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## Guest Editorial

### The Press and the Iraqi Elections

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(AINA) -- I had a very long talk with an American friend that works in Baghdad with the reconstruction of Iraq. He is currently overseeing the country's provincial elections.

I had not heard from him in a long time and I wanted to know how he was doing. He is always happy, optimistic and hopeful. I am often full with energy after talking with him. Not this time. He seemed disillusioned and tired. Provincial elections are being held in Iraq in a few days. Last time there were elections in Iraq, for the government and parliament, my American friend and I were deeply divided. He called the elections a positive step towards democracy, but I wrote several articles about election fraud.

I had interviewed Iraqis who told me that their lives were threatened if they voted for one party or the other. I wrote about ballot boxes that never arrived and about places that had ballot papers for only one party. Many non-Muslims couldn't vote at all and stood by and watched in grief as their representatives did not make it into parliament.

Robert says that it's gratifying to see democracy play out through election campaigns. Iraq is covered with posters of politicians who want to win the provincial elections. But then he reluctantly whispers that he became sad when they canceled article 50 that would have guaranteed the minorities -- the non-Muslims in particular -- representation in the provincial governments. I found a similar statement in the Swedish paper Dagen, by the Swedish UN-representative Staffan de Mistura: "I was surprised and disappointed that article 50 was not part of the election laws in the provinces." de Mistura said that it's an indication of Iraq's unwillingness to protect the political rights of the minorities.

14 of Iraq's 18 provinces are holding elections on January 31. More than ten thousand candidates are campaigning for 440 positions. During the referendum for a new constitution and the parliamentary elections in 2005, the voters were subject to sniper fire and threats of suicide attacks from Islamic terrorists.

The debate about election fraud is here this time as well. Several American papers report that the Iraqi government will use a so called "code of conduct" when it comes to reporting on the elections. Special rules will apply to journalists, both Iraqis and foreigners. They have to sign a contract to have access to press conferences and other election events. Journalists who don't report in an honest way can lose their rights to report before and during the elections. Journalists who break the contract may receive a warning, high fines, or lose the right to interview voters. According to Robert it's not the government but IHEC, The Independent High Electoral Commission, that issues the "code of conduct," and he is very critical of it and says that it can be used to serve specific parties.

Almost all Iraqi TV-channels and newspapers are owned and operated by political parties. The contract can thus be used in the competition between parties -- they can hinder journalists from another party from reporting.

Amin Farhan, the leader for the Yezidi party "Yezidi Movement for Progress and Reform," spoke last week of election fraud on Voice of Iraq. He accused KDP, The Kurdish Democratic Party, of sending armed Iraqi Kurdish soldiers to put up posters and scare Yezidis from voting for anyone else than KDP (AINA [1-27-2009](#)).

My people, the Assyrians (also known as Syriacs and Chaldeans), have also started accusing each other of election fraud. The parliamentarian Ablahad Afram said to the Baghdad Times that pro-Kurdish Assyrian parties have threatened people who receive aid that they will no longer receive the money if they don't vote for their representatives.

Robert says that this time he will follow up on every accusation of election fraud with open eyes.

For information on previous election irregularities, see AINA [12-15-2005](#), [2-10-2005](#), [1-17-2005](#), [12-30-2004](#), [7-2-2001](#)

*Nuri Kino is a journalist in Sweden specializing in investigative journalism, and is one of the most highly awarded journalists in Europe (CV). He is an Assyrian from Turkey. His documentary, Assyriska: a National team without a Nation, was awarded The Golden Palm at the 2006 Beverly Hills Film festival.*

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