

Assassinations Grow as Iraqi Elections Near
By Tim Arango, New York Times
15 April 15 2013

BAGHDAD — In the first Iraqi elections since the American troop withdrawal, Sunni candidates are being attacked and killed in greater numbers than in recent campaigns, raising concerns in Washington over Iraq's political stability and the viability of a democratic system the United States has heavily invested in over years of war and diplomacy.

At least 15 candidates, all members of the minority Sunni community, have been assassinated — some apparently by political opponents, others by radical Sunni militants. Many others have been wounded or kidnapped or have received menacing text messages or phone calls demanding that they withdraw.



Mourners attending the funeral of Salah al-Obeidi, 48, a candidate who was shot to death in his office. "Because he's a Sunni, no one will care," a friend said. (Adam Ferguson for The New York Times)

By going after members of their own sect, radical Sunnis aligned with Al Qaeda are effectively seeking to destabilize the Shiite-led government, making an already angry and alienated community fearful to participate in national governance. At the same time, it appears intra-Sunni rivalries are inadvertently aiding the radical cause, as Sunnis kill political adversaries in their quest for power.

As candidates nervously continue meeting voters, promising jobs and handing out cellphone cards in exchange for assurances, sworn on the Koran, of their votes in local elections this weekend, there are worries that the violence is deterring good candidates — and that voters will be put off as well.

In the latest surge of violence, more than 20 attacks around the country on Monday killed close to 50 people and wounded nearly 200. Two schools in Hilla that were to serve as polling sites were blown up by homemade bombs; no one was killed, but the explosions suggested that insurgents might be intent on attacking voters and not just candidates. Security officials in Hilla quickly declared a state of emergency, and said they had intelligence that militants were preparing to target more polling stations in the region.

At the same time, the violence could further mar the credibility of an election that was already being closely watched for fraud or other abuses: for the first time since the American invasion in 2003, Iraqi officials will be largely on their own in securing and monitoring elections.

"Killing candidates means instilling fear," said Hameed Fadhil, a political-science professor at Baghdad University. "And that is why I think it will affect voter participation, because I don't think that people will want to risk their lives again."

Politics and violence have long been intertwined in Iraq, where the promise of democracy is always tempered by sectarian, tribal and ideological conflict. But this election cycle is proving deadlier than either of the last two times that Iraqis went to the polls — in 2010 for parliamentary elections and in 2009 for provincial elections, said Ghazi al-Zawbai, an official at the Independent High Electoral Commission, which oversees elections in Iraq.

On a recent morning, the rituals of mourning played out over sweet tea and heaps of rice and lamb in the Baghdad home of Salah al-Obeidi, a prominent lawyer who days earlier was shot to death in his office just up the road. Mr. Obeidi, 48, was a Sunni candidate and a legal adviser to Ayad Allawi, the secular Shiite who heads Iraqiya, the mostly Sunni bloc that won the most seats in the 2010 parliamentary elections.

“Because he’s a Sunni, no one will care,” said Hussam Jassim, a friend of Mr. Obeidi’s. The murder will probably never be solved, he said, adding that he believed the gunmen were aligned with the Shiite-dominated government.

Mr. Obeidi almost always carried a pistol, but he had left it at home on the day he was killed. And days earlier, he received a text message that read, “Withdraw from the election or you will be killed,” said his son, Abdella Sabbah.

Mr. Sabbah said that he had hoped his father would heed the warning and told him: “I don’t think you need to run for this election. It is too dangerous.”

As the elections approach, the pace of attacks has seemed to increase. On Saturday night, a Sunni candidate was driving north of Tikrit when gunmen opened fire with pistols equipped with silencers, killing him, officials said. And on Sunday, in Baquba, the capital of Diyala Province, Najim al-Harb, a member of the local council who was running for re-election, was killed in an ambush involving a roadside bomb and hidden gunmen.

Civilians are often caught up in the violence. The bloodiest attack occurred on April 6, when a suicide bomber struck a hospitality tent in Baquba, where Sunni politicians were holding a rally. Nearly 20 people were killed, though none were candidates, and many more were wounded.

In the northern city of Mosul alone, six candidates have been killed, either by gunfire or homemade explosives, and six others have survived assassination attempts.

“We blame the security forces because of their negligence in protecting our candidates,” said Rahim al-Shimari, a spokesman for Iraqiya. “In spite of the repeated targeting, we have not seen any precautionary measures taken to limit the attacks.”

In offering theories about the attackers, experts and Iraqi officials say that in addition to the political rivals who are thought to be behind some killings, the militant group Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia is believed to be responsible for others. The group, which is also known as Al Qaeda in Iraq, targets Iraqi Shiites, but also Sunnis who accept the Shiite-led government or even just participate in politics, declaring them apostates.

“Although it is possible that some of the attacks may be the result of political rivalries, many of the attacks bear the hallmark of Al Qaeda in Iraq,” Ahmed Ali and Stephen Wicken, analysts for the Institute for the Study of War in Washington, wrote in a recent online column. “Historically it has opposed Sunni Arab participation in the political process.”

The killings have added to the sense of embattlement by the country’s Sunni Muslims, who are a minority here and who have been holding protests against the Shiite-dominated government. In Anbar and Nineveh Provinces, where Sunni-led protests have increased in recent months and where most of the assassinations have occurred, the government has postponed elections for a month, citing security concerns. They did so despite objections from local leaders, the Iraqi election commission, the United Nations and American diplomats.

“I have expressed my concern about this decision, as the citizens of these provinces are looking forward to these elections with great hope,” Martin Kobler, the United Nations representative in Iraq, said in recent testimony to the Security Council in New York.

On a visit to Baghdad, Secretary of State John Kerry criticized the decision and asked Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki to reconsider. Mr. Maliki only reiterated the decision, demonstrating the limits of American influence over Iraq's affairs.

The election postponement, despite the violence, is largely seen as a political move by Mr. Maliki to prevent the election of Sunni candidates who are opposed to the central government. At least that is what Iraqiya leaders believe. After all, they say, every election since 2003 has been held amid the threat of violence.

"There is killing every day in Iraq," said Jaber al-Jabouri, a member of Parliament and an Iraqiya leader. "It's not just candidates."

But the campaign season goes on, even in Anbar and Nineveh Provinces, in all the unorthodox ways that typify Iraqi politics.

In Falluja, some candidates have turned to a fortune teller, who locals say practices a kind of witchcraft, to improve their chances. The woman, who gave her name as Um Razak, said she had counseled candidates who have asked her to "cast a spell" to help them win.

"I tell them that they will win, but that they need to work hard," she said. "They promise me that if they win, they will pay for me to go to the hajj in Mecca, or buy me a house."

Others have given up on politics.

Muhammad Hikmet, a political science professor from Anbar, withdrew his candidacy after receiving a threat.

"I do not want to be the next victim," he said.

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