

Fear Grips Potential Voters

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As violence increases across the country, more and more Iraqis are unwilling to risk their lives to take part in the forthcoming election.

A group of men playing dominoes in a café in the troubled northern Iraqi city of Kirkuk are listening to the news when the presenter interrupts to announce that a car-bomb has driven into the city governor's motorcade, injuring five of his bodyguards and 13 bystanders.

The newsflash is followed by a public information announcement from the Iraqi Election Commission, instructing people to go to registration centers and add their names to the list of voters taking part in the January ballot for a national assembly.

Arab restaurant owner Abdullah Taha Khuthayyir snorted in disgust. "If the government can't protect itself, why should I venture out to a polling station?" he asked. "I won't sacrifice myself to democracy. If someone drives a car-bomb into a crowd of waiting voters, this democracy will be no replacement father for my kids."

For Khuthayyir, news of the attack on the governor's convoy underlines the impossibility of holding fair elections within the next few months.

"People are afraid of queuing in front of government institutions. Look at what happened to the guys who were waiting to sign up for the National Guard here - someone drove a car-bomb into the crowd," he said.

Khuthayyir went on to question the government's inability to protect its citizens, "If Iyad Alawi could not protect his relatives, who can protect someone like me?".

With the fighting in Fallujah still ongoing, and violent attacks spiralling in Mosul and other cities, trying to hold free and fair elections nationwide looks fraught with difficulties.

While the Allawi government continues to stress the importance of carrying out elections as close to the January deadline as possible, many ordinary Iraqis say they don't want to go and register, let alone vote, for fear of violent attacks by insurgents opposed to the process.

Others believe that even if elections can be held, in the current climate of instability they will fail to win legitimacy among the public, and will thus be doomed to failure.

A secondary school student in the northern city of Mosul, who asked to remain anonymous, says she is taken to school every day by her father, who fears she will be kidnapped if she goes out alone.

"I'm not going to take part in the election," she adds. "Look what's going on here in Mosul, look at the chaos. The only people still talking about elections and democracy are the officials whose houses are surrounded by concrete blocks and who have full-time guards to protect their kids."

Many Iraqis, after watching the fighting in Fallujah and explosions in Baghdad on television and hearing reports of increased tensions in the city of Mosul, say they have lost faith in the idea of elections.

Asad Hussein Ali left his job as director of the agriculture ministry's department in the central town of Baquba to stand for election and campaign full time for the Iraq Communist Party, but he says threats have already been made against people who intend to run in the municipality ballot, is due to be held at the same time as the national assembly election.

"After the recent car-bombs in Baquba, people have forgotten about elections. They are more concerned with their security situation," he said. "I don't think ordinary people are going to take much part in the vote. They're too afraid."

While people in the cities of central Iraq look unlikely to vote unless there is a significant change in the security situation over the next two months, it's a different picture in the northern region of Kurdistan which has so far remained largely untouched by insurgent violence.

In the areas which have been under Kurdish control since the region elected its own parliament in 1992, preparations for elections are more advanced and the mood more optimistic. The two main Kurdish parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party, KDP, led by Massoud Barzani and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, have already started holding pre-election meetings and forming alliances.

Dr Noori Talabani, head of Kurdistan's Election High Commission, recently held a conference in the Kurdish city of Erbil where he talked about the importance the forthcoming elections have for people in this area.

"The significance of this election lies in the fact that it will determine how the Iraqi state will be organised and what the relationship between the region of Kurdistan and the rest of the country will be," he explained.

"The situation in Kurdistan is secure," said Ranj Shukri Tofiq, a student. "I'm sure there won't be any terror attacks here, and I'll willingly go and vote."

The Kurdish media is already gearing up for elections, with the region's largest selling weekly, Hawlati, about to publish the results of an opinion poll indicating that up to three-quarters of Kurds are prepared to take part in the election. Given the choice, most say they would vote for independent candidates.

But in the rest of the country, many feel that holding elections right now is not in the best interests of the Iraqi people, and fear that competition among parties in the run-up to the election could lead to further violence, even civil war.

Salah Saeed, an ethnic Kurd living in Kirkuk, believes elections might only be feasible only in the Kurdish parts of the city because they are calmer than the Arab and Turkoman quarters.

He noted widespread apathy among the Arabs about the elections, but added that this was understandable, "Who can blame them? There have been a lot of car-bombs in the Arab areas, and they have the right to be afraid and not risk their lives to vote."

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