



Clerics Use Friday Prayers to Urge Big Iraqi Vote

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FALLUJA, Iraq (Reuters) -- From the pulpits of mosques across Iraq at Friday prayers, clerics urged worshippers to cast their votes in next week's election, setting up a mass turnout in a ballot that has polarised the nation on sectarian lines.

In Falluja, renowned "City of Mosques" and former seat of revolt against U.S. occupation, Sunni Muslim spiritual leaders made clear there would be no repeat of the boycott of January's election which left their minority marginalised.

In the Shi'ite holy city of Najaf, preachers reminded the faithful that only voting would ensure the long-oppressed majority community retained the upper hand.

Across the sectarian divide there was hope the parliament, the first fully empowered body since U.S. forces overthrew Saddam Hussein nearly three years ago, may finally mean the departure of those American troops.

Some appealed for the release of Western hostages, including four -- two Canadians, a Briton and an American -- whose captors have threatened to execute them on Saturday unless all prisoners are freed from Iraqi jails.

Others urged Iraqis to forget the trial of Saddam, which gripped millions of television viewers during three theatrical hearings this week, and concentrate on the election issues at hand -- the economy, public services, sectarianism and the state's fight against a belligerent Sunni-led insurgency.

Some clerics infused their sermons with messages of support for specific parties and lists -- some subtle, others less so.

But most simply urged Iraqis to vote, some as a religious duty:

"Consider my words as a fatwa," Sheikh Abdul Sattar Athaab told over 1,000 worshippers at the Raqeeb mosque in Falluja, where U.S. troops crushed a Sunni uprising in November 2004.

"Those who disobey it will be held to account under Islam.

"First, you must participate in the elections. Second, you have to vote for a list which really represents the people."

PARTY RECOMMENDATIONS

Less than a year ago, Falluja was a ghost town on election day on Jan. 30 as those of its population not displaced by the fighting boycotted Iraq's first post-Saddam election -- partly out of anger at the influence the minority lost with the fall of Saddam and partly out of fear amid insurgent threats.

But 11 months on, Sunni leaders are urging their supporters to vote in force to allow their once dominant community to punch at its full weight in the new 275-seat parliament.

"You must not vote for your tribal leaders or preachers, whom you very well know," Sheikh Athaab said.

"You should vote for lists which consist of people from various sects -- Shi'ites, Sunnis, Kurds and Christians."

That seemed like a veiled pledge of support for former prime minister Iyad Allawi, a secular Shi'ite whose cross-sectarian coalition is posing a threat to the Shi'ite Islamist-dominated government -- remarkable considering Allawi oversaw the assault on Falluja, but in line with support he has won from Sunnis for his tough line on violence, especially pro-government militias.

In Najaf, where Allawi also ordered the use of force against a Shi'ite uprising and where Allawi says opponents tried to kill him in a mosque earlier this week, one imam called for a peaceful final campaign week.

"We're against mutual accusations and against violations of the electoral process," said Sheikh Sadr al-Din al-Qabanji, a prominent member of SCIRI, most powerful of the parties in the Shi'ite bloc which won a majority at January's election.

He cited voting as "a way to liberate Iraq from the occupation" and at the same time hinting that Shi'ites, who make up 60 percent of Iraq's population and suffered terribly under Saddam, were in no mood to see their power diluted.

"Since we are a majority then we should have a majority in the next parliament," he said.

ANGER

In Baghdad, where Allawi is hoping to capitalise on frustration with the government to seize seats from the ruling Alliance, one cleric accused the Americans of using the trial of Saddam as a smokescreen to distract attention from their failure to rebuild Iraq from the rubble of the 2003 war.

"They say the most important issue now is the trial of Saddam and the reconstruction of Iraq but we haven't seen any reconstruction," Sheikh's Ahmed al-Samaraie told worshippers at one of the city's biggest Sunni shrines, the Abu Hanifa mosque.

"Reconstruction of Iraq is the biggest corruption case in history," he said, urging people to go and vote against all those who had ever held power -- the "heroes of corruption" and "those with hands stained with Iraqi blood".

The government's U.S. backers are hoping the election will pave the way for them to withdraw from the region soon.

Defence officials in Washington said on Thursday the U.S. military had plans to cancel the deployment of two Army brigades in what could be the start of a troop reduction.

However, the withdrawal of the two brigades would make only a small dent in the U.S. force in Iraq, which has been boosted to around 158,000 ahead of the election.

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