

Iraq elections loom as debacle for US occupation

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The elections in occupied Iraq, scheduled to take place on January 30, are looming as a political debacle for the Bush administration. The US objectives are being thwarted by the mass opposition to the American presence in the country and the entrenched insurgency against the occupation.

Under the stipulations of the interim constitution imposed on Iraq by the US in March 2004, the purpose of the coming ballot is the election of a Transitional National Assembly, which will be responsible for drafting a new permanent Iraqi constitution. The constitution is to be voted on by referendum no later than October, followed by another election for the National Assembly no later than December 2005.

Washington's ambition is to produce a puppet government with enough domestic and international legitimacy to be able to sign off on the real aims of the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. These include the establishment of long-term military bases in the Iraq, from which the US can exert strategic hegemony over the Middle East, and the sale to American corporate interests of Iraq's state-owned oil industry—which controls the world's second-largest oil reserves.

Far from winning over the Iraqi people, however, each stage of the US occupation has served to only heighten the resistance to the colonial agenda. Claims that the invasion of Iraq is bringing democracy and liberation to the Iraqi people are largely for propaganda purposes in the US itself. They have little resonance in Iraq, where the US actions have produced a nightmare of death and destruction.

As many as 100,000 Iraqis have been killed since the invasion. Iraqis have witnessed cities like Karbala, Najaf and Fallujah being pounded into rubble. Two years after the fall of Baghdad, the average household in the capital still only gets three hours electricity per day, while fuel shortages are continuous. Unemployment remains over 50 percent and infant mortality has reached the level of poverty-stricken countries like Haiti. Tens of thousands of Iraqis have been detained at various times and, in many cases, subjected to abuse by American troops.

The real face of the occupation is nowhere more clearly seen than in the city of Fallujah. In November it was largely destroyed in order to crush the resistance groups using the city as a base for armed struggle against the US forces and the

interim government. The US estimate of the Iraqi death toll is over 1,600, though the Red Cross has estimated 6,000. More than 250,000 Fallujah citizens have been turned into refugees inside their own country.

Fallujans who have returned to rebuild are being forced to live in a virtual prison camp of checkpoints and curfews. Last weekend, as many as 30,000 Fallujans demonstrated on the outskirts of the city on January 1. Children carried placards reading "Where is my father?", and "Where is my house, liberators?" The impression of a *New York Times* correspondent visiting Fallujah was that it would be "years" before the largely deserted city returned to anything approaching normalcy.

The mass opposition to the occupation guarantees there will be widespread abstention from the January 30 ballot, denying the result any legitimacy. Millions of Iraqis are expected to heed the call by 68 political parties and organisations for a boycott, mainly on the grounds that no genuine election can be held under the barrel of foreign guns and under conditions of a guerilla war. The most prominent advocates of the boycott are the main Sunni Muslim religious body, the Association of Muslim Scholars, and the largest Sunni political party, the Iraq Islamic Party. Other organisations include women's groups, ethnic Turkomen and Christian associations, and the Workers Communist Party of Iraq.

A US State Department survey conducted in Iraqi cities in December found that only 32 percent of Sunnis considered it "very likely" that they would vote, and only 12 percent stated that they viewed the election as legitimate.

Among Iraq's Shiite majority—who comprise close to 60 percent of the population—87 percent told the survey that they felt it "very likely" they would vote. The reason, however, was not sympathy with the US or the occupation, but the stance of Ali al-Sistani, the leading Shiite cleric. Sistani has endorsed a Shiite electoral bloc with the aim of winning a majority and establishing the domination of the Shia religious establishment over the transitional assembly. The weakness of the US position is underscored by the fact 75 percent of surveyed Shiites stated they would not vote if Sistani joined the call for a boycott.

The Shiite supporters of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr—who led an armed uprising against the US forces last April and August—are

also expected to vote in large numbers, especially in the Baghdad suburb of Sadr City. Sadr is believed to be tacitly supporting a large slate of candidates in order to get a number of his loyalists elected into the assembly.

Even with Sistani's and Sadr's blessings, the turnout among Shiites is unlikely to reach anywhere near the level suggested in the December survey. Millions of Iraqis across the country will not vote due to likelihood of widespread attacks on US troops and pro-US Iraqi security forces stationed at the expected 9,000 polling stations. A number of shadowy resistance groups have issued warnings that every polling booth will be considered a target.

The head of the interim government's intelligence agency, General Mohammed Abdullah Shahwani, this week estimated that the insurgency involved at least 40,000 fulltime fighters and as many as 200,000 active sympathisers, informants and part-time guerillas. The resistance effectively controls large areas of territory, including suburbs of Baghdad, Tikrit and the northern city of Mosul, and the province of Anbar, which includes Fallujah. One out of every four US convoys in the Anbar area is ambushed.

Explaining the reasons for the resistance's pervasive support, Shahwani stated: "People are fed up with no improvement. People are fed up with no security, no electricity. People feel they have to do something."

The number of US troops in Iraq has been increased from 138,000 to 150,000 for the elections. As many as 35,000 are positioned in Baghdad alone, working with thousands of US-recruited and trained Iraqi army personnel and police. Despite this, suicide bombings, roadside bombings, mortar strikes, ambushes and assassinations have sharply increased over the past several months. According to figures compiled by the Brookings Institute, 779 US-recruited Iraqi security personnel were killed in October alone, compared with 721 in the entire preceding nine months. In the first week of January over 100 police, interim government soldiers, foreign security contractors, officials and representatives of pro-occupation political parties were killed, with hundreds more wounded.

In one of the most graphic examples of the occupation's vulnerability, guerillas ambushed the governor of Baghdad province in the capital's outer suburbs this week, killing him and a number of his bodyguards. It appears that the resistance fighters knew what roads the governor would be traveling on—further evidence that the insurgency has infiltrated the US-installed state apparatus to the highest levels.

On Thursday, seven American troops in a Bradley armoured fighting vehicle were killed by a massive roadside bomb in Baghdad's northwestern suburbs, taking the US death toll for January thus far to 17. US casualties are now consistently at least two dead and more than 20 wounded per day.

Amid the escalating violence, a 52-year-old government employee told a correspondent for *Iraq Occupation Watch* this month: "I have four children and I fear for their safety, so I will

not go to vote. [T]he members of the parties [participating in the election] are hidden in their headquarters surrounded by concrete blocks... They are conducting their electoral campaign with posters, placards and television advertisements only, but none of them dares to appear among the people in the streets. They are afraid about their own security."

A 31-year-old carpenter declared: "I am not crazy to go and vote. In addition to the bad security situation that will prevent us going to vote, I don't know the views of any of the candidates." A 64-year-old taxi driver stated: "Neither I nor anyone else in my family will go to vote. It is better to stay at home that day because I think many explosions will happen."

Reuters reported yesterday that there are indications many Iraqis will leave the country due to the lack of security, and many police may not show up for work on election day. One officer stated: "The elections will be the worse days in this country, even with all the security preparations. We will be the first targets and I will leave the country next week for Syria. I don't want my children to live without a father and that is what could happen if I stay and do my job."

Sabah Kadham, Iraq's deputy interior minister, complained to the news service: "If people leave the country before the elections and policemen do the same, who is going to vote in the coming polls?"

A number of political figures in Iraq, including the president Ghazi al-Yawar and defence minister Hazem al-Shaalan, have publicly stated a delay in the elections is necessary due to the likely low turnout in many parts of the country. Shaalan told Agence France Presse the boycott calls would mean as much as "one half of (Iraqi) society would be absent from this election and the citizens of Ramadi, Mosul, Tikrit and Diala would not take part".

Following a phone discussion with Bush, however, Interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi has ruled out any delay. Highlighting the fact that the elections have no democratic content, Allawi this week extended until the end of February the state of emergency he declared last November, under which his government has imposed curfews and other martial law-style conditions in many areas of the country.



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