Iraq elections set stage for deeper crisis of US occupation regime

Patrick Martin
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The election January 30 in Iraq marks a further intensification of the contradictions confronting American imperialism, both in Iraq and at home. It will neither resolve the crisis of the American stooge regime in Baghdad, hated and despised by the vast majority of the Iraqi people, nor legitimize the US occupation in the eyes of the world and among large sections of the American public.

George W. Bush emerged from the White House briefly to make a triumphal statement hailing the vote. The US media carried wall-to-wall, gushing coverage all day Sunday. But even the combined propaganda powers of the US government and the corporate-controlled media machine cannot transform an election held at gunpoint and under military occupation into a genuinely democratic event.

Initial reports on voter turnout were driven by the political imperative to put the best possible face on the election and influence public opinion in the United States, which is increasingly turning against the war. The turnout figure began at 90 percent plus—numbers reported, naturally enough, on Fox News. Then an Iraqi election official put the figure at 72 percent nationwide. This was subsequently lowered to 60 percent nationwide, then to 60 percent "in some areas."

The compliant US media dutifully swallowed all these numbers in succession, never challenging their accuracy or questioning how each figure could be so quickly supplanted by a lower one as the day wore on.

The 72 percent figure, for instance, issued just before the polls closed, was inherently improbable, given that most polling places did not even open in the Sunni Triangle. With the vast majority of Sunnis, some 20-25 percent of Iraq's people, boycotting the election, turnout among the rest of the population would have to be near-unanimous to bring the total up to 72 percent.

The reports on turnout were supplemented by television news footage of happy Iraqis celebrating their new-found freedom to vote, praising the American military, and thanking President Bush. There is ample reason to believe that these scenes were largely staged for the benefit of the media—like the scenes of Iraqis tearing down the statue of Saddam Hussein in Firdos Square after the US invasion nearly two years ago. (Similar scenes were a hallmark of the Baathist dictatorship as well, with cheering crowds vowing to sacrifice their lives for Saddam.)

According to Robert Fisk of the *Independent*, a major British daily newspaper, "The big television networks have been given a list of five polling stations where they will be 'allowed' to film. Close inspection of the list shows that four of the five are in Shiite Muslim areas—where the polling will probably be high—and one in an upmarket Sunni area, where it will be moderate." Sunni working class areas were entirely off limits, he noted.

In some cases, the media reports were literally military propaganda handouts. ABC News, for instance, reported thousands of voters in Fallujah, the city virtually destroyed by the US military onslaught last November. The source for this report of surprisingly high turnout was the US military command in the shattered city. Meanwhile, other news outlets put the turnout in Fallujah as minuscule, on a par with the other predominantly Sunni cities where few polls opened and few voters turned out.

The major theme of the media blitz was that the Iraqi people had thronged to the polls in defiance of threats of violence from the insurgent groups opposed to the US occupation. Such coverage ignores the largest purveyor of fear and violence in Iraq by far: the American military occupation, which leveled Fallujah and has blitzed many other Iraqi cities, including Ramadi, Samarra and Mosul, all centers of the Sunni population.

According to Fisk, one of the few credible reporters working in the region, the incessant raids by US ground forces have been supplemented by a new air war: "American air strikes on Iraq have been increasing exponentially. There are no 'embedded' reporters on the giant American air base at Qatar or aboard the US carriers in the Gulf from which these ever increasing and ever more lethal sorties are being flown. They go unrecorded, unreported, part of the 'fantasy' war which is all too real to the victims but hidden from us journalists. The reality is that much of Iraq has become a free-fire zone (for reference, see under 'Vietnam') and the Americans are conducting this secret war as efficiently and as ruthlessly as they conducted their earlier bombing campaign against Iraq between 1991 and 2003, an air raid a day, or two raids, or

three."

The cumulative weight of this violence and destruction is far greater than that of the terror bombs planted by Islamic groups like that allegedly headed by Abu Mussab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian supporter of Osama bin Laden. The US military has killed an estimated 100,000 Iraqis since Bush ordered the invasion in March 2003, a total which dwarfs the casualties caused by terrorist attacks on civilians.

Moreover, the US government and media routinely label all acts of armed resistance against the US invaders, and their stooges in the puppet regime, as "terrorist"—a verbal device designed to criminalize all Iraqi opposition to foreign occupation. In truly Orwellian fashion, the US military occupation, notwithstanding its tactics of torture and mass killing, is identified with "democracy," while those Iraqis who fight against it are, by definition, enemies of democracy, "anti-Iraqi" elements, and even fascists.

There is evidence of direct intimidation of Iraqis by the US military in the course of election day. American soldiers were reported going through the city of Mosul, largely Sunni-populated and a center of insurgent resistance, and seeking out Iraqi non-voters, who could easily be identified by the absence of a semi-permanent ink stain on the thumb. Any Iraqi without such proof of voting was subjected to questioning as to why he had not voted—and no doubt, had his name entered on US intelligence lists of suspected supporters of the resistance, targeted for future arrest or attack.

More fundamentally, the entire election process is fatally tainted by the US military occupation. The regime that conducted the vote was appointed by the US occupation authorities, with the United Nations giving its rubber-stamp approval. The timing and procedures for the election were determined by US officials. And it was President Bush who decided earlier this month to reject the pleas of a majority of the Iraqi cabinet and oppose any postponement of the vote so as to allow for increased Sunni participation.

January 30 saw an unparalleled display of American military power on the streets of Baghdad, Mosul and other Iraqi cities. The 150,000 US troops were out in force, backed by hundreds of armored vehicles, and supplemented by another 150,000 US-trained Iraqi police and soldiers. Even the American media could not disguise the spectacle of Iraqis filing in to the polls through rolls of barbed wire, being frisked three separate times under the eyes of US snipers, while US helicopters and war planes roared overhead.

It was not a scene of freedom, but one of occupation and brutal subordination.

Within Iraq, the January 30 vote sets the stage for greater political conflicts and growing opposition to the US occupation regime. No official results are expected for at least a week, a delay which gives the US-backed regime plenty of time to manipulate the totals.

In the Shiite and Kurdish areas of the south and north, where a large voter turnout was reported, religious and tribal leaders are collaborating with the American occupation in return for promises of political power and financial concessions in a new US-backed regime. Their devil's bargain may produce a regime headed by the United Iraqi Alliance, the main Shiite coalition, with Kurdish support—or they may be defrauded by their American overlords.

The week before the vote saw a rash of reports in the American press that Prime Minister Ayad Allawi's party was gaining. Given the absence of reliable polls or forecasts of voter turnout, such speculation reveals the hopes of the Bush administration, and its effort, in league with the media, to condition public opinion to accept a manipulated outcome engineered by Washington. Allawi's Iraqi National Accord was supported and financed by the CIA for more than a decade, and the former Baathist enforcer is still the favorite of the White House—perhaps as the middleman in a coalition regime embracing both the Shiite and Kurdish parties.

Even should such a coalition emerge, facilitated by the Sunni boycott, Kurdish separatism could quickly break it up. The National Assembly elected Sunday is to draft a constitution in which Shiite demands for majority control will run up against demands for quasi-independence in the Kurdish provinces. An early flashpoint will be the status of Kirkuk, at the center of the rich northern oilfields, with its population evenly divided among Arabs, Turkomen and Kurds, but claimed by the Kurdish parties as part of the future region of Kurdistan.

Within the United States, the government-backed media blitz on the triumph of democracy in Iraq is aimed at intimidating opponents of the war and US occupation. But this propaganda campaign only intensifies the contradictions in the Bush administration's political position. If the Iraqi people have "taken control of their country," as the White House claims, why must 150,000 US troops remain there? Why can't 25 million Iraqis defend themselves from the small bands of foreign terrorists and Saddam Hussein loyalists who supposedly make up the resistance?

"Democratization" is merely the latest pretext for the US occupation, following the now discredited claims that the US invaded Iraq to destroy Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction or because of Saddam's alleged connections with the terrorists who perpetrated the attacks of September 11, 2001. The democracy pretext, too, will be exploded by events.