

# Election Watch for the Digital Age



## Preelection assessment

*Parliamentary elections set for October 10, 2021*

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Iraqis will elect 328 individuals to the Council of Representatives on October 10 amid a pandemic, economic crisis, and popular unrest. Widespread anti-government protests in October 2019 resulted in an agreement to hold early elections in June 2021. The government postponed the vote for four months ostensibly to allow the Independent High Electoral Commission more time to prepare. As of January 2021, 260 parties registered to take part. Among the 60 new entrants are numerous pro-reform parties established by some of the protest leaders. Iraq's fragmented political field has been dominated by several coalitions. The four largest coalitions are all led by Shiite parties but feature some degree of sectarian diversity. Kurdish parties, Sunni-led coalitions, smaller parties, and independents also hold seats in the Council of Representatives, which elects the country's president and prime minister. An activist-led boycott contributed to low voter turnout in the 2018 election.

The electoral environment is fraught with insecurity. Armed groups attack prodemocracy activists and journalists with impunity, resulting in calls to boycott the October 2021 elections, particularly among the new youth and activist-led political parties. Iraq remains a dangerous environment for journalists and activists, who frequently experience harassment, physical attacks, and criminal penalties in retribution for their online activities. While few websites are blocked, the Iraqi government often responds to civil unrest by disrupting access to the internet and social media. The pervasive intimidation of journalists and activists has resulted in high levels of self-censorship. Despite these risks, Iraq benefits from a relatively vibrant civil society and somewhat diverse media environment.

Freedom House has identified the following as key digital interference issues to watch ahead of the election:

- **Network shutdowns:** Iraqi authorities have resorted to network shutdowns during politically sensitive events. In October 2019, authorities responded to antigovernment protests with a week-long, near-total shutdown that impacted most of the country. Ahead of the 2018 elections, there were reports of localized shutdowns. Protests or calls for boycotts ahead of the 2021 vote could prompt similar restrictions. Access to the internet is critical in the days and months ahead of an election, as people often get their news and information about political parties online and through social media.
- **Social media blocks:** The Iraqi government frequently blocks popular social media platforms during times of political unrest in an attempt to stifle online mobilization. During the 2019 protests, the government required ISPs to restrict access to Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms. The blocks lasted much longer than the contemporaneous network shutdown, with some regions unable to access social media sites for 50 days. In July 2018, authorities instituted a

two-week block of social media networks, including Facebook and Instagram, during nationwide demonstrations against high unemployment and a lack of public services.

- **Information manipulation:** Political parties, Iranian-backed groups, and powerful people with ties to the government spend large amounts of money to spread false or misleading information online, often with political or sectarian goals. In May 2020, Facebook removed 324 pages, 72 accounts, 5 groups, and 31 Instagram accounts that were tied to individuals associated with Kurdistan Regional Government intelligence services in Iraqi Kurdistan. The network used fake accounts to impersonate political parties and politicians and posted about local and political news including Kurdish government policies and criticism of non-Kurdish politicians. Additionally, the government frequently issues gag orders and reporting guidelines around politically sensitive events, such as the 2019 protests, the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the Islamic State occupation in 2014. As political parties continue to campaign ahead of the elections, it will be important to watch for disinformation online or reporting guidelines directed by the government that could influence voters' perceptions.
- **Harassment and violence:** Journalists, activists, and social media users who publish or post content about corruption, criticism of the government, and taboo subjects are subject to harassment, intimidation, physical violence, kidnappings, and even assassinations, often by armed groups with government ties. In April 2020, a political organizer and government critic was intimidated and beaten by plainclothes intelligence officers after posting allegations to Facebook that a local health department was making a profit from face masks. In August 2020, unknown assailants killed Reham Yakob, an activist who led all-women protests and harshly criticized the government and pro-Iranian militias through social media. Additionally, women candidates have suffered harassment online and on social media, and in some cases, people have posted fake, salacious photographs and videos of them with the intent of harming their campaigns. The pattern of attacks and impunity for perpetrators has led to an increase in self-censorship and could silence journalists and activists online ahead of the election.

Iraq has a score of 38 out of 100, with 100 representing the least vulnerability in terms of election integrity, on Freedom House's Election Vulnerability Index, which is based on a selection of key election-related indicators. The score reflects Iraq's competitive elections, as well as rule of law deficits and frequent efforts to stifle political unrest online and offline. The country is rated **Not Free** in *Freedom in the World 2021*, with a score of 29 out of 100 with respect to its political rights and civil liberties. Iraq will be covered by *Freedom on the Net 2021* for the first time, and the country report and internet freedom score will be available in September 2021. To learn more about these annual Freedom House assessments, please visit the Iraq country report in [Freedom in the World](#).