US proconsul cancels municipal election in Iraq

Peter Symonds
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The cancellation of an election for the post of mayor in the southern Iraqi city of Najaf demonstrates once again that the Bush administration has no intention of allowing even the semblance of democracy in the country.

The poll, which was due to take place last Saturday, was being stage-managed from start to finish by the US army. Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Conlin, a Marine commander, appeared on local TV to announce the election. Late last month US marines were sent to local schools to help teachers to register voters and a central location was chosen where soldiers were to count the vote.

The event appears to have been designed as a public relations showpiece. While municipal administrations in other cities have all been handpicked by the US-led occupying forces, Najaf was to be the exception, with a mayor chosen in the first "open election". Some 18 candidates began campaigning and each was promised equal time on the local television station.

But no sooner had the voter registration begun than the head of the US military occupation, Paul Bremer III, stepped in to abruptly overrule the local commander, suspend the election and, then, just over a week ago, postpone it indefinitely. The election, he declared, would be "premature" in the absence of proper electoral legislation and procedures.

Local US soldiers in Najaf had a hard time believing the explanation. Speaking rather cautiously, Major David Toth told the *New York Times* that the city was "stable" and "we thought the people would be ready for it [the election]." The real reason for Bremer's decision was that the man widely tipped to win the poll— Asad Sultan Abu Gilal, 51—was not to Washington's liking.

Alluding to the problems, a senior official in Bremer's office declared to the *New York Times*: "The most organised political groups in many areas are rejectionists, extremists and remnants of the Baathists. They have the advantage over the other groups." In other words, the US has no confidence that anyone sympathetic to its rule would be elected, even in a carefully managed poll.

Gilal is hardly a "Baathist" or "extremist". He is a member of the Shiite-based Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), was jailed by Saddam Hussein for six years and forced to flee the country after the failed Shiite uprising in 1991. While US officials are now accusing SCIRI of being "Iranian-backed," it was, prior to the American invasion, one of six opposition groups that qualified under the Iraq Liberation Act passed in the US Congress in 1998 for American support and money.

Like the majority of the Iraqi people, however, SCIRI is "rejectionist"—that is, it demands that US troops leave Iraq. Last Thursday, more than 1,000 people gathered in Najaf to protest against the cancellation of the election. In a rather moderate statement to the media, Gilal warned: "If they don't give us freedom, what will we do? We have patience, but not for a long time."

Bremer's cancellation of the Najaf poll is no isolated aberration. Shortly after arriving in Baghdad last month, he called off plans for a gathering of Iraqi exiles and other leaders to set up an interim Iraqi administration to advise the US occupying force. Bremer declared instead that he would choose a group of 25 to 30 Iraqis to form an advisory council. And while he would "broadly accept" the group's recommendations, he warned that he would veto any decisions that "are fundamentally against the coalition's interests" or in "the better interests of Iraq."

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National elections have been relegated to the distant future.

Bremer has also outlawed the Baath Party and initiated a far-reaching purge of former members—a process that allows wide scope to block the appointment of any Iraqi official regarded as hostile to Washington, whether a member of the Baath Party or not.

At the same time, Bremer has been tightening the US grip over the media. Last week he issued a sweeping censorship edict on "Prohibited Media Activity" that includes encouraging civil disorder, advocating support for the banned Baath Party or inciting "violence against coalition forces". Media deemed to be engaged in prohibited activity face the revocation of their licences and the confiscation of their equipment. Individuals who are arrested and prosecuted face jail terms of up to a year and fines of up to $US1,000.

Even before the new regulations had been promulgated, marines stormed into the offices of the newspaper *Sadda-al-Auma* in Najaf, seized copies of the latest edition urging residents to resist the US occupation and detained at least four employees. A 32-year-old guard Ali Chiad said that he was bound, hooded and held for four days while US interrogators questioned the paper's staff.

The media in Baghdad reacted angrily to Bremer's censorship measures. The widely-read *As'saah* published an editorial headlined "Bremer is a Baathist" to explain its decision to cut two articles. "Only four months ago, the easiest accusation to make against us was that we were agents for America. Today, with the same ease, they put sacks on our heads and accuse us of being agents for Saddam Hussein and the Baath Party."

These comments are just a pale reflection of the growing hostility felt by broad layers of the Iraqi population towards the suppression of basic democratic rights and the country's appalling social conditions. Bremer's autocratic methods of rule testify to the lack of any significant political base of support inside Iraq for the colonial-style US occupation of the country.

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