



Christian Assyrians Face Obstacles in Iraqi Elections

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Despite being proclaimed a great success, Iraq's landmark elections on Sunday have sparked significant complaints from the Christian communities both in Iraq and in the United States.

According to a report published yesterday by the Alabama-based Decatur Daily News, Christian Assyrians--which include members of the Assyrian Church of the East (Nestorian), the Chaldean Catholic Church of Babylon, and the Syrian Orthodox Church--claim that Kurdish officials in North Iraq blocked the delivery of ballot boxes from Assyrian-dominated villages, leaving many Assyrians disenfranchised. They also claim that election officials placed U.S. voting locations in areas that maximized the distance expatriate Assyrians had to travel.

Susan Patto, chief of staff to the secretary general of the Assyrian Democratic Movement in Iraq, said officials failed to deliver ballot boxes to five towns in the Ninevah Plain of Northern Iraq--all predominantly populated by Christian Assyrians.

"The people of those areas went to vote. When they found there were no boxes, they headed to our centers," Patto said, according to the Decatur Daily.

Simon George, co-director of an Assyrian satellite television station, gave a similar report, saying he received "at least 100 calls" from Assyrians complaining about being deprived of the vote in Christian villages around the northwestern Iraqi city of Mosul.

The Decatur Daily reported that Patto and others in her organization contacted officials in Mosul, but were told that the security situation prevented delivery of the vote boxes. Baghdad officials then instructed election personnel in Arbil to deliver the boxes, but they failed to do so.

After the election hours ended Sunday, Patto said a U.S. helicopter delivered four boxes, and that election officials instructed local officials to permit three hours of voting Monday morning to make up for Sunday's missing ballot boxes.

However, "the next morning people headed again for the centers, but there were no staff, no ballots and no ink--just the boxes," Patto reported.

The Assyrians who had gathered to vote waited until noon before giving up, she continued, at which time they began a demonstration.

Patto also said that while other Assyrian-populated towns had ballot boxes, there was an inadequate supply of ballots. She estimated voting irregularities prevented 50,000 Assyrians from voting.

Meanwhile in the U.S., where many Iraqi Americans were not be able to vote in the Iraqi election as a result of the decision to limit polling places, members of the Assyrian community also expressed their complaints.

According to a statement made earlier this month by Nina Shea, the director of Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom, the problem stemmed from the decision of the International Organization of Migration (IOM)--the intergovernmental body contracted to carry out the operation--to limit polling places in the U.S. to five with only one of these located west of the Mississippi, namely Los Angeles. The other four cities include Nashville, Chicago, Detroit, and Washington.

Frederick Aprim, who lives in an Assyrian community in California, said the the five U.S. polling locations were chosen with deference to expatriate Kurdish populations, but failed to locate polls close to larger Assyrian communities.

Although about 38,000 Assyrians live in the northern half of California, the closest polling place was in Southern California, the Decatur Daily reported.

Aprim said he had to travel 800 miles, round-trip, to the Los Angeles polling site to register for the election and had to repeat the trip a few days later to vote.

The voting process, which extended over a period of two weeks, started on Jan. 17 with a seven-day registration period, while the actual

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voting itself took place between Jan. 28 and 30.

"Many Assyrians got discouraged from making the long trip," Aprim said, according to the Decatur Daily. "Many elderly could not make the trip. Many (poor Assyrians) could not make the trip. Assyrians lost so many votes because of this unfair distribution of voting centers."

Aprim said the blocked votes would prevent Assyrian representation from Ninevah Plain in the Iraqi Transitional National Assembly, the political body that will determine if the Iraq constitution adopts Islam as the new Iraq's official religion.

Patto added that the blocked votes hurt not just Iraqi Christians, but Iraq as a whole.

"It is not just the number of seats (on the National Assembly). We want to establish a new country that believes in human rights and democracy, and (in which) people are equal and have the same rights," Patto said.

"We want to build it together with all Iraqis."

Since the expulsion of Saddam Hussein last year, Iraq's Christian community of 700,000 has grown increasingly anxious at the rise of Islamic fundamentalism.

According to the secretary general of the Assyrian Democratic Movement, more than 100 Christians had been murdered after the U.S.-led war, and about 200 more have died in the general violence that has gripped Iraq. Meanwhile around 15,000 to 40,000 of Iraq's 700,000 Christians have fled to neighboring Jordan and Syria, since the recent wave of church bombings began last year in August.

Kenneth Chan
The Christian Post

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