

Dozens of bombings in run-up to today's Iraq provincial elections

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This last week has seen a spate of bombings across Iraq and the execution of 21 men on terrorist charges in the run-up to the provincial elections today.

The attacks were aimed at disrupting the elections, the first to be held under the auspices of Nuri Kamal al-Maliki's Shi'ite-led coalition government since the US troop withdrawal at the end of 2011.

The campaign expressed sectarian Sunni/Shia conflicts that were cultivated following the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003. Most of the attacks were car bombs, clearly coordinated and carried out during the morning rush hour, claiming the lives of nearly 70 people and injuring hundreds more.

While the federal government is responsible for security, most of the powers are devolved to the provincial councils, which have authority over the control of resources, including oil, distribution of wealth and local security, and the power to veto federal laws. They are responsible for administration, finance and reconstruction projects, including key services such as water, sanitation and electricity.

With about 13.5 million Iraqis eligible to vote, there are more than 8,000 candidates competing for 378 seats, under conditions where the parties typically appeal to voters on the basis of sectarian, ethnic or tribal loyalties and fraud and corruption is widespread. The bombings and assassinations have targeted candidates of the minority Sunni community, many of them members of the Sunni coalition Al-Iraqiya led by the secular Shi'ite, Iyad Allawi. Fifteen have been killed, including six in Mosul alone, one in Bakuba and another in Baghdad, some apparently by political opponents and others by Sunni Islamists linked to al-Qaeda and similar militant groups.

Other attacks focused on Sunni rallies and political meetings and, on Monday, two schools in Hilla that

were due to serve as polling stations. Officials in Babel Province, whose capital is Hilla, declared a state of emergency, saying they had received intelligence that armed gangs were planning to carry out attacks at other polling stations.

Maliki has already used the security situation to postpone the elections for one month in two Sunni-dominated provinces, Anbar and Nineveh. It is widely believed that the reason was to prevent the election of Sunni candidates hostile to the Shi'ite-led government.

A further four provinces will not be holding elections: the three in those provinces administered by the Regional Government of Kurdistan will hold their elections later in the year, while elections in Kirkuk are on indefinite hold because of disagreement between political and ethnic groups in the province, which is claimed by both Kurdistan and the federal government.

The Al-Iraqiya coalition won 91 seats in the 2010 parliamentary elections, 2 more than Maliki's State of Law coalition. Despite this, Maliki manoeuvred through the constitutional court with Washington's backing to become prime minister, and included members of Iraqiya in his government.

Behind the violence lies seething discontent over unemployment, lack of basic services such as electricity and water, rampant corruption, patronage, and the government's failure to rebuild the infrastructure destroyed by the US war on Iraq. Maliki has concentrated power in his own hands, holding the defence and interior posts, using anti-terrorist laws against his Sunni rivals and hinting that he will call elections ahead of those scheduled for late 2014 to maintain himself and his clique in power for a third term.

The Iraq Security Forces now employ 933,000 people, an estimated 8 percent of the workforce and 12

percent of the male population, nearly twice the size of the military. Shi'ite security forces, masquerading as militias, operate secret prisons and conduct kidnappings and targeted killings. Oppositionists are rounded up and detained.

On Tuesday, the authorities executed 21 men convicted on terrorist charges, bringing to 50 the number of executions carried out since the beginning of 2013. Amnesty International pointed to the "alarming" increase in executions by the Iraqi government in 2012, when 129 people were executed, double the previous year, making it third only to China and Iran.

Last September, an Iraqi court handed down death sentences for exiled vice president Tariq al-Hashemi, one of the most prominent Sunni politicians, and his son-in-law, who have fled to Turkey. They were found guilty, in absentia, of allegedly killing a lawyer as well as an Iraqi army officer and his wife.

The targeting of Sunni politicians has provoked a four-month Sunni uprising. Since last December, when the bodyguards and aides to one of Iraq's most prominent Sunni politicians were arrested, there have been weekly Friday rallies by tens of thousands protesting against the Maliki government. This has prompted numerous defections from the Iraqiya coalition group in the Maliki government, which has splintered into rival factions. Many Sunnis are now calling for greater autonomy for the Sunni-dominated provinces in central and western Iraq.

Maliki's relations with the northern Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) are no less fraught, with a number of Kurdish ministers and legislators boycotting cabinet meetings and parliament over the state budget allocations and protesting Maliki's blocking payments to oil companies operating in the Kurdish region. The KRG has been pursuing separate oil and gas exploration deals with international corporations, and selling oil on the international markets, bypassing Baghdad.

Last week, the Kurdistan government shipped its first direct cargo of crude oil, about 30,000 tonnes and worth around US\$22 million, to the international market, trucking it from an oilfield near Kirkuk and over the border into Turkey.

Behind all these conflicts is the savage sectarian civil war for regime change, fomented by the US, Britain and France, across the border in Syria, and financed

and supported by the Sunni states of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and Jordan. This war is in no small part the product of concerns in Washington that its installation of a Shi'ite-led regime in Baghdad tilted the regional balance too far in favour of Iran.

The Syrian civil war has pitted Sunni Islamist militias against the government of President Bashar al-Assad, a member of the Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shi'ism. Iraqi Sunni Islamist fighters linked to Al Qaeda of Iraq have longed played a prominent role. The Al-Nusra Front recently openly swore allegiance to Al-Qaeda in Iraq.

Iraqi Shia militias have also reportedly crossed the border to fight on the side of the Assad government. The Maliki government has refused to join in the demands for Assad's ouster and has forged close ties with Iran.

Turkey, which is at the forefront of the war for regime change in Syria, is assuming the mantle of the defender of the Iraqi Sunnis. It has forged close relations with Iraqi Kurdistan, despite having carried out a relentless war against its own Kurdish separatist movement, the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). This has aligned the Iraqi Kurdish leadership with the Syrian "rebels" and the Sunni regimes supporting them, exacerbating the conflict between the Kurds and the government within Iraq.

In the reckless drive to foment a sectarian conflict to overthrow Assad and pave the way for an attack on Iran, the imperialist powers are creating the conditions for a far wider conflagration that will engulf not just Syria but Iraq, Lebanon and its other neighbours.



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