

Vietnam 1967 & Iraq 2005: using elections to justify criminal wars

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Voters turned out in unexpectedly high numbers, defying terrorists in an act of collective bravery that marked a historic triumph in the struggle for democracy and a turning point in the long and bloody US military operation thousands of miles from American shores.

Iraq, January 2005? No, this was the story pitched by the government and the US media to the American public more than 37 years ago after the people of South Vietnam went to the polls in an election engineered by Washington to legitimize its imperialist intervention in that country.

While the differences between Vietnam and Iraq are many, the similarities between the way in which Washington organized, manipulated and exploited elections in both countries to further its own strategic aims are all too evident.

“US encouraged by Vietnam Vote,” was the headline of the *New York Times* September 4, 1967, the day after the ballots were cast.

“United States officials were surprised and heartened today at the size of the turnout in South Vietnam’s presidential election despite a Vietcong terrorist campaign to disrupt the voting.”

Washington and its puppet regime claimed an 83 percent turnout among the 5.85 million South Vietnamese registered voters.

“The size of the popular vote and the inability of the Vietcong to destroy the election machinery were the two salient facts in a preliminary assessment of the national election,” the *Times* added.

The day after the vote, the administration of US President Lyndon Johnson hailed the election as a “major step forward,” declaring that the South Vietnamese people had expressed their democratic will and “deserve our support.”

Substituting the word “Iraq” for “Vietnam,” the same news stories, editorials and speeches could have been dusted off this past week and reused virtually unchanged.

In her incisive 1972 book on the US intervention in Vietnam, *Fire in the Lake*, Frances Fitzgerald commented on the way in which the Johnson administration and the media presented the Vietnamese election to the American people:

“The message, as received by the American public, was that the United States was generously bringing all the virtues of its own political system to this underdeveloped country, that it was creating a democracy to win the Vietnamese people away from Communist totalitarianism. So clear was the message that none of the distinguished Americans arriving to view the elections remembered that the embassy and the Ky government agreed to elections in the first place only under the threat of defection of the entire northern half of the country and total anarchy in Saigon.”

Once again, the parallels are striking. While Bush basks in the reflected glory of the turnout at the Iraqi polls, virtually no one in the media bothers to recall the unpleasant fact that Washington agreed to the election only under duress. It was organized in order to defuse a full-scale uprising by the Shiite population, whose principal religious figure, Ayatollah Ali Sistani, had demanded a popular vote. Initially, the US administration planned on installing its stooge Ahmed Chalabi and similar CIA operatives in power. Later, occupation authority chief Paul Bremer hatched a plan for a handpicked US council to form a government.

Having been forced to hold such an election—both in Vietnam and Iraq—the US administration turned it into a propaganda vehicle designed to suppress the mounting popular opposition at home to American military intervention.

Which of these two elections represented a greater travesty is a hard call. In Vietnam, the vote was run under the combined thumbs of the US military—whose numbers were climbing toward the half-million mark—and the

corrupt and repressive South Vietnamese military junta of Marshal Nguyen Cao Ky. Prospective candidates deemed to be communists or “neutralists” were barred from running.

In the end, despite these tight controls, the US-backed generals failed to win a majority of the vote, securing a plurality only through frenzied last minute stuffing of the ballot boxes. Opposition candidates who protested the election as illegitimate were jailed.

While the results of the Iraq vote are yet to be announced, the process is if anything even less legitimate. Held under a military occupation resulting from an illegal war of aggression, the organization of the vote is itself the continuation of a war crime. It was prepared without any semblance of an election campaign in which rival programs were put before the Iraqi people. Even the names of the bulk of the candidates were kept secret until the day ballots were cast.

And, as even the US media cannot conceal, the process was largely boycotted by the Sunnis, who make up 20 percent of Iraq’s population and have played the central role in Iraqi political life for over a century.

More fundamentally, it is inherently impossible for a people occupied by a foreign power that exercises an unrestrained military dictatorship to make anything approaching a democratic decision.

There is no doubt that in Vietnam, as in Iraq, people turned out to vote for their own reasons. In both countries, one of the principal motivations was the conception that the election could somehow lead to the end of the killing and the withdrawal of US occupation forces.

In Vietnam, any popular illusions on this score were quickly dashed. As Fitzgerald noted in her book, “However they voted, whatever they said, the generals and the Americans would continue to rule the country. Rather than ‘train them in democracy,’ the elections of 1966-1967 convinced the Vietnamese that elections were useless as a means of settling political conflicts.”

Needless to say, the same will prove true in Iraq. Washington has poured some \$300 billion into its war and occupation. It has created a series of structures and appointed a collection of stooges to assure itself a tight grip over the country’s economic and political life—and above all its huge oil reserves—no matter what the outcome of the vote or the decisions of the national assembly that emerges from it. It is not about to relinquish this control.

What followed the Vietnam election and the Johnson administration’s claims of a “major step forward” is

instructive. Within less than five months came the Tet offensive of January 1968. The coordinated attacks by Vietnamese liberation fighters against cities and towns as well as US bases across the country came as a shock to the American public and forced Johnson to withdraw his name from nomination for reelection that year.

It also gave rise to a vast intensification of the war. This included the CIA’s Operation Phoenix, which killed anywhere between 20,000 and 70,000 suspected members of the National Liberation Front together with their families and neighbors and the murderous bombing campaigns in both the North and the South, including the use of napalm, Agent Orange and other chemical weapons.

There is every reason to expect that the Iraqi elections will be followed by a similarly bloody escalation of US attacks. There is already open discussion within the US national security establishment of launching a Phoenix-style campaign of wholesale assassinations as a means of suppressing the mounting popular resistance. And the use of air power against the hostile population has grown increasingly indiscriminate.

The elections are no more a signal of US success in Iraq than all the other “turning points” previously cited by the Bush administration, from the fall of Baghdad to the end of “major combat operations,” the capture of Saddam Hussein and the installation of the supposedly “sovereign” Iraqi Interim Government headed by the CIA asset Iyad Allawi.

The killing will continue until US imperialism’s colonial venture is defeated by the Iraqi people’s resistance and the independent struggle of American working people against the war and those who conspired to wage it.



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