequently, the electoral environment provides a conducive atmosphere for elections and serves as a key to adapting to the outcomes of elections, in addition to providing guarantees for criticizing ruling parties if they fail to manage their responsibilities.



The electoral system in any country is one of the most important pillars for measuring the availability of a suitable electoral environment. It is the mechanism through which voters' voices are transformed into seats in the legislative authority. The electoral system represents one of the most critical issues occupying democratic systems due to its significant implications for the future of political parties participating in the political process. The selection of the electoral system is more political than legal or societal, with political party interests often playing a prominent role in determining the direction of the electoral system, sometimes contributing to reducing political conflicts between parties by convincing them to accept the election results.

It is evident from the above that the electoral environment influences the development of party work positively when a fair electoral environment is present or negatively when there are flaws in the electoral environment. Here lies the importance of the electoral environment as one of the most crucial factors for political stability if all or most of the participating parties in the political process are convinced by it. Conversely, it can cause tension if some parties feel that their interests may be compromised if other competing parties have greater chances of winning in the elections.

SECOND: ASPECTS OF THE ELECTORAL ENVIRONMENT IN IRAQ

The electoral environment has influenced the behavior of Iraqi voters and candidates throughout the previous electoral experiences, which witnessed fluctuations and transformations in the electoral landscape, resulting in clear effects on the political process in general and party work in particular. Understanding this requires examining the key aspects of the electoral environment in Iraq since 2005, marking the first democratic elections in Iraq following the democratic transition in 2003

1- THE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

The electoral system cannot be discussed in any country without addressing the details of its electoral system. Moreover, the electoral system cannot function without the presence of other components of the electoral environment. There is a clear interdependence between the electoral environment and the electoral system. This was evident in the Iraqi experience, where the electoral system served as the most important gauge through which the stability of the electoral environment could be understood. The frequent changes and amendments to the electoral law before each electoral experience, along with the presence of objections and criticisms, may indicate a flaw in the electoral environment that needs to be addressed.

The following table illustrates the relationship between the electoral system and the electoral environment over the electoral experiences witnessed in Iraq since 2005.



Table (1): The Relationship between the Electoral System and the Electoral Environment

Electoral Experience	Electoral System	Electoral Environment	Classification Criterion
National Assembly 2005	Single non-transferable vote (SNTV)	Unclear environment	The environment was unclear as it was the first electoral experience after the democratic transition in 2003
Council of Representatives 2005	Proportional representation in multi-member constituencies	More stable environment	The environment became more stable after some factions refrained from boycotting and the formation of the first elected council after 2003
Council of Representatives 2010	Proportional representation in multi-member constituencies	Intense competitive environment	Intense competition emerged amid widespread controversy over Article 76 of the constitution until the Federal Court's interpretation resolved the dispute
Council of Representatives 2014	Proportional representation in multi-member constituencies	Less intense competitive environment	The competitive environment appeared less intense after the Federal Court's interpretation regarding the largest bloc was accepted
Council of Representatives 2018	Proportional representation in multi-member constituencies	Relatively stable environment	The electoral environment was relatively stable with no major objections to the results
Council of Representatives 2021	Single non-transferable vote (SNTV) / Multi-member constituencies	Environment with new outcomes (controversial)	Discrepancies in election results generated controversy between those advocating for multi-member constituencies and other influential factions rejecting the belief that this law was fair to them
Post-2021 Elections	Return to proportional representation in multi-member constituencies	More stable competitive electoral environment	After most influential political factions reached a consensus on the necessity of having an electoral law that achieves relative stability, which was applied in the 2023 provincial council elections.

Source: Compiled by the researcher.



2- ELECTION SUPERVISORY BODY

The electoral experience in Iraq is considered one that adheres to international standards of fair elections, including the presence of a neutral body overseeing the elections. The existence of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) serves as a guarantee for the proper conduct of the electoral process, especially after the Council of Commissioners became composed of judges who have demonstrated their commitment to the success of the electoral process in 2021 and 2023 by contributing to providing a suitable electoral environment.

3- PARTY WORK

No electoral experience in the world can succeed without a supportive political and party environment. Despite the competition among Iraqi parties, which can sometimes be intense, these parties generally unite in supporting the electoral process and its outcomes. The peaceful transfer of power in Iraq after each election is a clear indication of the presence of a supportive political environment for elections, stemming from competitive party work.

4- ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

Participation in elections represented one of the most important aspects of the electoral process in Iraq. It serves as the measure through which the contribution of voters in electing their representatives to legislative and executive positions can be assessed. Therefore, understanding the relationship between participation and the electoral environment, whether participation rates are high or low, is crucial.

5- ENHANCED LEGISLATION AND SYSTEMS FOR THE ELECTORAL ENVIRONMENT

Legislation alone cannot solely determine the direction of the electoral environment in Iraq. There are other important legislations related to the electoral process, such as the Party Law and the Independent High Electoral Commission Law, in addition to regulations and instructions issued by the Electoral Commission to facilitate electoral procedures.

6- ELECTION MONITORING

One of the notable characteristics of recurring electoral processes in Iraq is the presence of extensive local oversight, which has contributed in one way or another to reducing the objections witnessed regarding the results. Additionally, the presence of international monitoring has played a significant role in highlighting Iraqi efforts aimed at achieving a stable electoral environment.



THIRD: CHALLENGES OF THE ELECTORAL ENVIRONMENT IN IRAQ

The electoral environment can be defined as the surroundings or conditions that influence the electoral process, making it stable at times and unstable at others. Understanding the electoral process through its environment involves borrowing some terminology from environmental issues such as global warming and water scarcity to illustrate the challenges of the electoral environment. However, from another perspective, these terms take on a political dimension.

Therefore, the most prominent challenges of the electoral environment in Iraq include:

1-POLITICAL STAGNATION

Political stagnation is no longer limited to environmental issues; in politics and specifically in the Iraqi experience, the persistence of unresolved conflicts has played a role in transforming them over time into crises that have impacted the electoral environment. This has led to the recurrence of disputes ranging from competition that sometimes escalated into conflicts and then into political struggles. This competition has been repeated in electoral experiences through multiple incidents, some of which can be mentioned in the following table:

Table No. (2): Examples of Political Stagnation

Electoral Experience	Challenge
2005 Elections	Boycott by some political factions
2010 Elections	Debate over the largest bloc
2014 Elections	Prolonged discussions over government formation
2018 Elections	Persistent instability leading up to 2021 elections
2021 Elections	Political deadlock

Source: Compiled by the researcher.



2-LOW VOTER TURNOUT

The climate change witnessed globally in recent years has led to the use of the term "water scarcity" as one of the challenges facing the environment worldwide, indicating a decrease in water levels compared to previous levels. By monitoring voter participation rates from 2005 until the latest electoral process, we have noticed a clear decline in participation levels, indicating a drought in electoral participation. This represents a clear dysfunction in the electoral environment, which cannot be resolved unless there is confidence in the electoral process. Confidence can only be demonstrated through participation, as abstainers are classified, in one way or another, as being unconvinced by the current electoral environment.

Table No. (3): Voter Turnout in Iraqi Electoral Experiences

Elections	Electoral Law	Voter Turnout
Jan 30, 2005	Proportional Representation / Largest Remainder	58%
Dec 15, 2005	Proportional Representation / Largest Remainder	76%
2010 Elections	Proportional Representation / Largest Remainder and Electoral Quota	62%
2014 Elections	Proportional Representation / Sainte-Laguë	61%
2018 Elections	Proportional Representation / Sainte-Laguë	44%
2021 Elections	Single Non-Transferable Vote	43%

Source: Dr. Abdulaziz Aliwi Al-Essaoui, "The Role of Electoral Systems in Achieving Political Stability in Iraq," Al-Monsassa Magazine, Issue No. 2.



3-ZERO-SUM PARTISAN DISPUTES

The exacerbation of the crisis in global warming occurred after failing to achieve net zero emissions, similarly to the electoral environment in Iraq, which was significantly affected. This was due to the inability to achieve a zero-sum partisan dispute. The electoral process cannot stabilize unless partisan disputes are resolved or reduced. However, this has not happened; instead, the opposite has occurred, with partisan conflicts continuing to dominate the Iraqi political scene. This has posed a clear challenge to the political and electoral working environment.

4-THE FLUCTUATIONS IN THE ELECTORAL LAW

Like the weather, which can fluctuate from season to season, day to day, or even hour to hour, the electoral law in Iraq is among the most fluctuating laws globally. It seems that legislative amendments or new electoral laws are being introduced before each election cycle. This instability in the electoral law creates an environment of uncertainty, with constant discussions about further amendments or reverting to previous electoral systems, such as the multi-district system used in the 2021 elections with some modifications.

5-POLITICAL UNDERSTANDINGS

The political dynamics accompanying any election are natural, especially if they are accompanied by agreements that lead to the stability of the electoral environment. Democracy has granted political parties the freedom to engage in political activities, as the primary goal of forming parties is to gain power through the ballot boxes. However, this does not mean that there are no political interventions that occasionally arise, especially in the post-election period, sometimes conflicting with the election outcomes.

Despite this challenge, it has not halted the progress of the electoral process, as election operations have led to the formation of governments that have enjoyed an acceptable level of stability.

FOURTH: THE ELECTORAL ENVIRONMENT AND PARTY POLITICS (FUTURE OUTLOOK)

Experiences have shown that laws, systems, regulations, and all other issues related to the electoral environment influence party politics, which performs better when the electoral environment is stable. Providing a safe electoral atmosphere in terms of stability will regulate the pace of party politics, whether it's regarding nominations, directing popular bases, or organizing the relationship between parties.

Regarding the Iraqi experience, the relationship between the electoral environment and parties is strong, as mandated by the emerging democratic experience. Parties are influenced by the nature of electoral laws. For example, proportional representation through modified Sainte-Laguë mechanism may lead to party blocs forming large alliances. Conversely, parties may not find themselves obliged to join broad alliances if the electoral law adopts small, multi-member districts.



The search for alternatives that can transition the electoral environment out of a state of instability has become a necessary endeavor for the maturation of the Iraqi experience. This is what the paper attempted to achieve through the following:

1- STABILITY OF THE ELECTORAL LAW

Reforming the electoral environment in Iraq requires the stability of the electoral law through the adoption of fixed mechanisms for elections that are only changed or amended when absolutely necessary, not before every election as has been the practice in Iraq. Therefore, this stability will lead to a positive relationship between the electoral environment and party politics, as the programs and orientations of the parties will depend on the nature of the electoral system. If Iraq were to become a single electoral district, party interests would be national in scope. However, if each province becomes an electoral district, party interests would narrow down to the district or sub-district level.

2- STABILITY OF THE ELECTORAL LAW

No matter how good the electoral law is, it cannot achieve positive results unless there is confidence in it from the participating political forces in the electoral process. Consequently, preparing the party mood for the post-election phase is one of the most important factors for stability in the electoral environment. This can lead to significant outcomes, including political stability that can expedite government formation dialogues and produce a parliament capable of legislation and oversight, as well as avoiding the repetition of political deadlock after elections.

3- ENHANCING ELECTORAL PARTICIPATION

The presence of stability in electoral laws and a supportive political environment for the electoral process and its outcomes depends on a third crucial issue: electoral participation. It is considered a fundamental requirement for the success of any elections. Often, a decline in voter turnout signals dissatisfaction or another disruption in the electoral environment. Therefore, efforts to increase voter turnout in elections will expand the scope of party activities and prevent the political scene from being limited to specific forces. Moreover, it will serve as a reinforcement for the stability of the electoral environment, which cannot function without the presence of parties, voters, and candidates.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it can be said that the relationship between the electoral environment and party politics in Iraq is interdependent, with neither able to function independently of the other. This means that stability in the electoral process will yield further stability in the party system. Moreover, parties' acceptance of election outcomes will contribute to providing a stable electoral environment, thereby solidifying the emerging democratic experience in Iraq.

It is essential to note, however, that both the electoral environment and party politics cannot be productive unless there is an electoral law that suits Iraq's conditions, which has been lacking in the past. This has resulted in an unstable electoral environment. Nevertheless, this does not negate the presence of positives in the electoral laws that have contributed to achieving relative stability at times.

The frequent changes to electoral laws have played a significant role in the divergence of political outcomes, sometimes leading to disputes over results. This has caused delays in government formation, which, in turn, has affected the performance of previous governments.

What is concerning in repeated electoral experiences is the decline in voter turnout between the 2005 and 2021 elections, indicating the importance of investigating the reasons behind this decline, some of which are related to the nature of electoral laws, their understanding, and the mechanisms for dealing with them.

This prompts the search for solutions that can contribute to providing a suitable electoral environment that convinces voters to participate in voting and compels parties to accept the results, regardless of their outcome. Because the essence of elections is based on the existence of winners and losers, leading to the formation of stable parliaments and governments.

There may be multiple solutions that can be proposed, but none will be achievable in reality unless there is an electoral law that suits Iraq's current situation, benefiting from the positives of previous experiences and avoiding their negatives. Therefore, the focus should be on developing what can be improved to enhance the positive relationship between the electoral environment and party politics through electoral law reform. Calls for amendment have emerged in recent weeks. Hence, the recommendation is as follows:

Propose an electoral law reform proposal through an expanded conference or multiple sessions involving relevant parties and the public, utilizing significant reform pathways.

- Conducting interviews with legislative and executive figures to understand their views on the most appropriate electoral law, as the acceptance of legislative parties could be crucial for its passage in the Parliament.
- Conducting a wide-ranging survey covering all Iraqi governorates to ascertain their preferences towards the electoral law.

- Engaging with the Independent High Electoral Commission to identify the most suitable mechanisms that can be implemented on the ground.
- Involving experts and specialists in electoral law reform, especially regarding studying previous experiences to benefit from their positives and avoid their negatives, as well as drawing lessons from countries with similar conditions to Iraq.
- Achieving these four points above could lead to the development of a realistic formulation for the electoral law that could contribute to the stability of the electoral environment while simultaneously preparing for the 2025 elections.

CONCLUSION

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