Iraq election results reflect broad hostility to US occupation

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The official results of the Iraq election have exposed much of the hype that emanated from the Bush administration and the media in the wake of the poll.

Even through the highly distorted prism of a vote held under US military occupation, it is evident that the vast majority of Iraqis do not support the political stooges installed by Washington in Baghdad. Far from being a vindication of the US-led invasion, the outcome has confirmed that most Iraqis do not believe that American soldiers are bringing "peace" and "democracy" to the country.

According to official figures, just over half the eligible voters—58 percent—cast a ballot. In four predominantly Sunni provinces, the turnout was far lower. In Anbar, to the west of Baghdad, where there has been fierce and mounting armed resistance to the US invasion, just 2 percent of voters went to the polls. Like other areas of the so-called Sunni Triangle, it has borne the brunt of US military strikes. Tens of thousands have been killed and maimed or arbitrarily detained and tortured.

In the three other Sunni provinces, the higher turnout reflected the presence of significant minorities. In the northern Nineveh province, the figure was 17 percent, most of the voters being Shiites and Kurds. In Diyala, where about a third of the population is Shiite, the turnout was 33 percent. In Salahaddin, also with a substantial Shiite minority, it was 29 percent. The only conclusion that can be drawn is that just a tiny fraction of the country's Sunnis, who make up about 20 percent of the country's population, took part in the election.

Such is the depth of the resentment, hostility and anger at nearly two years of US attacks that most Sunnis heeded the call of the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS) and various resistance groups not to vote. The AMS, an association of around 3,000 Sunni clerics, issued a public statement denouncing the election as illegitimate.

The main winners in the election were the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA)—a predominantly Shiite coalition—and the Kurdistan Alliance (KA)—comprising the two major Kurdish bourgeois parties. The UIA received about 48 percent of the vote and the KA some 26 percent. The number of seats each grouping receives will only be finalised after any electoral challenges are settled. It is estimated, however, that the UIA will get 140 seats in the 275-member National Assembly and the KA will have 75 seats.

The UIA includes the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and the Dawa Party, both of which are sectarian Shiite parties that seek to establish some form of Islamic state. The other major coalition partner is the Shia Political Council headed by Ahmed Chalabi—a longtime US "asset" who fell out of favour with Washington last year. While all three groups fully supported the US invasion, the UIA had to distance itself from the occupation in the course of the campaign. Such is the depth of anti-US hostility that the Shiite leaders appealed to voters to support the UIA as the means of ending the American presence.

Not only did the UIA have the public backing of Iraq's most senior Shiite cleric—Ali al-Sistani—but the tacit approval of rebel cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who gained a significant following during the Shiite uprising against the US military last year. While he has been critical of the UIA for not being sufficiently firm over a date for US withdrawal and personally did not stand in the election, al-Sadr has not condemned this conservative pro-US alliance. According to an analysis in *Forbes* magazine, 12 individuals loosely connected to al-Sadr have been elected on the UIA list.

Significantly, the UIA did not capture all the Shiite votes. The current US-installed prime minister Iyad Allawi was able to make inroads into the UIA vote through a campaign focussed on its sectarian policies and its Iranian connections. Many Iraqi Shiites have a secular outlook and no desire to establish a theocratic state along the lines of the Iranian regime. As a result, whatever their misgivings about Allawi and the US occupation, a layer of Shiite voters backed the prime minister and other secular parties. Allawi won nearly 615,000 votes—more than half his total—in Baghdad and the southern Shiite city of Basra.

In the north of the country, Kurds turned out and voted

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overwhelmingly for the KA. Like the Shiite majority, the Kurdish minority was led to believe that the election would be a means of ending their long history of oppression. KA leaders fostered the illusion that the US occupation would lead to an autonomous or even fully independent Kurdish region that would end persecution and poverty.

The election results have proven to be a devastating blow for those most openly identified with the US-backed puppet regime in Baghdad—above all Allawi. Even with the implicit backing of Washington and the heavily controlled media in Iraq, his political grouping—the Iraqi List—was only able to muster 14 percent of the vote and a probable 20 seats. Without his aggressive campaign against the UIA, the figure would have been even lower. Allawi's vote indicates the real social base of support for the US occupation—less than 14 percent of those who voted, or about 7 percent of Iraqis.

Iraqi president Ghazi al-Yawar fared even worse. His party—the Iraqis List—gained less than 2 percent of the vote and some five seats. Yawar is a prominent figure among one of the main Sunni tribes. Another senior Sunni politician, Adnan Pachachi, who has been paraded around the world by the US as a representative of the Iraqi people, garnered just 12,728 votes and will get no National Assembly seats. Yawar and Pachachi blame the Sunni boycott for their poor result. In reality, the outcome reveals that these figures have no credibility in the eyes of most Iraqis.

The lack of support for the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) demonstrates that it has all but lost its previous substantial base in the working class. The party consummated a long history of opportunist manoeuvres and alliances, including at one point with the Baathists, by backing the US invasion of Iraq and then joining Washington's puppet administration in Baghdad. Despite an extensive election ticket, the ICP, which campaigned on secular nationalism, not socialism, gained just 70,000 votes and two seats.

Following the announcement of the election result, the wheeling and dealing to form the next government has intensified. Under the framework put in place by the US occupation, a two-thirds majority is necessary to choose the president and two vice-presidents, who in turn select the prime minister. The cabinet chosen by the prime minister then requires majority approval in the National Assembly. This complex, indirect system strengthens the hand of smaller parties by effectively handing them a means of vetoing the government.

While it gained the largest vote and the most seats, the Shiite UIA will fall well short of a two-thirds majority, forcing it to make a deal either with the Kurdish leadership or with Allawi. A possible trade-off is being mooted that would make Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leader Jalal Talabani president, in return for a UIA leader becoming the new prime minister. Efforts are being made to include Sunni figures such as Pachachi or Yawar to give the next government a more representative veneer.

All these petty calculations ignore the deep divisions that exist between and within the major groupings. Far from resolving the democratic and national questions that were suppressed by the Baathist regime, the US occupation has opened up and exacerbated longstanding sectarian and ethnic grievances in the Iraqi ruling elites. The Kurdish leadership's demand for autonomy is incompatible with the ambitions of the Shiite establishment for hegemony in a united, centralised Iraq. The conflict is highlighted by the bitter struggle among Kurdish, Sunni Arab and Turkomen groups for control of the northern city of Kirkuk and its oil fields.

Moreover, the electoral alliances were nothing more than temporary political marriages of convenience. Within the Kurdish Alliance, the PUK and the Kurdistan Democratic Party are bitter rivals, which fought each other in the mid-1990s for dominance of the country's northern areas. Similarly, the UIA contains competing factions of the Shiite elite. All of these inherent tensions will only worsen as the national assembly and the next government confronts the task of drawing up a new constitution.

The parties that form the next government face a more fundamental dilemma. The real power to make decisions will remain in Washington, not Baghdad. Even in formal terms, the next government is severely constrained by the framework put in place by the US occupation authority. The Bush administration did not invade Iraq to improve the lot of the Iraqi people but to open up the country, above all its oil, to US companies and to establish a permanent US military presence.

As the new administration colludes in implementing the US agenda, it will inevitably earn the same contempt and hostility as its predecessor and confront growing opposition and resistance.

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