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The Iraqi Election | Dispatches; NAJAF; 'I Kissed the Ballot Box,' Says One of the Jubilant Voters; In the capital of the Shiite Muslim heartland, optimism outshines fear.

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They came in wheelchairs and on crutches. Some dressed in new clothes as if it were a holiday. Others brought their children along to watch history being made.

Here in the capital of Iraq's Shiite Muslim heartland, fears of insurgent violence were dwarfed by a wave of electoral optimism. Seemingly worlds away from the anxiety witnessed in other parts of the country, Najaf's election day had the atmosphere of a heavily guarded carnival.

Again and again voters referred to the day as an irris, a celebration.

"I kissed the ballot box," said 46-year-old merchant Sadik Zwain. "It's a celebration, a turning point and a step toward the correct direction, toward the independence, toward getting rid of occupation."

Galvanized by the urgings of top Shiite religious leader Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who equated voting with a religious duty, and by the promise of a long-sought political ascension for Iraq's Shiite majority, Najafis turned out in droves to vote.

The day started slowly, with residents walking in small groups on a cold, misty morning through streets devoid of traffic.

Munthir Hamid Moussa, a Najaf currency trader, showed up at his polling station five minutes before its 7 a.m. opening and found about 65 people already in line.

"The voters were there, and the [Electoral Commission] employees were still half asleep," he said, chuckling.

By 8:45 a.m., long lines segregating men and women snaked around the walls of the Gomhuriya Middle School in the working-class district of Judayda. Children played among the crowds as their parents clutched registration forms. Around some stations, volunteers shuttled elderly residents from their homes in wheelchairs.

The generally festive air belied the near-total security lockdown of the city.

Only cars bearing large permission stickers from the governorate were allowed on the streets. Police snipers peered from rooftops around polling stations, and plainclothes officers patrolled the crowd. All voters were subjected to an extensive pat-down, with black-clad women stepping into makeshift cloth-screened enclosures in deference to conservative local traditions.

Outside one polling center in Najaf's Old City, visitors wishing to enter had to turn in not only cellphones and cameras, but watches, matches, pens and asthma inhalers.

Despite the fears that insurgents seeking to wreck the election would target Najaf, the local election commission estimated voter turnout at 85%. It was almost impossible to find someone in Najaf who didn't proudly display an indelible-ink-stained index finger.

Some of those who didn't vote said it wasn't for political reasons or fear of attack. Outside the Arab Revolution Middle School, Mohammed Hassan Mahdi, a 39-year-old owner of a copy shop, found that his name wasn't on the voter lists because of a mistake in a registration process that was based on Iraq's welfare rolls.

"Sistani gave an order that not voting is a sin," he said despondently.

But Mahdi's passion to participate didn't quite match his actual knowledge of the proceedings. He had planned to vote for both interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi's slate and the United Iraqi Alliance coalition that Sistani helped organize. When told he would have had to pick one, Mahdi said, "If I have to choose, it will be the candle," the Alliance's symbol.

In dozens of interviews Sunday in several neighborhoods, more than two-thirds of voters expressed support for the Alliance, with the rest favoring Allawi.

Nobody mentioned a third slate.

Allawi has run an aggressive campaign that, combined with his image as a forceful leader, seems to have overcome his initial reputation as a U.S. puppet. Many of the younger voters mentioned Allawi as their choice, as did almost all of the police officers interviewed.

"Allawi is a strong man, and Iraq needs a man like this," said lyad Nasser Mohammed, 25.

A Najaf police officer, who refused to give his name, put it more bluntly. "We need someone scary," he said.

But amid the hope, some sounded a downbeat note about the price paid to reach this day. Many Najaf residents lost family members to deposed dictator Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime.

Tears welled in the eyes of Ezzedine Hakim, the son of prominent Shiite cleric Mohammed Said Hakim, when asked what Sunday meant to him.

"Today reminds us of our victims," he said.

Special correspondents Raheem Salman and Saad Fakhrideen contributed to this report.

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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