

Canada to lead chorus of support for sham election in Iraq

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At the behest of the federal Liberal government, Canada's election commission has created and now leads an International Mission for Iraqi Elections (IMIE). The IMIE's ostensible purpose is to determine whether the January 30 vote for a 275-member provisional Iraqi National Assembly and subsequent votes to ratify a new constitution and elect a fresh National Assembly before the year's end are free and fair. But the IMIE's real mandate—as the mission's origins, composition, and conduct demonstrate—is to drum up international support for the sham elections the US is staging in Iraq so as to lend legitimacy to the continuing military occupation of the oil-rich country.

The Canadian government has repeatedly proclaimed its support for the puppet regime Washington has created in Iraq; it has also hailed the US-designed process whereby a parliament is to be elected and a constitution drafted under the watchful eyes of US and British occupation forces as the birth of a “democratic” Iraq. “We all recognize that this is a crucial time in Iraq's political transition,” Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Pierre Pettigrew told the international conference that set up the IMIE. “The best way to ensure Iraq's stabilization is a democratic, inclusive and credible political process.”

For months, Liberal government officials have been touting a Canadian role in organizing and validating elections in Iraq as a means of assuaging Bush administration complaints over Canada's failure to participate in the US-British invasion of Iraq. It had been expected that a Canadian role in organizing and monitoring the coming Iraqi elections would be announced either just before or during US President George Bush's late November visit to Canada. But the growing popular insurgency in Iraq and the inability, therefore, of US military forces to guarantee the safety of Canadian government officials deployed to Iraq meant that the announcement had to be postponed and, ultimately, the scale and scope of the Canadian role significantly curtailed.

Other election-monitoring missions in which Elections Canada has participated have involved on-site monitoring of campaigning, balloting, and vote counting. But the Canadian-led IMIE will be far more “flexible.” In fact, in all likelihood it will have no presence on the ground in Iraq. Rather, its members will “monitor” the elections from their offices and

hotel rooms in the adjacent state of Jordan!

Globe and Mail reporter Lawrence Martin, himself a proponent of Canadian support for Iraq's US-sponsored election, reported this week that Elections Canada head Jean-Pierre Kingsley and his aides “won't be imposing overly harsh criteria” in assessing the elections; indeed, Martin concedes that Kingsley is “setting the bar low.” He won't establish a minimum benchmark for popular participation. Nor will he refrain from proclaiming the elections a legitimate expression of the will of the Iraqi people “even if the [Arab] Sunnis”—who constitute a fifth of the country's total population—“don't vote.”

To claim that the January 30 vote will be anything other than a sham is preposterous. Iraq is under military occupation, the result of an illegal war of aggression, launched on the basis of lies and fabrications. In 22 months of war and occupation, up to 100,000 Iraqis—the vast majority of them civilians—have been killed and whole neighbourhoods, towns and, in the case of Fallujah, an entire city reduced to rubble. Faced with a growing popular insurgency—which the commander of US ground forces in Iraq, Lt. Gen. Thomas Metz, conceded last week would make it impossible to stage the elections in all or parts of four provinces—the Pentagon is considering organizing “El Salvador”-style death squads. These would seek to crush the rebellion by “disappearing” individuals and imposing collective punishments on communities suspected of supporting the insurgents.

Faced with growing international disquiet over the prospects for anything resembling a real election on the 30th, Iraqi interim prime minister Iyad Allawi recently insisted that only “pockets” of the country will not see voting. If this is more than mere bombast, it can only mean that in the final two weeks of “campaigning,” US military forces are going to mount a reign of terror in much of the country, including Iraq's two largest cities, Baghdad and Mosul. Meanwhile, in Kirkuk, the Turkoman minority confronts concerted attempts by Kurdish nationalists to expel them.

Some 70 parties and organizations, including Turkoman and women's organizations, the main Sunni religious body, the Association of Muslim Scholars, and the largest Sunni political party, the Iraq Islamic Party, are calling for the elections to be

either boycotted or postponed on the grounds that genuine elections are impossible when the country is under foreign occupation and rent by insurgency.

The Bush administration, however, will brook no delay, and the Canadian-led IMIE, acting on the orders of Canada's Liberal government, stands ready to give the charade its blessing. In so doing, it will no doubt parrot US claims that violence from "opponents of democracy"—not resistance to US imperialism—kept masses of Iraqis from the polls.

The IMIE was established at a closed-door conference convened by the Canadian government and held in Ottawa last December 19 and 20. The conference was endorsed by the United Nations, which, as the result of a great power consensus that a complete rout of the US in Iraq would dangerously destabilize the Middle East, has emerged as a key bulwark of Iraq's provisional government. Although neither Elections Canada nor the Department of Foreign Affairs published a full list of those who participated, it is known that the US military gave a report to the conference.

Other countries whose election commissions are participating in the IMIE include Britain, the US's closest ally in the conquest of Iraq; Mexico, which like Canada is eager to mollify Washington after balking at joining the "coalition of the willing"; Panama, which in 1989 was itself invaded by the US; and two impoverished Muslim-majority countries, Albania and Indonesia.

Elections Canada reported that it organized the conference in "partnership" with the International Foundation for Election Systems. The IFES is part of a network of so-called civil society organizations created over the past two decades by US corporate leaders and Republican and Democratic Party operatives and which function as an arm of US foreign policy. IFES's boards of directors is chock full of former government officials and politicians such as Robert Livingston, a former leader of the Republicans in the House of Representatives, and Peter Kelly, a former treasurer of the Democratic Party. Among the handful of IFES board members who are not US citizens are the aforementioned Jean-Pierre Kingsley and Andrés Pastrana, who as Colombia's president from 1998 to 2002 was instrumental in implementing the US's Plan Colombia. Launched in the name of fighting drug trafficking and terrorism, Plan Colombia has resulted in intensified state repression in Colombia and facilitated a massive increase in the US military's presence in the Andean region.

Through the IFES, a leading role in the Canadian-initiated election monitoring mission can thus be traced directly back to the US government.

This is far from the first time that the Canadian government has put its carefully cultivated image as a peacekeeper and proponent of democracy and international law at the service of US imperialism. To cite but one example: during the Vietnam War, the Canadian delegation to the International Control Commission, acting on Ottawa's instructions, defended the US-

backed South Vietnamese regime's treaty violations, aided the covert introduction of US military equipment and personnel, supplied intelligence to the CIA, and spotted for US air attacks on Hanoi.

In March 2003, Jean Chrétien, Paul Martin's predecessor as Liberal Party leader and prime minister, scotched plans to have the Canadian Armed Forces join the US-British invasion of Iraq. Chrétien feared the domestic political reaction—the preceding weeks had seen giant anti-war protests, including some of the largest political demonstrations in Canadian history. But his principal concern was to somehow prevent the collapse of the system of inter-imperialist alliances that had underpinned world geo-politics since the beginning of the Cold War and that had provided the Canadian ruling class with a useful means of pressuring and constraining the US.

Since the war's outbreak, however, the Liberal government has been desperate to mend fences with Washington and convince the Bush administration that Canada will be an eager and loyal partner in the development of a Fortress North America. Under Chrétien and, since December 2003, Paul Martin, the Liberal government has decried any discussion of the legality of the US's "pre-emptive" war, announced C\$300 million in reconstruction aid to Iraq, dispatched Canadian troops in ever-greater numbers to prop up the US puppet regime in Afghanistan, announced major increases in military spending and Canadian troop strength, and accorded Bush a lavish and obsequious reception when he visited Canada last November.

In this, the Liberals have had the full support of the Canadian ruling class. If anything, the corporate-controlled media is critical of the government for not moving quickly enough to cement closer ties with Washington and Wall Street. Canadian big business calculates that under conditions of rapidly intensifying competition for markets and profits and great-power geo-political rivalry, it can best defend and assert its predatory interests by forming a still closer partnership with its historic US rivals.

Not coincidentally, the very first agreement Martin negotiated with Bush on becoming prime minister involved the lifting of restrictions on Canadian companies bidding on Iraqi reconstruction contracts.

Elections Canada's role in orchestrating an international chorus of support for the bogus Iraqi elections only serves to underscore the complicity of the Liberal government and the Canadian ruling class in Iraq's bloody, colonial occupation.



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