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Iraq's Democracy at a Crossroad

Website Report on the Fall 2010 Research

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Although most Iraqis are moderately upbeat about gradual improvements in security, education, health care, and other basic services, concerns about employment temper the public's optimism. Sectarian divisions remain a major source of concern and a defining characteristic of Iraqi public opinion.

Equally important, despite broad faith that democracy can bring tangible improvements to their lives, Iraqis are frustrated about their country's political leadership. An eight-month political stalemate, coupled with rampant corruption and personality-driven politics, leads many Iraqis to believe their leaders are more focused on their own interests than on the needs of the public.

A nation-wide survey of 2,000 Iraqis¹ conducted by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner for the National Democratic Institute highlights these complex currents at a key point of transition with the formation of a new government **[Figure 1]**.

The poll shows that Iraqis are cautiously optimistic about the direction of their country, with 45 percent believing the country is moving in the right direction, compared to 44 percent who say it is going in the wrong direction. But there is disparity in the public's mood based on regional, ethnic, and religious lines. A 60 percent majority in the West and a 56 percent majority of Sunnis say the country is headed in the wrong direction, whereas most Shias and Kurds feel Iraq is heading in the right direction. **[Figure 2]**

Improving conditions on key issues drive much of this optimism. Focus group participants particularly cite modest improvements in the security environment, but majorities in the survey also say education, health care, and water supply are improving as well. **[Figure 3]**

However, mixed views on the economy temper the sense of improvement. A plurality view Iraq's economy as strong and expect their household's financial situation will improve in the coming year—feelings in Iraq's West, however, are less optimistic. **[Figures 4 and 5]** Overall, Iraqis list employment as their top concern, and a 48 percent plurality say job opportunities are getting worse rather than better. **[Figures 6 and 7]**

¹ Greenberg Quinlan Rosner conducted 16 focus groups with Iraqi adults in 8 locations from September 22-27, 2010. Groups were homogenous with respect to age, gender, ethnicity, religion, education level, and political leanings. Greenberg Quinlan Rosner followed this qualitative research with a quantitative survey, based on face-to-face interviews conducted between October 25 – November 2, 2010 in 15 of Iraq's 18 provinces (due to safety and feasibility concerns, no interviews were conducted in Muthanna, Missan, or Dohuk). The total sample includes 2,000 adults 18 years of age and over and was representatively stratified by province.

Along with this mixed view on the country's material conditions is a divided set of feelings about the country's political life. A strong 61 percent majority believes that making Iraq more democratic will improve their services and quality of life. **[Figure 8]** But Iraqis are divided along regional and sectarian lines on whether their country is a real democracy at this point. **[Figures 9 and 10]** And across the focus groups, participants stress that the long post-election stalemate has undermined progress on major challenges such as security and the economy, while feeding perceptions that political leaders are mostly focused on their own well-being.

With Iraq's politics at a crossroad, its parties, leaders, and people face the danger that a range of divisions, resentments, fears, and frustrations will once again dominate public debate. At the same time, they also face an opportunity—to create a more issues-based culture of politics and governance that can begin to address the public's concerns and push the country's trajectory in a more positive direction.

Beyond these broad findings, four points deserve special emphasis:

1. Entrenched sectarian divisions perpetuate a divisive political climate

Many Iraqis express a desire to move past their country's sectarian divides, yet continue to see their country and leaders through a sectarian lens. Among many other signs of this pattern, majorities of Sunnis give Allawi favorable ratings and approve of the job he did as prime minister, while most Shia give Maliki favorable ratings and positive approval ratings. Some of this is a legacy of the deep sectarian resentments and fears that incubated during Saddam's rule. In the focus groups, a large number of voters express a desire for the country's leaders to move Iraq past these divisions and to focus more on solving the country's material problems, such as security and jobs.

2. A sense of disenfranchisement characterizes feelings in the West and among Sunnis.

Both the survey and the focus groups suggest a broad feeling of discouragement and even disenfranchisement across the West region of Iraq and the Sunni population in general. Fully 70 percent of Western Iraqis say job opportunities are getting worse; 67 percent believe the cost of living is getting worse; and 55 percent say security is deteriorating—all significantly more negative views than in the rest of the country. **[Figure 11]** The pattern is virtually the same among Sunni respondents. As result, Sunnis and Iraqis in the West are more skeptical about the character of Iraqi democracy: only 35 percent of the former and 22 percent of the latter believe that Iraq is a real democracy. **[Figure 12]** This skepticism translates into a majority of Sunnis (52 percent) saying they are not likely to vote in future elections. **[Figure 13]**

3. Stronger conditions in Kurdistan could encourage further disengagement from the central Iraqi government

Kurdish Iraqis see a different trajectory for themselves than the rest of the country. While 50 percent of Kurds say *Iraq* is headed in the right direction, a full 84 percent say *Kurdistan* is moving in the right direction. **[Figure 14]** On a host of issues ranging from security to basic services, Kurds are significantly more upbeat about conditions in their region, compared to perceptions of other Iraqis. **[Figure 15]** As such, the Kurdish Regional Government receives strong approval ratings, and Kurdish leaders enjoy high favorable ratings within Kurdistan, especially compared to national leaders. **[Figure 16]**

4. Despite signs of material improvement, the public views political leaders and parties as self-interested, which helps give nearly all of them net unfavorable ratings

Despite the gains many Iraqis see in security, the economy, and public services, there is broad frustration with Iraq's politics and the political class. This feeling is vivid in the focus groups; for example, a Shia man in Basra predicts the formation of the new government "will take a long time because they [politicians] have put their own personal interests above those of the people." Pervasive anger over corruption—a strong 56 percent majority see it getting worse—further erodes trust in the political class. **[Figure 17]** Moreover, the focus groups suggest that voters hear little from the political parties in the way of specific policy proposals, and that the country's leader-focused political style deepens the sense that politics is more about leaders' ambitions than the people's needs. All these reasons for political cynicism, along with the country's many fault lines, help explain why nearly every national leader receives net unfavorable ratings.

There are no easy answers to the material hardships, security fears, and sectarian divisions that confront Iraq at the moment. But the current research suggests that a turn toward more issue-based politics could help create a stronger bond between the voting public and their leaders. The survey and focus groups suggest Iraqis have little sense of the political programs of the various parties or how to hold leaders and parties accountable for their promises and performance. A stronger focus on substantive programs and communications might help restore some measure of trust in the political class and create a more defined and productive role for those leaders and parties in the opposition.

The current research project is part NDI's effort to provide Iraq's parties and their leaders with a stronger understanding of public opinion currents and measurement so that they can connect more strongly with the public's concerns. In particular, the survey explores a host of potential policy alternatives, developed from the focus groups, on the economy, education, health care, and security. **[Figures 20, 26, 28, and 32]**