

Dysfunctional government

Former allies of Al-Maliki's government are now turning into some of its harshest critics, writes **Nermeen Al-Mufti** in Baghdad

The number of identified bodies found in Baghdad rose by 41 per cent compared to three months ago, when Operation Imposing Law began. Some 220 civilians and over 30 Iraqi servicemen were killed on Saturday and Sunday alone.

The worst attacks took place in the dominantly-Turkoman town of Amirli, 170km north of Baghdad, where on Saturday morning a suicide bomber blew up a truck loaded with five tonnes of explosives in the central market. The explosion killed 150 civilians and wounded 350 others.

The following morning the town was in shock and mourning with walls draped in black banners bearing the names of the dead. Most of the victims were from the Bayatli clan, one of the largest Turkoman clans. The town has about 1,200 mud brick houses. Fifty of those were destroyed in the blast.

Jasem Al-Bayati, whose relative was seriously wounded and hospitalised following the attack, told *Al-Ahram Weekly* what happened minutes before the blast. The relative was going to his shop when he saw a green truck driven by a man speaking on a mobile phone approaching. Within seconds, the truck exploded and he was tossed into the air and awoke in hospital, he said.

Abu Ali Al-Bayati said that Amirli was a safe place and had neither American nor Iraqi military bases. All the town had was a small police station, five police cars and 30 policemen. Town residents, who were in the process of putting together a pavilion for a memorial, voiced their anger at the government and the Unified Iraqi Alliance, the group for which most of them voted in the last elections. The blast disrupted supplies of water and electricity in the town. Now residents want the government to declare their town a disaster zone.

Turkoman parties, such as the Iraqi Turkoman Front, promptly denounced the explosion and started sending relief supplies. Turkey sent in two planes to fly 25 of the wounded to Ankara for treatment. This followed a request by residents for Turkish intervention to protect them from various threats. On the same day, two bombings occurred in dominantly Turkoman Kirkuk. One of the blasts hit a centre of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

Many Turkoman expressed surprise at the bombing, explaining they had always fought for a united Iraq and had refrained from cooperating with the occupation forces before or during the invasion. This may explain why they have become so politically marginalised. US-backed Kurdish leaders have been trying to seize oil-rich Turkoman land, including Kirkuk, a city described in the Baker- Hamilton Report as a "powder keg".

Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki and other Iraqi officials denounced the attack. Vice- President Tareq Al-Hashimi accused the government of weakness and of the inability to protect Iraqis. Al-Hashimi described the bombing in Amirli as "black terror".

In June alone, 540 bodies were found in Baghdad. Fighting between the Mahdi Army and Iraqi forces erupted in Al-Samawa, Al-Nasiriya and Al-Diwaniya in the south. US and coalition forces intervened in the battles, shelling 10 homes in Al-Diwaniya and killing 10 civilians.

Meanwhile, a crisis loomed on the political horizon following the suspension of the Accordance Front, a Sunni group, from participation in the government.

The Al-Maliki government, in the meantime, approved the controversial gas and oil law, which the Bush administration demanded as a condition for continued support of the current government. The law is opposed by several parliamentarians. And the Association of Muslim Scholars issued an edict, or *fatwa*, calling for the law to be scrapped. The Accordance Front said it had no information about the law and its amendments.

Although the pro-Sadr parliamentarians have ended their boycott of the parliament, tensions between Sadr supporters and the prime minister remain evident. Sadr supporters said that Al-Maliki had turned against them, although they were the ones that put him in office, adding that Al-Maliki's days in government were numbered. The Sadr supporters were dismayed by Al-Maliki's claims that, "Baathists and Saddamists" were active within the pro-Sadr group. If such accusations were true, one Sadr supporter retorted, then it was the Baathists and Saddamists who put Al-Maliki in office.

Ahmed Al-Sharifi, a key figure in the Sadr group, told the newspaper *Al-Zaman* that Al-Maliki was duplicitous. Al-Maliki's government had encouraged the occupation forces to attack the Sadr group, he claimed. Al-Sharifi added that a coordination committee has been formed by the Islamic Daawa Party and the Higher Islamic Council in Iraq (HIC) without prior consultation with Sadr supporters. "The aim of the new committee is to produce new sectarian quotas that would favour Daawa and the HIC."

Ahmed Al-Shibani, a top aid of Muqtada Al-Sadr, said that Al-Maliki's government was not going to last long, and was already a spent force in the eyes of the occupation. "We have learned from our sources that the occupation forces told Al-Maliki's government that much." Thousands of Sadr supporters staged a protest against Al-Maliki in Baghdad last Saturday. Sadr parliamentarians say that even if they approve the oil law, they will insist that US and UK companies are not allowed to process and drill for Iraqi oil.

Al-Maliki launched a fierce attack on the Sadr group following a meeting with President Jalal Talabani last Saturday. The prime minister accused the Sadr group of abetting "gangsters and robbers, Saddamists and Baathists, who carry out criminal acts with impunity." He called on Sadr supporters to disassociate themselves from killing, terror and lawlessness.

Nassar Al-Rabiei, a pro-Sadr parliamentarian, told the *Weekly* that the government "was looking for an excuse to hide its failure to bring about security and stability, despite its claims that the security plan was making progress".

Iraqi and US officials had in the past accused the Sadr group of involvement in sectarian killings and abductions. Al-Maliki dismissed those charges. He even criticised US forces when they stormed Al-Sadr City, the stronghold of the Mahdi Army.

Al-Maliki's change of heart coincides with Jalal Talabani's promise that a "front of moderates" would be formed. The front would bring together the Daawa Party, the HIC and the two Kurdish parties. Talabani expressed hope that the Islamic Party would join the new coalition, but it was trying to exclude other forces from the scene, such as the (Shia) Sadr group and the (Sunni) Accordance Front. Al-Maliki, for his part, said that all political groups were welcome in the new coalition, so long as they were committed to resolving disputes through peaceful means.

Janan Ali, a professor at Baghdad University, mocked the term "front of moderates", saying that the parties involved were quite extreme themselves. Ali said he expected the formation of the new front to trigger further problems.

Iranian diplomats visited for the first time the five Iranians held by US forces on charges of aiding armed groups. The five men were arrested in Irbil on 11 January 2007. The Iraqi Foreign Ministry described the visit as a "positive development".

Sources in the White House said the Iraqi government was unlikely to meet the deadline set by President Bush for September. The US has 157,000 troops in Iraq and is expected to send more. On the first two days of the week, 12 US and two UK servicemen were killed.