

Experience of proportional elections in Iraq, Japan

Two countries, one reality

How proportional formulae configure political power



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ANALYSIS

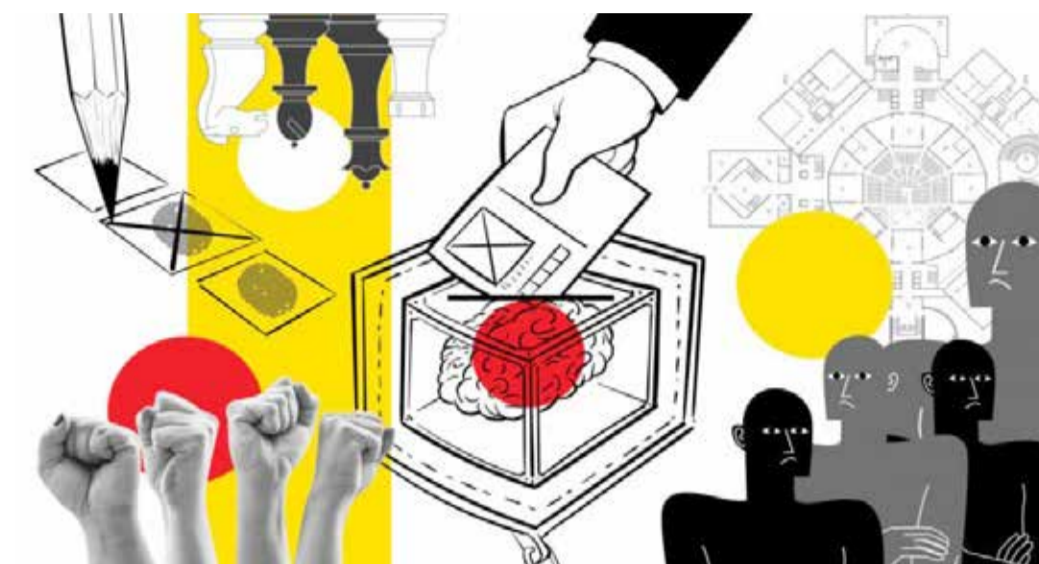
Elections have always constituted one of the most consequential junctures in the political life of every polity, a moment during which citizens can articulate their judgment regarding who ought to function as decision-makers. However, when the matter concerns proportional representation, the subject becomes somewhat more intricate, and many individuals may remain unaware of how this species of election operates and what advantages and disadvantages attend it. In this exposition, we endeavor to examine, in a simple and intelligible manner, the experience of two dissimilar countries, namely Iraq and Japan, and to demonstrate what role proportional elections can perform in representation and political oversight. Initially, we must elucidate what proportional elections are.

In the most elementary definition, in a proportional system, the number of seats that each party or political list acquires is approximately commensurate with the percentage of votes that they obtain in the election. In other words, if a party secures 30 percent of the votes, it is expected to possess approximately 30 percent of the parliamentary seats. This system is designed to engender greater equilibrium and more precise representation of political groups and minorities, in contrast with majoritarian systems in which only the winning candidate within each electoral district can enter parliament, and the votes of those who cast ballots for others are, in effect, disregarded.

1. What is proportional representation?

In traditional simple-majority systems (First-Past-the-Post), such as district-based elections, only the candidate who obtains the highest number of votes within a district becomes the victor, and other votes within that district are consequently wasted. This signifies that a party with a high percentage of votes nationwide may obtain a small number of seats since it has not acquired a majority within any district. Conversely, proportional representation endeavors to allocate seats relative to the overall percentage of votes to parties or lists. For instance, if a party obtains 30 percent of the votes nationwide, approximately 30 percent of the seats are accorded to it. This system generally ensures that smaller parties and marginalized groups can also possess representation in the legislature and that the voices of minorities are heard. Various methods exist for implementing proportional representation, including:

- **Closed/open list:** in the closed list, the party designates who receives the seat; in the open list, voters can exert direct influence upon the ranking of candidates.
- **Seat-allocation formulae:** such as Sainte-Laguë or D'Hondt, which convert vote percentages into seats.



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2. Experience of Iraq: proportional representation, its challenges

Iraq's parliamentary elections were held in November 2025 and distributed 329 seats in the Council of Representatives. The elections utilized a modified form of proportional representation known as the Sainte-Laguë formula.

- Iraq has 18 provinces (Halabja is still calculated under the province of Sulaymaniyah). Each province is considered one electoral district.
- Iraq's modified Sainte-Laguë formula possessed one significant alteration: the first divisor was 1.7 instead of 1.0. This signifies that, to determine how many seats each party receives from the total seats of an electoral district, the total votes of each party are initially divided by 1.7, not 1 — which is used in the standard Sainte-Laguë formula. This ostensibly minute technical alteration, in practice, facilitates the efforts of large parties and reduces the prospects of small and independent parties.

Quotas

- **Women:** at least 25 percent of the seats in the Iraqi parliament are allocated to women.
- **Minorities:** 9 seats are allocated to religious and ethnic minorities such as Christians, Yazidis, Mandaeans, and Feyli Kurds.

Constraints, administrative issues

The Iraqi elections were conducted amid serious challenges:

- **Disenfranchisement of overseas voters:** no voting was conducted in embassies and consulates, and this active and politically engaged segment of the Iraqi diaspora was excluded.
- **Restriction of competitors:** approximately 850 candidates, nearly 10 percent of all registrants, were barred from competition.
- **Return of closed lists:** this alteration reduced the prospects of independent candidates and augmented the power of traditional parties.

Impact on participation, competition

- Despite the presence of around 31 coalitions, 38 parties, and 70 independent lists, power effectively remained in the possession of several major blocs.
- Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish parties, through internal mechanisms and

quota structures, possessed substantial control over the elections. In Iraq, the experience of proportional elections in recent years has been complex and, to some extent, contentious. The Iraqi parliamentary elections on November 11, 2025, were intended to constitute the country's sixth national election since 2005. These elections are conducted under the supervision of the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) and aim to engender equilibrium and inclusivity among various parties. However, recent alterations have considerably undermined this objective. The 2025 elections occurred amid declining public trust since years of political manipulation and elite dominance have corrupted a process that was supposed to be democratic. Many consider the recent elections the most inequitable elections since 2005 because decisions were made that strengthened powerful and established parties and weakened independent and reformist competitors.

The elections in Iraq were conducted proportionally and through the modified Sainte-Laguë method. As stated earlier, in this method, each province functions as an electoral district, and the number of seats is determined by the total votes divided by the number of seats in that province. The modification implemented in the 2025 elections was that the first divisor, instead of being 1.0, was considered 1.7. This alteration, small yet extreme-

ly consequential, ensured that the initial seat-winners within each district were largely selected from among large and established lists, and the prospects of small parties and independent candidates were diminished. Thus, although the system ostensibly remained proportional, the reality is that power became concentrated within traditional and potent political groups.

Furthermore, overseas voters could not participate and were required to return to Iraq in order to cast their votes. This decision effectively disenfranchised a large segment of the politically active diaspora and reduced the representation of ethnic groups such as the Kurds since the Kurdish community abroad generally votes intensely for Kurdish parties. In other words, a significant portion of the electorate was excluded. In this election, approximately 850 candidates, nearly 10 percent of all applicants, were barred from competition. Reasons such as criminal records, accountability issues, and administrative irregularities were cited. This wave of disqualifications produced widespread controversy, as many influential and well-known candidates, including individuals who had served multiple parliamentary terms, were removed. This situation has caused citizens to doubt the fairness of the electoral process.

From a political perspective, Iraq still operates under the system of muhasasa, meaning that power is



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allocated according to ethno-sectarian lines: the prime minister is Shia, the speaker of parliament is Sunni, and the president is Kurdish. Within such a framework, the 2025 elections were tumultuous and highly competitive, with candidates contending for 329 seats. The large number of candidates and parties ostensibly reflects political plurality, but in reality, power remains concentrated within a few established blocs whose structural advantages permit them to exercise superior influence.

Among the Shia blocs, Muqtada Sadr's movement decided to boycott the elections. In the early elections of 2021, this movement obtained 73 seats, but after failing to form a national majority government, it withdrew its representatives from parliament. The boycott reduced voter participation and shifted the electoral landscape to the advantage of other Shia parties under the banner of the Coordination Framework. This bloc includes most principal Shia parties, and key individuals, such as Hadi al-Ameri, continue to play significant roles within it. In the Sunni landscape, Iraq's political environment is also undergoing transformation. The Taqadum Party, which previously held Sunni leadership, has lost part of its standing after the removal of the former parliamentary speaker, yet it still retains considerable power. Other parties and coalitions, such as the Sovereignty Alliance and the Azm Movement, endeavored to attract Sunni voters. Sunni voter participation has increased in several provinces, signifying a partial revival of electoral motivation.

Among the Kurds, nearly one year after the 2024 parliamentary elections of the Kurdistan Region, Kurdish parties entered the national elections without possessing a regional government. Internal disagreements prevented the formation of a coalition, and Kurdish political power in Iraq is significantly fragmented. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan has been weakened due to leadership disputes, and several senior figures have joined the Kurdistan Democratic Party. Meanwhile, there is heightened attention toward Baghdad to secure greater influence in federal decision-making.

Given this experience, one can assert that the proportional system in Iraq was designed to engender precise representation and inclusivity, yet reforms and alterations in calculation methods, disqualification of candidates, and voting restrictions have caused this system, in practice, to strengthen established parties and reduce the prospects of independents and minority groups. This demonstrates that although the system appears democratic and proportional, political reality can be entirely different.

3. Experience of Japan: combination of district-based, proportional systems

Japan possesses a distinct system known as the Two-Part Voting System or the Mixed Electoral System, with 465 seats in the House of Representatives, out of which:



People sit behind fences watching a campaign rally unfold in Iraq on November 4, 2025, seven days before the parliamentary elections are held.
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