

WSWS replies to letters on Iraq's election and the US occupation

4 February 2005

Several readers have sent comments and questions about an article by Patrick Martin, "Iraq elections set stage for deeper crisis of US occupation regime," posted January 31, 2005. Below, we publish the letters with a reply by Bill Van Auken.

Although I agree with your two main statements that the election will neither resolve the current crisis of the puppet government nor that it will legitimize the military occupation, I felt that your well-written article was tainted with unsubstantiated hyperbole. The precept that the majority of Iraqis despise their current puppet regime is debatable. There is evidence that there are groups dedicated to their removal, but that does not include all Iraqis. Furthermore, it completely ignored the fact that there were many Iraqis who sincerely felt that the election would bring them hope of a better and, more importantly, a peaceful future. That they were willing to risk their lives in order to do so proves their enthusiasm. You mention that many Iraqis felt pressured to vote by the military occupation, but you leave out the threats that militant groups made to those that would vote. I write to you not to defend the election, but rather to point out the lack of objectivity in the article.

Thank you.

AA New Mexico, US

I really like your scientific analyses of the political situation of the world done by different writers. I also like very much Marxist analysis of the US policy and imperialism. They are impressive. But I get confused when I read your analyses on Iraq. They seemed to be more tilted towards Sunnis of Iraq. I don't believe in sectarianism, but the fact is that Sunnis were more privileged people during the Baath and Saddam regime in Iraq. And Shias were oppressed people during that period. I wonder, why do you forget in your analyses that Shias of Iraq were ruthlessly repressed by Baathists led by Saddam Hussein? Naturally, they have no choice but to oppose any change in the balance of power in Iraq. If the American army had espoused the political cause of Sunni minority in Iraq, then America would have been the darling of Sunnis in Iraq. But unfortunately that did not happen. So they turned against America.

Moreover, since when have Osama and his likes, such as Zarqawi, been heroes of socialist people like the regular contributors of WSWS? Moreover, why do you sound like Tariq Ali and Robert Fisk?

There is no doubt that America is an occupying force in Iraq, but if America had not been there, you could never have had elections in Iraq. Can you show any Arab dictatorial regime capable of holding elections? After having read your analyses and criticism on Iraq elections, I am "tempted" to believe that "Democracy is a product of capitalist culture," and perhaps it has nothing to do with Socialism. Please, you must try to understand what's happening in Iraq. Do not try to interpret Iraq situation from a Sunni-Baathist Arab's point of view. Please try to be scientific, which is your claim as well.

SI

Surrey, UK

Why must the socialist atmosphere be so hostile against freedom and

democracy? The elections in Iraq may have been due to controversial circumstances, but the fact that they occurred is reason for any freedom-loving individual, socialist or not, to celebrate. The voter turnout of this election was at 60 percent. That rivals most American presidential elections. In fact, it dwarfs the 1996 election, with only 49 percent of eligible Americans coming out to vote. Americans do not have to fear kidnapping, beheading, or death if they vote. The Iraqis did have these fears, and yet they came out to vote in vastly superior numbers than anyone had thought. Continue the socialist cause, but do not spin a triumphant event such as this into something that needs to be scrutinized instead of cherished.

Thank you.

MD

Colorado, US

Bill Van Auken replies:

The US government and the corporate-controlled media have conducted a massive propaganda campaign to sell the elections in Iraq as a triumph for democracy and freedom. The purpose of this campaign is to undermine the deep opposition to the US occupation that exists within the United States itself and legitimize a predatory war that was launched on the basis of lies.

Such campaigns have their effect on popular consciousness, even among those who oppose the Bush administration and hold the media in general contempt. That is precisely why the principal task of the *World Socialist Web Site* is—despite the objection of our last correspondent—to treat this election precisely as "something that needs to be scrutinized instead of cherished."

A free election and a genuine expression of the popular will are incompatible with foreign military occupation. To claim otherwise is to make a mockery of democracy. It represents a revival of the cynical rationalizations and justifications for colonialism that prevailed a century ago. That such elementary principles are either rejected or ignored by all sections of the political establishment and the mass media is a manifestation of a profound and reactionary retrogression, and a deep decay of democratic institutions within the United States.

As Patrick Martin pointed out in his article: "...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."

Candidates were unknown to the public and, for the most part, unnamed until the day of the vote, and the entire operation was conducted under a state of siege enforced by US firepower.

So flawed were the forms of the election, even the Carter Institute, headed by the former US president, Jimmy Carter, refused to participate, on the grounds that the conditions did not exist for a legitimate vote.

What of the election's content? How has the vote changed things in Iraq? Has it led to any expansion of democratic rights, or given the Iraqi

people greater power? The US military remains the real ruler of Iraq.

The day after the election, just like the day before, Iraqi towns and villages are subject to bombardment by US military aircraft. Ordinary people face the prospect of being summarily shot or thrown into detention camps without charges or trials, to face abuse and torture.

The struggle for genuine democracy means a fight for freedom of the press and the right to strike and assemble—all of which the US occupation ruthlessly suppressed before the election and will continue to do so afterwards. It means the right of a people to determine their own future, free of external compulsion.

The ultimate purpose of the election, from Washington's point of view, is to legitimize a continued US occupation and the installation of a regime under the tutelage of the US military—a puppet government that will sign agreements granting the Pentagon permanent bases in Iraq and ceding to the US-based oil conglomerates a controlling interest in the country's massive petroleum reserves. Officials of the Iraqi Interim Government recently revealed that legislation has already been drafted to turn over the country's oil industry to the likes of Occidental, ExxonMobil and Chevron-Texaco.

Numerous polls have shown 80 percent or more of Iraqis favoring the withdrawal of all US occupation forces from their country—which is why this question was not on the January 30 ballot. However, a number of parties—including the Shiite-backed United Iraqi Alliance, which is expected to poll a plurality, if not a majority of the vote—did demand an end to the US military presence in the run-up to the election. As a consequence, many of those who turned out at the polls did so in the belief that the election of an Iraqi assembly would lead rapidly to an end to the American occupation.

Yet the Bush administration touts the election as a vindication of that very occupation, and will undoubtedly use the vote as the justification for an even bloodier counterinsurgency campaign.

To hold elections under military occupation represents, in the final analysis, the continuation and deepening of a war crime. It is a blatant violation of international law. The 1907 Hague Convention, the basic law governing the conduct of occupying powers, expressly prohibits the occupiers from imposing any permanent changes in the form of government and laws of the occupied territory. The government that emerges from the January 30 election will be no more “sovereign” than the Quisling regimes established by the Nazis in occupied Europe during World War Two.

The US occupation dictated the rules of the election, and has already imposed a state structure that leaves key levers of power in US hands. US “advisors,” who take their orders from the fortified US embassy complex in Baghdad, have been installed in every government ministry, exercising effective control over all aspects of policy. The Transitional Administrative Law (TAL) imposed under Washington's former colonial proconsul in Iraq, Paul Bremer, remains the law of the land, and can be changed only by a two-thirds vote of the new national assembly, together with the unanimous support of the three-member presidency that this assembly will choose.

This setup, requiring a two-thirds majority for any significant decision, is designed to allow Washington the greatest possible leverage in exerting its control. It means that a minority—such as the forces around US puppets like Iyad Allawi—will be in a position to block any legislation not to the liking of their American patrons.

As a further impediment to changing the legal and constitutional structure dictated by Washington, the US has handpicked the Iraqi judiciary. The newly formed supreme court has the power to overrule legislation as well as decisions taken by the presidency if they conflict with the TAL. Similarly, control commissions that exercise supervisory powers over key aspects of the government have been put in place. Those appointed to these panels by Bremer—for the most part CIA-connected

exiles—enjoy five-year terms.

The US-imposed TAL also includes sweeping provisions for the privatization and foreign takeover of Iraq's economy.

In the end, the US occupation continues to exercise a monopoly of military power and remains the principal source of funding for governmental operations in Iraq, with a vast pool of money for bribing elected officials. According to one recent report, up to \$9 billion in US “reconstruction” funds are unaccounted for—much of it apparently having been funneled into payoffs and kickbacks.

What will result from the irreconcilable contradiction embodied in the election between the desires of the Iraqi people for peace and liberation from foreign occupation, on the one hand, and the strategic aims of US imperialism, on the other? Ultimately, it will be a brutal intensification of the colonial-style war.

One of the letter writers, SI, suggests that our analysis of the events in Iraq is “tilted towards the Sunnis” and makes heroes of the likes of Osama bin Laden and Zarqawi. This criticism has no basis either in the article by Patrick Martin or the long record of the WWS on these questions. The criticism boils down to an amalgam based on the following specious premise: the Islamists have denounced the election and the occupation; the WWS has also denounced the election and the occupation; therefore, the WWS supports the Islamists.

The Socialist Equality Party, which publishes the WWS, has opposed the US attacks on Iraq and warned of Washington's colonial objectives in the region since the run-up to the first Persian Gulf War of 1990-1991. Our opposition to US imperialism is based on the interests of the international working class and the struggle for socialism, which are diametrically opposed to the retrograde program of the Islamist groups. We have frequently denounced the reactionary policies and tactics of these groups, warning that the deliberate targeting of civilians and beheading of hostages serve the interests of imperialism.

The fact remains, however, that the January 30 election is the product of US imperialism's attempts to manipulate sectarian divisions within Iraq in order to prop up its own colonial project. For this reason, the vote has deepened the danger of civil war along ethnic and religious lines.

The holding of an election was neither Bush's first nor second choice. Initially, Washington hoped to turn over power directly to its stooge Ahmed Chalabi and a government of exiles. This proved untenable, however, and Bremer worked out a complicated scheme involving the US appointment of regional councils to draft a new constitution and select an executive branch.

This scheme was rejected by the Shiite leadership, which organized mass demonstrations demanding an election based on universal suffrage. Facing a growing insurgency centered in the Sunni-dominated region of central Iraq, Washington was desperate to avoid confronting an even larger revolt by the Shiite majority population. It therefore agreed to elections, and the implicit promise of power to the Shiite parties.

This deal determined the composition of the electorate on January 30, with a sizeable turnout among the Shiites—whose principal ayatollah, Ali Sistani, declared it a religious duty to vote—and a largely effective boycott by the Sunni population. There was also a substantial turnout by Kurds in the North, where the vote was seen largely as a referendum on Kurdish autonomy, if not outright independence.

There is no doubt that the US war in Iraq, along with the punishing economic sanctions that preceded it, have decimated the country's social foundations, economy and infrastructure, and exacerbated sectarian loyalties and divisions. Under these conditions, an election can produce decidedly anti-democratic results, as the disintegration of Yugoslavia at the end of the 1980s demonstrated. The vote in Iraq has the potential for encouraging Balkan-style “ethnic cleansing” in cities like Kirkuk and elsewhere.

The complex Kurdish question and the Shiite demand for equality

cannot be resolved within the confines of the Iraqi capitalist nation state, much less one that is militarily occupied by US imperialism.

The struggle for a genuinely democratic solution requires the unification of the working class across sectarian lines and across the artificial borders drawn by European colonialism, in a united struggle to expel imperialism and establish control over the vast oil wealth, so as to eradicate conditions of poverty and oppression. The first step in this struggle is the demand for the complete and unconditional withdrawal of all US and other foreign troops from Iraq. Such is the basis of the principled attitude taken by the *World Socialist Web Site* to the January 30 election.



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Socialist Equality Party visit:

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