

Bombings ravage Baghdad as election campaign begins

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Seemingly coordinated suicide bombings wreaked carnage in Baghdad on Tuesday. For the third time since August, the blasts targeted official buildings and were intended to kill or maim as many government employees as possible. The initial death toll from the five separate blasts is 127, with a further 513 people injured.

The slaughter follows the October 25 bombings at the Justice Ministry and Baghdad provincial government offices, which killed over 140 and wounded 520, and the August 19 bombings at the finance and foreign ministries, in which at least 102 died and more than 600 were injured.

The latest attack took place on the same day elections were announced for March 7, 2010—more than a month later than originally scheduled. After months of political wrangling, an election law was finally agreed on Sunday by the rival ethno-sectarian factions that dominate the Iraqi parliament.

Tuesday's killing began when a suicide bomber detonated an explosion near a police patrol in the largely Sunni Arab suburb of Dora. Three police died, along with at least 12 students from a nearby technical college.

An hour later, a suicide bomber raced an explosives-laden van through an armed checkpoint and slammed it into barriers blocking the entrance to the car park of the Al-Karkh courthouse in western Baghdad. The blast blew out the front of the three-storey building and collapsed part of its roof. Many of the casualties were people inside upper-storey courtrooms or young law graduates waiting in the car park for job interviews. A

large number of criminal cases against alleged Iraqi insurgents are heard at Al Karkh.

Within 10 minutes of the courthouse bombing, a man driving an ambulance rigged with munitions exploded his vehicle at the last checkpoint before the new offices of the Finance Ministry in eastern Baghdad. The previous office was virtually destroyed by the August 19 bombing. While little damage was caused this time to the ministry, adjacent homes and a market were devastated.

Shortly afterward, a third suicide bomber detonated a car-bomb close to the nearby Labor Ministry, while a roadside bomb rigged near the Technology University exploded as a police patrol passed, killing people in the vicinity.

In all the major attacks, the bombers were able to get past the array of troops, police, private security guards, checkpoints and blast walls that ostensibly protect government installations. Al Jazeera correspondent Zeina Khodr reported: "We just spoke to a high ranking official who said he was worried that the security forces were infiltrated."

US troops, who under the terms of the Status of Forces agreement are supposed to stay in their bases on the outskirts of Baghdad, were deployed into the centre of the capital to cordon off the blast-affected areas and man checkpoints.

Like the earlier blasts, government spokesmen blamed Tuesday's bombings on supporters of the former Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein or the anti-occupation Sunni Arab extremist group that operates

under the name “Al Qaeda in Iraq”.

While the scale of the insurgency against the US occupation and the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has markedly declined over the past 18 months, it has by no means ended. In the three days before Tuesday’s bombings, at least 14 attacks took place against government troops, police or militias. Yesterday, two bombings in northern Baghdad killed at least four people and wounded 18.

On the eve of elections, the bombings have led to an outcry by Maliki’s rivals over the failure of Iraqi security forces to secure the capital. A special parliamentary session was convened yesterday. Various politicians used it as a platform to gain election mileage by denouncing the prime minister and his interior minister Jawad al-Bolani.

Maliki has already dismissed General Aboud Qanbar, a loyalist he appointed to head of security in Baghdad. The parliament is now demanding action against other pro-Maliki figures in the Army and National Police.

The bombings and political recriminations in parliament are further signs of the sharp ethno-sectarian rivalries that have been entrenched in Iraqi politics by the US occupation and that erupted again in bitter disputes over the election law.

The first version of the legislation was vetoed by the Sunni vice-president Tariq al-Hashemi on the grounds it did not give sufficient weight to the millions of refugees who were forced to flee Iraq, many of whom are Sunni or Christian. Hashemi demanded that the exiles be able to directly elect a certain number of parliamentarians. The Shiite and Kurdish factions, however, used the opportunity provided by his veto to redraft the law to meet Kurdish demands for a greater number of parliamentary seats. In the process, they reduced the proportional number that would be elected from majority Sunni provinces and gave the refugee population no special status at all in the parliament, which will be expanded from 275 to 325 seats.

The final compromise deal leaves virtually every faction with grievances. It is the outcome of direct

pressure by US President Obama on Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani and Iraqi President Jalal Talabani to accept fewer additional seats and thereby avert a second veto by Hashemi.

Sunni areas have gained some greater representation, but there is no special seat allocation for the refugee population. Their votes will simply be counted as part of the tally in the province where they previously lived.

Most controversially, Obama reportedly gave the Kurdish factions at least a vague undertaking that the US will support a census and then a referendum in the province of Kirkuk to decide whether it will be placed under the authority of the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq. Any referendum in Kirkuk is bitterly opposed by Iraqi nationalists, and by the Arab and Turkmen populations in the province, as a step toward the establishment of a separate Kurdish nation-state.

Anti-Kurdish rhetoric will be a feature of the election campaign in much of the country. The most extreme Kurdish nationalists will match it, however, with calls for faster moves toward securing control of Kirkuk. They are increasingly alienated by the constant pressure to limit their ambitions according to a timetable dictated by Washington.

The latest bombings are one more indication of the rising political tensions that will almost certainly lead to a sharp escalation of violence in the lead-up to the March 7 election.



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