

## **Shia Clerics Welcome Imminent Polls**

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Preachers use Friday prayers to speak out about the landmark ballot.

Shia preachers used Friday prayers as their last opportunity to speak about the election – some enthusiastically, others supporting it with the proviso that it should lead to a withdrawal of foreign troops from Iraq.

At Baghdad's Baratha mosque, Sheikh Jalauddin al-Saghir gave a message of hope, "There are only hours left to the election, and we will see an end to darkness and terror."

Al-Saghir is a member of the Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution of Iraq, one of the major Shia parties fielding candidates as part of the United Iraqi Alliance.

Iraq's Shia majority suffered for years under the regime of former president Saddam Hussein. Like millions of other Shias, al-Saghir sees the January 30 election as an opportunity for the community to win a leading role in government.

In his sermon, the cleric urged the 1,500 worshippers to make their voices heard at the polls.

After the prayers, the congregation chanted, "Yes, yes to elections! No, no to Saddam!"

At al-Kadhimiyyah, a major Shia shrine in Baghdad, tight security measures were in place to protect the 2,000 worshippers. Guards were deployed around the mosque and supported by Iraqi police.

Inside, Imam Salah al-Ubaidi, a follower of radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, told worshippers that it was up to them whether to vote or not, "If you see the elections as being in the country's interests, then vote. If you don't, then do not vote. It is a matter of conscience for each individual."

In conversation with IWPR afterwards, al-Ubaidi was much more decisively in favour of the January 30 election, saying it was of crucial importance because Muqtada al-Sadr's movement wants to use the post-election political process to set a timetable for the withdrawal of United States-led Coalition forces.

When it came to political choices, the cleric said he favoured the United Iraqi Alliance and the Independent National Elites and Cadres lists, because he believed they would draft a constitution founded on Islamic law if they won power in the new National Assembly.

In his sermon, al-Ubaidi also addressed the security and economic concerns affecting his congregation directly. He denounced attacks targeting Shias, including the recent assassination of the Abu Hasanen, imam or prayer leader of the al-Jawadain mosque in Kadhimiyah.

He also criticised the transitional government for not doing enough to meet people's basic needs. "It's preoccupied with the democratic process of holding elections - leaving the Iraqi people to face their crises alone," he said.

The mood was more subdued at Sunni mosques in Baghdad such as Um al-Qura. There, prayer leader Sheikh Mahmood al-Sumaidai used his Friday sermon to hint that a government set up as a result of the election might just be acceptable as long as it behaves with propriety.

"We don't have to be satisfied with the leadership unless it is decent and does not squander the wealth of the country," he said.

The Muslim Scholars Association, an influential grouping of Sunni clerics, is officially boycotting the poll.

Al-Sumaidai also took a swipe at politicians who cooperate with the US-led Coalition forces, saying, "He who takes the same path as foreigners for the sake of ruling the country is wrong."

In the southeastern city of Amarah, Sunnis and Shias prayed together in the Grand Mosque.

Sheikh Hamid Jasim al-Nieimi, a Sunni cleric standing in provincial-level elections, addressed a congregation that he later said consisted mostly of Shia followers of Muqtada al-Sadr.

Because these "Sadrists" have said they are boycotting the election, al-Nieimi diplomatically skirted the issue in his sermon.

Instead, he called for unity between Sunnis and Shia, and condemned those who seek to create animosity between them. He spoke out against attacks on Iraqi Christians and members of the small Sabean faith as well as on Muslims, saying this could wreck the country.

"Iraq is a country for all of us, not the Muslims alone," he said. "Those who engage in such aggressive actions are not Muslims - they are neither Sunni nor Shia."

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