

Bush rules out any delay in bogus Iraqi election

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Before the Iraqi elections planned for January 30 get underway, it is clear that the exercise has nothing to do with bringing democracy to the Iraqi people.

Even the date of the poll is being determined in Washington. Last Thursday, speaking to reporters at the White House, US President Bush bluntly dismissed calls from inside Iraq for the election to be delayed. “It’s time for the Iraqi citizens to go to the polls,” he declared.

“It’s one of those moments in history where a lot of people will be amazed that a society has been transformed so quickly from one of tyranny and torture and mass graves to one in which people are actually allowed to express themselves at the ballot,” he added.

Of course, none of the assembled media pointed to the absurdity of Bush’s comments. The “tyranny, torture and mass graves” that have been part and parcel of the US occupation of Iraq are precisely what is fuelling ongoing armed resistance to the American military presence. The election date was set in the wake of the latest US atrocity—the levelling of the city of Fallujah and the indiscriminate slaughter of thousands of resistance fighters and civilians.

As far as the White House is concerned, the essential preparation for the election is an increase by 12,000 in US troop strength to bolster American military operations to suppress armed opposition and intimidate an overwhelmingly hostile population. The Iraqi people will only be able to “express themselves” at a ballot held under US military occupation and for parties and candidates vetted and monitored by US officials.

In three of the country’s 18 provinces, fighting has been so intense that preparations for the January 30 poll have not begun. In the northern city of Mosul, voter registration lists and other election material were destroyed in mid-November when insurgents mounted

a series of concerted attacks and took over police stations and key government buildings.

US ambassador John Negroponte tried to reassure the media last week that security conditions would be “sufficient and adequate” for the election to take place. Over the past three days, however, more than 80 people have died in a wave of attacks on US forces and Iraqi government police and troops. In the deadliest incident on Saturday, a car packed with explosives rammed a mini-bus carrying Kurdish militia who were heading to Mosul to reinforce government forces. At least 18 were killed.

In an interview published in a Dutch newspaper on Saturday, UN special envoy to Iraq Lakhdar Brahimi bluntly warned: “It is a mess in Iraq.” Asked if it would be possible to hold elections, he declared: “If the circumstances stay as they are, I don’t think so.” He called on the “international community” and the US “to help clean up this mess. If you let it deteriorate, the situation will become even more dangerous.”

Brahimi’s comments reflect concerns, particularly in European ruling circles, that the situation in Iraq is rapidly spiralling out of control. Far from stabilising the country, an election held under these circumstances will be widely viewed as illegitimate both inside and outside Iraq.

Opposition to the election is most evident among the country’s Sunni minority, which constitutes about 20 percent of the population. Over the weekend, a meeting of mainly Sunni leaders, representing 40 parties, gathered under the slogan “Flawed Elections, Disputed Results” to call for the election to be delayed. Tawfik al Yassri, leader of Iraqi National Coalition party, told the media: “I warn the two sides that the situation is very serious.” If the poll is seen as illegitimate, he said, “It will be the first seed of civil war.”

A number of parties, including the Association of Muslim Scholars, the Iraqi Turkomen Movement and the Christian Democratic Party, have already gone one step further and called for a boycott of the poll.

Negroponte contemptuously dismissed threats of a boycott last week, warning that the parties would simply be left out in the cold. “Do they really want to opt out of an election process that is going to pick a national assembly that drafts the constitution and shapes the political future of their country?” he asked in comments to the *Chicago Tribune*. “I think once they realise the elections are going forward as planned, they’ll have to deal with that reality.”

The US is nevertheless pulling out all stops to undermine any boycott. The US-installed figureheads—interim prime minister Ayad Allawi and president Ghazi al-Yawar—have both issued statements backing the elections and the current polling date. Allawi made a visit to Jordan last week in an effort to convince Iraqi exiles to lend their support to the election.

Washington is resting on the support of prominent Shiite groups headed by Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who has been pushing for direct elections since the beginning of the year. Sistani and other Shiite leaders calculate that they can win the election by making a sectarian appeal to the country’s Shiite majority, who constitute about 60 percent of the population. With a majority in the national assembly, they are seeking to dominate the process of drawing up a constitution, in preparation for fresh elections at the end of next year.

Sistani has rejected calls for a postponement of the polls. His aides are prominent in drawing up a joint Shiite ticket to contest the election. The main parties involved in the alliance include the Islamic Dawa party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), both of which actively supported the US invasion of Iraq. Representatives of rebel Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, whose militia fought pitched battles with US forces in Najaf and the Baghdad suburb of Sadr City, are also taking part.

Washington can draw little comfort from the fact that this alliance appears set to dominate the election. Sistani and his allies are contesting the poll, and thereby lending it much-needed legitimacy. At the same time, they are compelled to appeal to the sentiments of voters who overwhelmingly want the US

to leave the country. “If we don’t have elections or an elected government then the Americans will stay and our problems will continue,” one Shiite leader Nadeem al-Jabbery argued.

According to an Iraqi Gallup poll cited in *Time* magazine, some 80 percent of respondents wanted American forces out of the country after the January 30 election. The polling was done before the brutal US crackdown in Fallujah, which has inflamed Iraqi opposition to the occupation even further.

Many ordinary Iraqis regard the election with contempt. “Talking about a fair and a successful election is an improbable matter,” a Baghdad professor declared on the *Occupation Watch* web site. “How can we say it is a legitimate election while the occupation forces are in our country? For sure these forces will drive the election on their behalf. How are we to imagine a real election while our towns are being bombarded and civilians are dying every day?”

The mechanics of the election are barely underway. Voter registration has been carried out via forms sent out through the country’s food rationing system—a method that is wide open to rorting. There are just a handful of international officials—20 UN staff and 15 from Jordan—in the country to help prepare the poll. The electoral officials required to man polling booths across the country are yet to be hired, let alone trained.

“I just can’t see how we can hold these elections,” an international consultant told the *Christian Science Monitor*. “We need at least 40,000 people—nine thousand polling stations and four or five people per station. And I just don’t see that happening. The electoral commission just doesn’t have the manpower.”

The election planned for January 30 is a sham. By comparison, the recent election in the Ukraine was a model of democratic process and propriety. Yet, the Bush administration, which has denounced the Ukrainian result, will no doubt declare the Iraq poll to be a great victory for democracy. In both instances, the rhetoric is determined by political expediency and US economic and strategic interests.



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