



VIOLENCE COULD DELAY IRAQ ELECTIONS

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With kidnappings and car bombings on the rise and several cities effectively under rebel control, officials are offering different opinions about whether Iraqis will be able to participate in free and fair elections in January as originally planned.

The election, to be held by Jan. 31, 2005, will create a national assembly, which in turn will pick a new government to replace the one headed by interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. The assembly will also oversee the writing of a new constitution.

The election is a key milestone in the nation's path to democracy, and the first time Iraqis will choose their own representatives. The elections are also vital to a U.S. exit strategy from Iraq.

However, attacks on foreign aid workers have raised concerns that threats could keep election observers from certain areas of the country. More than 140 foreigners have been kidnapped in Iraq -- some by anti-U.S. insurgents and some by criminals seeking ransoms. At least 26 of them have been killed.

Will violence delay elections?

On the same day Prime Minister Allawi told the U.S. Congress that violence will not derail plans for national elections, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld warned that balloting may be impossible in some dangerous areas.

"Let's say you tried to have an election and you could have it in three-quarters or four-fifths of the country, but some places you couldn't, because the violence was too great," Rumsfeld said Sept. 23.

Secretary of State Colin Powell said the insurgency will only become more violent as elections near.

"They are determined to disrupt the election. They do not want the Iraqi people to vote for their own leaders in a free, democratic election," he said. He reiterated the international community's commitment to holding elections on time.

Importance of full elections

Powell's predecessor, Madeleine Albright, who was secretary of State under President Clinton and is an adviser to the Kerry campaign, questioned the value of elections in Iraq if they cannot be held nationwide.

Albright contended Allawi's statement that 15 out of 18 Iraq provinces were ready for elections was "kind of like deciding that California, Texas and Florida won't participate in our election."

The most violent regions of Iraq are in Sunni Arab areas north and west of Baghdad. If voting is not held there, it could anger the Sunni minority, which already feels alienated after losing the power and privilege it enjoyed under Saddam Hussein.

Iraq's Shiite Muslims, who make up about 60 percent of the population, are eager to hold elections, since they expect to have a majority in the new government. Iraq's top Shiite Muslim cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, insists the elections be held on time.

American troops in Iraq

Some U.S. officials have raised the possibility of sending more troops to Iraq to assist in elections security. Army Gen. John Abizaid, commander of U.S. troops in the Middle East, has said he expects Iraqi and possible international troops to do the job.

Because the Army is rotating fresh troops into Iraq this fall and winter to replace those whose one-year tours are ending, it expects to have an overlap of 10,000 to 15,000 extra U.S. soldiers in January when the 3rd Infantry Division's four brigades arrive to replace the 1st Cavalry Division, Abizaid said.

However he warned that voting may not be possible in parts of Iraq where the violence is too intense.

"I don't think we'll ever achieve perfection and when we look for perfection in a combat zone we're going to be sadly disappointed," he said on NBC's Meet the Press.

Abizaid compared the situation in Iraq to the disputed U.S. presidential election in 2000 that put George Bush in the White House following the Florida ballot fight that ended up in the Supreme Court.

"I don't think Iraq will have a perfect election. And if I recall, looking back at our own election four years ago, it wasn't perfect either," he said.

--Compiled for NewsHour Extra by Leah Clapman

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