

Mixed Reactions to State of Emergency

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While many Iraqis welcomed the recent imposition of martial law, others believe it should have been a last resort.

“The state of emergency? It won’t affect us, we’re living quite peacefully,” said Tawfiq Ali, a taxi driver in the southern Iraqi city of Basra. “But they do need it in Baghdad and in other places where there’s been a lot of trouble.”

Although he may not feel directly affected, Ali believes the interim Iraqi government’s decision to impose a state of emergency was a necessary step. “On the whole, I think the country does need this kind of law, I just hope it’s properly applied. Look at what’s been going on; this is no time to be liberal.”

The November 7 move to impose a 60-day state of emergency on all parts of the country except the northern region of Kurdistan grants Prime Minister Iyad Allawi sweeping powers to impose curfews, close off entire towns and cities, take command of intelligence and security forces, and restrict movement.

“It’s only the trouble spots that are going to be affected by this law,” commented Fathi Hassan, a surgeon from Basra. “It’s come at the right time. The insurgents shouldn’t get the chance to abuse the freedom we got when the regime fell.”

While those in the relatively peaceful southern provinces of the country may welcome the move, many people in towns likely to feel the force of the new measures see it as an unwanted restriction of freedom – and an admission of failure on the part of the government.

“A state of emergency is not the answer. The government should have found peaceful ways to impose security. They’re doing exactly what Saddam would have done,” said Fakhriya, a pensioner from the northern city of Mosul where an immediate curfew was imposed after clashes on November 10.

For Ahmad al-Asadi, a taxi driver originally from the Kurdish town of Sulaimaniyah – located in the Kurdish area and thus unaffected by the decree – the move shows that the government’s control over the country is slipping. “Imposing a state of emergency means the authorities are incapable of dealing with the security issue. It’s just one of their many failings.”

Hala al-Mufti, a journalist from Kirkuk, believes the decision is both premature and undemocratic. “Why bother asking what people think? It’s too late now. The government should have carried out some kind of referendum before applying it. A state of emergency should be the absolute last resort for our problems. There must be other solutions.”

Some, however, believe the decision has come too late, and should have been enforced as soon as the uprisings began in earnest.

“The government should have applied a state of emergency from the beginning to give us some peace and security,” said Salman Hussein, a computer science student at Baghdad University. “Most people I’ve spoke to seem to accept the idea. There is the danger that some security elements might try to abuse certain aspects of it, but it’s a good step towards a safe and stable Iraq.”

Fears that the government's loose hold over many areas could lead to the decree being abused are prevalent among those who otherwise support the move. Baghdad lawyer Farouk al-Gurairi admitted, "The situation has its good and bad points. I feel the government should have waited a bit longer before applying it. We're afraid that people could start exploiting it."

With seven weeks of the state of emergency left to run, observers are hoping the move will restore a level of calm to the country and allow the national elections, slated to take place in January, to go ahead on schedule.

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