

Iraq election sets stage for escalating political turmoil

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The Iraq election on January 30 has resolved none of the political dilemmas facing the US occupation and created a series of new ones.

The election has been presented as a blow to the anti-occupation insurgency. Before the results are even counted, however, it is clear that in the Sunni Muslim areas of central Iraq where the resistance is most active, millions of Iraqis followed the calls for a boycott of the ballot.

In the northern city of Mosul, Iraq's third largest and the scene of heavy fighting over the past three months, just 50,000 people out of 500,000 eligible voters participated. The turnout was primarily in Kurdish suburbs. An almost total abstention took place in Fallujah, which was largely destroyed by the US military in November at the cost of an estimated 6,000 Iraqi lives. Only 4,000 to 5,000 voted in Tikrit, while just hundreds are believed to have voted in cities such as Ramadi and Samarra. Low turnouts have also been reported from Sunni towns to the south of Baghdad and some of the main Sunni suburbs of the capital. While no exact estimate has been made, it is believed that just 10 percent of Iraq's Sunni population cast a vote.

There is little doubt that a significant number of Iraqis did not vote in the Sunni areas due to fear of insurgent attacks on polling stations or reprisals by guerilla groups. The dominant factor though, was opposition to the occupation. The Sunni population has suffered immensely since the US invasion in March 2003. Tens of thousands have been killed, maimed, abused or stripped of their employment and social position. The main Sunni religious and political organisations called for the boycott on the grounds no genuinely democratic vote can take place under an occupation that is seeing the Sunni regions of the country endure daily repression at the hands of the American military.

The Association of Muslim Scholars, the organisation of some 3,000 Sunni clerics which led the boycott agitation, has already issued a statement declaring the election illegitimate. The statement read: "These elections lack legitimacy because a large segment of different sects, parties and currents with their influence in Iraq boycotted. This necessarily means that the coming National Assembly and the government that will emerge from it will not possess the legitimacy to enable them to draft the coming constitution."

As if to answer the assertions that the election would lessen the intensity of guerilla actions against the occupation, a wave of attacks has taken place on US troops and Iraqi forces in the past four days.

After the initial inflated claims regarding voter turnout—such as Fox News' reports of 90 percent—observers are now estimating that some eight million people, or 57 percent of eligible voters, participated across Iraq. The largest turnouts were among Shiite and Kurdish Iraqis.

In the three predominantly Kurdish provinces of northern Iraq, an estimated 2.1 million people voted—overwhelmingly for the coalition of Kurdish bourgeois parties contesting the ballot as the Kurdish Alliance.

Across Iraq's south, large numbers of Shiites turned out. In major Shiite centres such as Basra, Nasiriyah, Karbala and Najaf, as well as Shia areas of Baghdad, long queues developed at polling stations. In some areas, so

many voted that polling stations ran out of ballot papers. Iraq's interim president Ghazi al-Yawar reported on February 2 that "tens of thousands were unable to cast their votes because of the lack of ballots in Basra, Baghdad and Najaf".

As many as 60 percent of Iraqis are classified as adherents of the Shia branch of Islam. The majority of Shiite votes flowed to the Unified Iraqi Alliance (UIA) or what was popularly known as the *Shia List*—a coalition based around the largest sectarian Shiite fundamentalist parties, the pro-Iranian Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Da'wa Party, as well as the previously US-sponsored Iraqi National Congress (INC) led by Ahmed Chalabi. The UIA was supported by the most senior Shiite cleric in Iraq, Ali al-Sistani, who issued a *fatwa* or edict making it a religious duty for Shiites to participate in the ballot. The cleric's image was used in most of the List's election posters and propaganda.

According to figures released on Friday from 10 predominantly Shiite-populated southern provinces, the UIA had won at least two-thirds of total votes counted. Once national totals are tallied, it is predicted to win at least 45 to 50 percent of the seats in the 275-member Transitional Assembly. The Kurdish parties may end up with 25 percent of the seats. The Iraqi List coalition headed by US-installed interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, and the Peoples Union coalition headed by the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), are both registering around 10 percent support in early counting.

The raw voting numbers, however, explain nothing about the sentiments of the Shiite and Kurdish masses and why they, in contrast to the Sunni population, took part in the election.

For a range of historical factors, the majority of contemporary Iraq's working class and rural poor are Shiite or Kurdish. Their aspirations for social equality and democratic, national and religious rights had an explicitly left wing and secular character.

For decades following the overthrow of the British and US-backed monarchy, millions of Iraqi workers, whether Shiite, Sunni or Kurdish, gave their political allegiances to the Stalinist Communist Party, wrongly believing it to be a genuine socialist and anti-imperialist organisation. Shia fundamentalism and Kurdish nationalism only began to develop significant support after the bloody Baathist suppression of the working class in 1978. The bloodbath was directly facilitated by the refusal of the ICP to conduct an open struggle against the regime, which it had promoted as representing the progressive wing of the ruling elite.

The voting patterns last Sunday can only be understood in the context of this complex history. The election was not an endorsement of the US invasion and occupation. It was above all a reflection of the confused but deeply-held aspirations of ordinary Iraqis for lasting social change and an end to decades of political repression.

The parties making up the *Shia List*, along with Sistani, promoted the illusion that the election would be the means both for bringing a quick end to the American military presence in Iraq and for creating a government

that will be attentive to the outstanding social needs of the millions of Shiite working class and rural poor.

Similarly, the Kurdish bourgeois parties campaigned on the basis that the reorganisation of Iraq under the US occupation will lead to an autonomous or fully independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq that would ensure the Kurds never again suffer persecution. Moreover, by establishing control of Iraq's northern oilfields around the city of Kirkuk, it would deliver improved living standards.

None of these promises can or will be delivered. The illegal invasion in 2003 was not launched by the Bush administration to end the oppression of Iraqi Shiites, Kurds or anyone else. The objectives of the war were and remain to transform the country into a US client state in the Middle East and turn over its energy resources to US-based oil conglomerates. To achieve its ends Washington is prepared to offer minor concessions to factions of the Iraqi ruling class, but it will not accept any demands that conflict with its geopolitical and economic ambitions in the region.

The electoral success of the Shiite and Kurdish parties has therefore placed them on a collision course both with US imperialism and with the very layers who voted for them. They will only retain US backing to the extent they carry out Washington's dictates, and in doing so, will be increasingly exposed in the eyes of those who voted for them.

The Kurdish parties already face discontent over the issue of Kurdish control of Kirkuk and the surrounding oilfields. Washington at this point is insisting the Kurds accept that northern Iraq can never be anything more than an autonomous zone, with no substantial economic resources. Turkey has implicitly threatened military intervention into Iraq to prevent any move toward an independent and oil-rich Kurdish state, fearing it would fuel the separatist sentiment among the country's own substantial Kurdish minority. A Turkish-Kurdish conflict would plunge the region into protracted turmoil and seriously undermine US interests.

By encouraging Kurdish separatist sentiment in Iraq over the past 15 years, however, the US has let loose forces it cannot easily control. A Kurdish tribal leader, for example, told the *Los Angeles Times* this week: "Talabani and Barzani [the main Kurdish leaders] must not give up Kirkuk. If they do, the people will split with them. We won't accept that. We want it to be resolved peacefully, but if not, we've already lost a lot of lives over Kirkuk and we're willing to lose a lot more. The oil of Kirkuk will sustain us and we will not abandon it."

The Kurdish nationalist poet Sherko Bekas told the *Los Angeles Times*: "I'm disappointed in US policy toward the Kurds. The US is not reading Iraq accurately." Agitation for a separate state is intensifying in northern Iraq, with demands for a referendum.

Tensions are also already apparent between the Shiite masses and the Shia List parties. Even before the election took place, the Shia parties had effectively repudiated their call for the withdrawal of foreign troops by declaring that it should only take place when the US-sponsored Iraqi government had sufficient troops to replace them. The backwardness of the country, combined with the plunder of the country's wealth by foreign corporate interests, precludes any serious agenda to address the social issues of the population—from the pervasive unemployment, to the lack of basic infrastructure, to the general poverty. The Shiite masses, in other words, will gain nothing from a puppet regime dominated by the Shia elite.

In a sign of impending unrest, Moqtada al-Sadr, the clerical leader of the Shiite uprising against the US occupation last year, issued a statement this week directly challenging Sistani and the Shia List over their compromise on the issue of removing American troops.

Sadr has manoeuvred since agreeing to a ceasefire with the US military last September, tacitly accepting the occupation while trying to maintain his support base among the Shiite urban poor with demagogic criticisms of the US. His statement is a further sign that his base is becoming increasingly angry at the refusal of the Shiite establishment to openly fight

against the US occupation.

Sadr declared: "I call on all religious and political powers that pushed the elections and took part in them to issue an official statement calling for a timetable for the withdrawal of the occupation forces from Iraq. I stood aside from the elections but did not stand against them as I did not want to show disobedience toward the Marjaiyah [the religious council headed by Sistani]. I did not join these elections, however, so I wouldn't be one of the West's pawns."

The election outcome will have tremendous implications as the year progresses. Alongside a continuing insurgency in the Sunni regions, conflicts are inevitable between the US occupation and the Shiite and Kurdish populations.

Moreover, it will take place under conditions where the political mechanisms put in place by the US following the invasion have become largely untenable. The Transitional Administrative Law imposed on Iraq by the US in March 2004 defined a series of steps: the election just held; the formation of a transitional government; the formulation of a constitution by the Transitional Assembly; a referendum to endorse the document; and, finally, an election for the first National Assembly by January 2006.

This entire process is surrounded by doubt. The administrative law included a clause that allowed a "No" vote by two-thirds of voters in just three of the country's 18 provinces to prevent the adoption of a new constitution. The clause was inserted to force the Shiite religious hierarchy, and those sections of the Sunni-based elite, which are also collaborating with the occupation, to accept a large measure of self-rule in the three Kurdish northern provinces. If they did not, the vote in the Kurdish provinces alone could defeat any proposed constitution. By way of compromise, the Kurds were denied Kirkuk and the northern oilfields.

The conflicts between the competing factions in Iraq will re-emerge as attempts begin to formulate a permanent constitution. The potential exists for a complete political breakdown and raises the prospect of civil war. Even if a constitution is developed, it risks being rejected out-of-hand by the majority of one or more of the three main communities. The statement by the Association of Muslim Scholars this week indicates that the leading Sunni organisations will not participate in drafting the document and will call for its rejection in any referendum.

The predatory aims of the US invasion of Iraq always portended that American imperialism would have to suppress the unresolved democratic, social and national questions in the country and throughout the Middle East. Washington has no more answer to them than the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. US domination over Iraq can only be maintained by ever-greater repression and terror.



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