

The Iraq election: a travesty of democracy

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The January 30 elections in Iraq have nothing to do with democracy. To claim a “free” election can take place in Iraq is no different to asserting that the French, Yugoslav or Greek people could have elected a representative government in 1942 while living under the jackboot of Nazi rule.

Over the past two years, Iraq has been subjected to invasion and a military occupation that has plunged the country into a social and political catastrophe. The Bush administration has brought the Iraqi people 50 to 70 percent unemployment, food and fuel shortages, a breakdown in essential services such as electricity, a collapse in basic law-and-order and dictatorial forms of rule little changed from those of the Baathist regime.

The US invasion of 2003 was launched not to bring “liberation”, but to establish US dominance over the country’s oil resources and transform it into an American client state and military base in the Middle East. Legitimate resistance to the country’s takeover is the main factor behind the guerilla war that has been fought against US forces for close to two years. Due to both Iraq’s experience with colonialism in the twentieth century and the reality of the occupation, millions of Iraqis bitterly oppose the US presence in the country.

The US military and its local collaborators are using the most brutal and indiscriminate methods to crush the Iraqi resistance. Millions of Iraqis daily confront the ordeal of vehicle or personal searches, restrictions on their movement and, in many cities and towns, what amount to dusk-to-dawn curfews. A large percentage of the Iraqi population have had family members or close friends killed, wounded, detained or abused. Thousands have had their homes and property destroyed or damaged.

The high point of the US reign of terror, thus far, was the destruction of the city of Fallujah in November, at the cost of an estimated 6,000 Iraqi lives. Over 250,000 Fallujah residents have been turned into refugees. While the exact number is unknown, over 100,000 Iraqis are estimated to have died since the March 2003 invasion, as well as some 1,500 US and allied occupation troops.

A Human Rights Watch report issued this week provides a timely refutation of claims that a democratic state is in the process of formation in Iraq. The report explains that “abuse of detainees by the [US-recruited] Iraqi police and intelligence forces has become routine and commonplace”. It documents cases of arbitrary arrest and torture, and accuses the US and British governments and the US-installed interim government of Prime Minister Iyad Allawi of “actively taking part”, or being “at least complicit”.

Over 160,000 US and allied troops, along with thousands of locally recruited security forces and more than 20,000 mercenaries—described as “private security contractors”—have maintained martial law. The past two weeks have been marked by an intensification of the repression, aimed at ensuring the election takes place under conditions of intimidation and fear. Curfews have been imposed across the country, the borders will be closed for three days before the ballot and all vehicles banned from the vicinity of polling booths. Last weekend, large-scale round-ups of alleged resistance fighters took place in Mosul.

The American terror has only served to heighten the determination of Iraqis to fight the occupation. While the resistance is made up of disparate

forces, including reactionary Islamic extremist elements, those calling for armed struggle to expel the invaders can justifiably claim to represent the views of a clear majority of Iraqis. The predominantly Sunni Muslim regions of western and central Iraq are effectively war zones. The relative calm in the predominantly Shiite south has only prevailed since September, when a truce ended the popular Shia uprising led by the Mahdi Army of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

Given the sentiments of the Iraqi population and the actual state of affairs in the country, it is uncertain how many people will vote. The low turnout among émigré Iraqis living in North America, Europe and other Middle Eastern countries—who were able to cast ballots over the past week—testifies to the broad hostility, distrust and contempt toward the election. Just 237,000 émigrés registered to vote in 14 countries, out of an estimated one million eligible voters.

The Bush administration claims that any abstention on Sunday will be due, not to political opposition, but to fear of insurgent attacks on polling stations. This clearly did not apply outside Iraq. The fact that before 2003 many émigrés were under the illusion that a US invasion would bring democratic change to Iraq makes their repudiation of the ballot all the more significant.

A major factor in the rejection of the election is the nature of the parties and candidates who are contesting seats in the 275-member Transitional Assembly. Most Iraqis know little about them and what they represent, except that they have the following characteristic in common: they either directly supported the US invasion or have accommodated themselves to the illegal occupation. These tendencies have set themselves in direct opposition to the aspirations of the Iraqi people and collaborated in their repression.

Iyad Allawi and his US-funded Iraqi National Accord (INA) head an electoral alliance known as the Iraqi List. The List has drawn together émigré and local businessmen, tribal leaders and other sections of the Iraqi elite who see collaboration with US imperialism as the means of securing wealth, power and privilege. It appeals to those who believe that the occupation cannot be defeated, by claiming Allawi is a “strongman” who can work with the US military to crush the resistance and bring stability.

The INA has received tens of millions of dollars in financing and assistance from US National Endowment for Democracy affiliates, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs and the International Republican Institute, which have also been involved in financing pro-US candidates in Haiti, the Ukraine and Venezuela.

The most prominent electoral bloc is the Unified Iraqi Alliance (UIA). While it includes Kurdish, Turkomen and Sunni groups, it is popularly known as the Shia List. Its main components are the sectarian Shiite fundamentalist parties—the pro-Iranian Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Da’wa Party—which supported the US invasion. It also includes the Iraqi National Congress of one-time US favourite, Ahmed Chalabi, who played a key role in fabricating the claims that Iraq possessed “weapons of mass destruction”.

Under the Baathist regime, which rested primarily on the Sunni-based elite, the Shiite religious hierarchy was largely sidelined from political power and economic privilege. The UIA aims to harness its influence

among the majority Shiite population to dominate the Transitional Assembly and assert the interests of the Shiite establishment within a US-dominated Iraq. It has been tacitly endorsed by Ali al-Sistani, the most senior Shiite cleric in Iraq, who has issued a religious edict ordering Shiites to vote.

As many as 60 percent of Iraqis adhere, to some degree, to the Shiite branch of Islam. Even among deeply religious Iraqi Shiites, however, support for Sistani and the UIA is far from solid. Many Shiites regard Sistani and the parties in the Shia List as traitors and American collaborators. None of these parties, for example, supported the uprising led by Sadr last year, even as the US military was bombarding the holy Shiite cities of Karbala and Najaf. Moreover, millions of Shia Iraqis, particularly in the urban working and middle class, have long secular traditions. They are hostile to any suggestion of the clergy having a political role and deeply suspicious of SCIRI's links to the Iranian theocracy.

Having endorsed the US invasion, the parties of the UIA are cynically attempting to adapt themselves to the anti-occupation sentiment. Its election platform declares that a date should be set for the withdrawal of US troops—but only when Iraqi forces can replace them. While its platform declares it wants Islamic law to be at centre of Iraq's legal code, UIA spokesmen have been forced to issue repeated reassurances that it opposes an Iranian-style state. Nevertheless, the popular distrust is such that the UIA's claim to overwhelming Shiite support is not credible. A representative of Moqtada al-Sadr's movement in Basra told the *New York Times*: "The other Shiite parties are taking positions that are good for their interests but not for the people. Their actual popularity with the people is almost zero."

In the three predominantly Kurdish provinces of northern Iraq, the Kurdish bourgeois nationalist parties, which have effectively ruled the region under US protection since 1991, have formed a joint electoral bloc called the Kurdistan Alliance. While not explicitly stated, its perspective is the separatist agenda of gaining American backing for a de facto Kurdish state that controls Iraq's lucrative northern oilfields. The Alliance is campaigning for votes almost exclusively among Kurds. Its main platform is to incorporate the region around the city of Kirkuk into the Kurdish sphere and limit the influence of a central Iraqi government in the north.

Kurdish separatism has the potential to trigger ethnic fighting throughout northern Iraq. Clashes have erupted already over accusations that Kurdish militias are attempting to ethnically cleanse Kirkuk of the Arab and Turkomen communities. The International Crisis Group this week warned that tensions between Kurdish armed groups and the non-Kurdish population in Kirkuk have reached the point where "it may take only a minor provocation for open conflict to break out".

The electoral bloc standing the largest slate of candidates is the Peoples Union—an alliance headed by the Stalinist Iraqi Communist Party (ICP). Far from being socialist or communist, the history of the ICP is one of political subservience to various bourgeois regimes, including the Baathists. The consequences for the Iraqi working class have invariably been disastrous.

The ICP and the Peoples Union are cynically appealing to voters with calls for the removal of US troops from Iraq and demands to assist Iraq's workers and poor. But like the Shiite parties, the ICP slavishly supported and justified the 2003 invasion. At the same time, it is using its lingering influence among sections of the Iraqi working class to promote collaboration with the occupation, denouncing all resistance as the work of "Islamic fascists".

The ICP sat on both the interim government and its predecessor, the Governing Council. It has endorsed policies that have produced mass unemployment and the US agenda for the wholesale privatisation of the country's major resources—the oil industry in particular. The utter perfidy

of the ICP is underscored by the fact that it is most likely, in the election's aftermath, to volunteer again to operate as a coalition partner for Allawi's INA.

Numerous other electoral blocs are standing, ranging from advocates of bringing back the monarchy to pro-occupation Sunni groups. In all, as many as 7,200 candidates, organised into 83 electoral blocs, have placed themselves on the ballot.

In many areas of the country, however, particularly where resistance is strongest, little campaigning has been carried out. In four provinces in central and western Iraq with a high proportion of Sunni Muslims, voter turnout may be as low as 20 percent. The provinces include about half Iraq's population and some of the country's major cities—Baghdad province, with the capital; Anbar province, with Ramadi and Fallujah; Ninevah; which includes Mosul, the country's third largest city; and Salahidin, which is centred on Tikrit. In the predominantly Sunni suburbs of Baghdad, just 24 percent of people interviewed in a recent poll said they intended to vote.

Reflecting the mass sentiment against the occupation, dozens of leading Sunni organisations, Shiite leaders such as Sheik Jawad Khalissi, secular associations and groups representing ethnic minorities called last year for a boycott of the ballot.

The Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), consisting of some 3,000 Sunni clerics, as well the largest Sunni-based party, the Iraqi Islamic Party, are advocating a boycott on the principled grounds that no expression of the will of the Iraqi people can take place under occupation. Both organisations are insisting that the prerequisite for a genuinely democratic vote is the withdrawal of all US and foreign troops.

Iraqi Islamic Party secretary-general Tariq al-Hashimi spoke this month in support of his party's boycott call. He stated: "A situation marked by chaos and violence does not favour holding elections that will create a national assembly and even draw up a constitution. This assembly will not be representative of all categories of Iraqi society."

A leading Sunni cleric, Mahmud al-Sumaydi, told his congregation in Baghdad in mid-January: "Everyone looks forward to the day when all Iraqis come out to vote, for elections are an Iraqi matter. But the elections cannot be held on the basis of the marginalisation of one community."

Sadr's movement, while not formally associating with the boycott coalition, is linking itself with the anti-election sentiment with the slogan "no boycott, no participation". Sadr stated this month: "I personally will stay away from the election until the occupiers stay away from them and until our beloved Sunnis participate in them. Otherwise they will lack legitimacy and democracy."

Renewed conflict is inevitable between the occupation and the Shiite working class and urban poor who form the social base of the Sadr movement. In the past two weeks, the Sadrists have sought to keep their influence among the increasingly restive urban poor by organising demonstrations in Baghdad, Karbala, Amarra and other southern Shiite cities. Avoiding any direct opposition to the election, the Sadrists insisted that action against deteriorating social conditions was the main political issue, not the January 30 ballot. The US response was a raid this week on a Sadr-aligned Baghdad mosque and the arrest of dozens of his supporters.

Regardless of the voter turnout, the Bush administration has made clear it will declare the election result an endorsement by the Iraqi people of the US invasion and occupation. Bush stated Thursday the vote would be a "grand moment in Iraqi history".

The reality is that millions of Iraqis will refuse to vote on Sunday, not because of fear, but because they understand the election to be a sham designed to give a "democratic" gloss to an illegal neo-colonial occupation. While paying lip-service to the Iraqi people electing their own government and formulating a new constitution, the actual decisions about the country's future have already been made in Washington. At the top of the list is the dismantling of state control of the oil industry and the

establishment of permanent US military bases.

This week, the Bush administration has gone to Congress for a further \$80 billion to fund the occupation, while the Pentagon has declared that 120,000 US troops will remain in Iraq for at least the next two years. The announcements, made before Iraqis even vote, only underscore the fact that the election will produce nothing more than a puppet regime and that the real decisions about Iraq's future are being made in Washington.

The transitional government that takes office in Baghdad in the aftermath of the ballot should be rejected as illegitimate both in Iraq and throughout the world.



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