

Iraqi elections announced amid mass repression

James Cogan
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In the wake of the American military slaughter in Fallujah, the US-installed interim government announced over the weekend that elections will be held on January 30, 2005.

The elections, if they take place at all, will have no legitimacy. They will be controlled to ensure they result in the formation of a loyal US puppet regime that signs away Iraq's oil resources to US corporations and agrees to an indefinite American military presence in the country. No candidate will be permitted to put forward the view of the majority of the Iraqi people, who want all US and foreign troops to leave.

All but the most openly pro-US Iraqi organisations—such as the Kurdish nationalist parties, the Iraqi National Accord of interim prime minister Iyad Allawi, the Iraqi National Congress of Ahmed Chalabi and the Shiite Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—have opposed any participation in the election.

The representatives of 47 Iraqi political groups gathered in Baghdad last week to declare they will boycott the ballot. Among them were the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), which speaks for over 3,000 Sunni mosques; dozens of smaller Sunni parties; the Iraqi Turkmen Front, representing ethnic Turkomen; the Iraqi Communist Party; two prominent women's associations; a Christian party; and eight Shiite parties, including the organisation headed by Sheik Jawad Khalissi—the descendent of the cleric who led the 1920 revolt in Iraq against British rule—and the Najaf-based movement led by Ayatollah Qassim Taei.

Their joint statement condemned the elections as “imposed by the US-backed interim government and rejected by a clear majority of political and religious powers” in Iraq. The AMS spokesman told a press conference: “These elections will not represent the real

will of the Iraqi people... We are sure the results of the elections are already decided. They [the US] have picked people who will support them.” While the Shiite movement led by Moqtada al-Sadr was not present at the meeting, it has also called for a boycott.

At this stage, the leading Shiite cleric, Ali al-Sistani, is continuing to call for Iraq's Shiite majority to take part in the elections. There are good reasons to believe he may not be able to maintain this stance however.

The assault on Fallujah has, in many ways, transformed the political situation. Iraqis watched in stunned horror as the US military literally reduced one of the country's oldest cities to rubble and bombed mosques and hospitals. The country is awash with rumours that the US forces used napalm and chemical weapons to wipe out Fallujah's defenders and that marines executed hundreds of wounded men.

One expression of the attitude of the Iraqi people toward the occupation is the blog-site “Baghdad Burning” authored by a young Iraqi woman. On November 16, she wrote: “What people don't understand is that the whole [US] military is infested with these psychopaths. In this last year we've seen murderers, torturers and xenophobes running around in tanks and guns. I don't care what does it: I don't care if it's the tension, the fear, the 'enemy'... it's murder. We are occupied by murderers.”

The predominantly Sunni Muslim regions of central and northern Iraq are now in a state of ongoing insurrection against the occupation, with every indication pointing to the US military's grip over the country coming under serious challenge.

Two battalions of marines are fighting a bloody battle around the city of Ramadi, the capital of Anbar province, which is, along with Fallujah, one of the centres of the Iraqi insurgency. Other marine units are

trying to suppress resistance fighters in Samarra.

In Mosul, Iraq's third largest city, an estimated 3,500 police deserted and joined ranks with insurgents. It has taken over 2,500 US troops, backed by thousands of Kurdish *peshmerga* militia, more than a week to regain control over the city. Over the weekend, guerillas in the city burnt a government warehouse storing voter registration forms to the ground and executed nine captured government troops.

Insurgents have also carried out sabotage attacks on Iraq's northern oilfields, west of Kirkuk, setting six oil-wells on fire.

The response of the Bush administration and the interim government is stepped-up repression. On the orders of Iyad Allawi, leading clerics who have spoken out against the US assault on Fallujah are being arrested around the country. On Friday, US and government troops raided the Abu Hanifa mosque in Baghdad, killing two guards and arresting over 40 people, including Muayed Adhami, the mosque's prayer leader and a prominent AMS member. In Najaf, a leader of Sadr's movement, Sheik Hashem Abu Raghif, was arrested the same day. On Saturday night, US troops raided the al-Mustafa mosque in Baghdad and arrested another leading Sunni cleric, Douraid Fakhry, in the city of Haqlaniyah.

Dozens of cities and towns are under curfew, including Baghdad, and are being wracked by sporadic fighting. Resistance fighters carried out attacks across the capital over the weekend in retaliation for the raids on the Sunni mosques, killing at least one American soldier and forcing US forces to withdraw from the mainly Sunni suburb of Azamiyah. A local resident told Associated Press: "Baghdad is now a battlefield and we are in the middle of it."

Toby Dodge, a British-based analyst, told the Al Jazeera website: "Insurgency is a national phenomenon fuelled by alienation. I don't think this war is winnable because they have alienated the base of support across Iraqi society."

A US military report, parts of which were leaked to the *New York Times* last week, highlights the growing alarm within the American armed forces over the deteriorating state of affairs in Iraq. The report warned that Fallujah would rapidly fall back under the control of resistance fighters unless American troop numbers were kept up in the area. The US military, however,

does not have enough forces in the country to keep 10,000 troops permanently in Fallujah, and conduct operations against the growing number of rebellious cities. American casualties are also rising. In November so far, 100 troops have been killed and some 800 wounded.

Senator John McCain, who often articulates the views of the US military command, called on Sunday for another 40,000 to 50,000 American troops to be sent to Iraq in order to police the elections. Already, thousands of troops who have served a tour of duty in Iraq are preparing to return to the occupied country over the next several months.



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