

Iraqi Christians Cautiously Hopeful After Elections

Observers say Christians in Iraq are hopeful but concerned in the wake of the nation's first post-war election.

Though the Jan. 30 election largely was viewed as a success, the Assyrian International News Agency (AINA) reported that 300,000 Christians in Kurdish-controlled areas of northern Iraq were unable to vote because voting boxes were not distributed to them.

In the United States, where Christians make up at least 80 percent of Iraqi expatriates, a limited number of polling places created travel challenges that may have deterred some from voting, said Nina Shea, director of Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom, an advocacy group for Iraqi Christians.

AINA founder Peter BetBasoo said because of their size, Iraqi Christians could have won as many as 10 seats had there been no voting irregularities. "Although Assyrians [who with the Catholic community of Chaldeans make up the Christian minority in Iraq] applaud the election, and have been staunch supporters of the U.S. policy in Iraq, they feel they have been deliberately locked out of the process," AINA reported. "In their eyes this is not an auspicious beginning to Iraqi democracy but a continuation of 1,400 years of discrimination and marginalization of their community, not only in Iraq but now also in the West."

Shiites won 140 of 275 seats in the Iraqi National Assembly, while the National Rafidain List, which represents the Christian minority, won one seat. Four Christians were elected on the Kurdish ticket, which won 75 seats.

Christians in Iraq, who make up roughly 3 percent of the population, were primarily concerned the new government would implement Shariah law, which would make them a permanent underclass. Because Kurds, also a minority, won enough seats to block the move, BetBasoo said it is unlikely the Muslim legal code will become law.

BetBasoo said Iraqi Christians believe their situation can only get better, adding that among Assyrians and Chaldeans, "there's hope, but there's also concern."

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