

Election Prospects Dim in Ramadi

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Some residents of Sunni triangle town will boycott the vote out of conviction, others out of fear.

With the elections six days away and the city under a virtual lockdown, many residents of Ramadi have told IWPR they will not be taking part.

Rafed Muhammad, 38, said most residents will be boycotting the January 30 poll for political and religious reasons. Some are following a call by the Association of Muslim Scholars, an influential Sunni clerical group, not to take part. Others will stay away because they see the election as a “farce” orchestrated by the United States, said Muhammad.

For many residents, fear rather than conviction will provide reason enough to steer clear of polling stations. Posters covering the walls of the city call for a boycott of the elections, while election workers and candidates have received threatening letters.

Ramadi, located more than 60 kilometres west of Baghdad in the volatile al-Anbar province, part of the “Sunni triangle”, has seen recent clashes between US-led Coalition forces and insurgents.

Three soldiers of the Second Infantry Division were killed last week by a suicide car bomber. And in recent weeks, there have been explosions at several police stations, while US Marines and insurgents have exchanged fire on several occasions.

In addition to a 3 pm to 11 am curfew, US troops control most of the main streets in the city, and roads leading into the city have been blocked. Travel along the major roads that go to Baghdad has been restricted, creating difficulties for local people.

The democratic process has been further hampered as election officials face difficulties in distributing election documents to prospective voters. Many Ramadi residents say they have yet to receive the proper forms.

Election materials are being issued at the office where food rations are given out. Abu Muhammad, who works at the Ramadi branch of the trade ministry, which is responsible for issuing rations, said insecurity is causing problems. The election office has been forced to move location several times because of threats, and people employed to issue documents to voters are refusing to do so, he said.

Muhammed Alwan al-Dulaimi, head of the Chamber of Commerce in al-Anbar province, said the elections cannot be successful unless the right security is in place. “I don’t think we can distribute the forms because the employees here live in this area and they are concerned for their own safety and that of their families,” he said.

On January 24, US soldiers began a makeshift voter education programme, setting up a checkpoint on the Baghdad road outside Ramadi to hand out leaflets about the election. Loudspeakers mounted on Humvees urged waiting motorists to participate and “stand against the terrorists” instead of boycotting the poll.

One of the fliers provided information about how the polls would be conducted, advising people about

which identification documents would be accepted when they came to vote, and warning them not to bring weapons, mobile phones or handbags anywhere near polling stations.

In one Ramadi district, al-Hawz al-Mahaziya, Iraqi National Guardsmen were seen distributing leaflets urging people to vote for the candidate list topped by Prime Minister Ayad Allawi.

Ramadi resident Salam Abdullah, 45, has not received his voter registration form yet, but he's adamant that it won't make any difference if he does - he won't be voting anyway.

"If I get the forms, I'll ignore them," he said. "I don't think Ramadi will witness any sort of election process, as the city is still living under the shadow of war. It would have been better for the Iraqi government to think about providing protection, electricity, and fuel for the people before talking about elections."

Dawood Salman is an IWPR trainee journalist in Iraq.

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