

Polling Thin in Sunni West

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People stay home rather than vote as Ramadi sees sporadic violence.

Polling stations remained virtually deserted in Ramadi, Fallujah and other towns in the western governorate of Anbar province on election day.

Ramadi, about 100 kilometres to the west of Baghdad, was like a ghost town on January 30. Most residents stayed at home rather than venture out into the streets. United States-led Coalition forces tried to coax voters to the polls, using loudspeakers to broadcast their appeal.

Officials had earlier predicted that most voters would not turn out in Anbar, a mostly Sunni area, because of the ongoing violence there. In view of the heightened risk of violence, US troops were in charge of security, rather than Iraqi police and National Guards, who were not to be seen in this part of Iraq on election day.

The streets were quiet after polling was scheduled to start at 7 am, but a half hour later, an explosion was heard near the US military base in Ramadi. At 8 am, IWPR reporters spotted only two polling stations that were open. One was at a kindergarten in the al-Adalus neighbourhood and the other was in the al-Rasool al-Arabi school.

“If our requests had been met and there was better security in place, the elections and our own safety would have been better,” said Mustafa al-Kubaisi, a high-school teacher.

In the afternoon, a roadside bomb exploded after a patrol of US troops had passed through Ramadi’s al-Malab neighbourhood, and insurgents and US soldiers exchanged gunfire close to the city’s amusement park. On January 29, two Iraqis were killed by Americans in a battle with militants in the same area.

Despite the sense that people here were unwilling or unable to take part in the elections, some Ramadi residents were not totally pessimistic.

“Let’s wait and see what the new elected government is like,” said Basim al-Alwani, 42, a shop owner. “Let’s accept them and then see what the results are.”

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