Iraqis to vote on neo-colonial constitution

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The referendum today in Iraq on the draft constitution is a cynical and, for the Iraqi people, humiliating event. Far from an exercise in self-determination, it is the next stage in a US-crafted, but increasingly crisis-ridden process aimed at turning Iraq into an American client state in the Middle East.

Bush, Cheney, Rumsfeld and others among the clique responsible for the illegal 2003 invasion will use today's vote to justify their crimes with the claim that "democracy" is being realised in Iraq. In reality, even the date of the referendum was determined according to a schedule determined in Washington. For its own political purposes, the Bush administration insisted that a constitution be adopted this month so elections can be held in December and a government formed that advances US objectives.

The new regime in Baghdad will be bound to privatise Iraq's oil industry and sign off on a status-of-forces agreement sanctioning long-term US military bases in the country. What is now Article 109 of the document declares that the oil and gas wealth of Iraq must be developed on the basis of "market principles" and in a manner that "encourages investment". Article 24 dictates "the reform of the Iraqi economy in accordance with modern economic principles", which encourage the "development of the private sector".

The remainder of the constitution is riddled with absurdities and inconsistencies. Various clauses assert the rights of women and non-Muslim minorities, but Islam has the status of "official religion of the state" and no law can contradict the "established provisions of Islam". Freedom of speech, of the press and of assembly, is given constitutional protection, but only in a "way that does not violate public order and morality". The document prohibits arbitrary arrest, coerced confessions and imprisonment by foreign entities, yet the US-led occupation forces have thousands of Iraqis imprisoned without charges and will continue to do so, constitutional guarantees or not.

The mass of the Iraqi people has had no say in the document's formulation. It was drawn up in sordid negotiations between the US ambassador, Zalmay Khalilzad, the Kurdish nationalist parties that preside over an autonomous region in the north, and the Shiite fundamentalist parties that dominate the oil-rich southern provinces of Iraq. Large portions of the document were most likely written in the US embassy.

In return for their collaboration with its plans, the US has paid off the Kurdish and Shiite parties with a constitution that sanctions the establishment of federal "regions" in the areas they control. These regions will have considerable powers over oil revenues and the right to maintain their own "internal security forces". The constitution establishes the mechanisms for the Kurdish region to be expanded to include the main oil-producing area in the north around the city of Kirkuk.

The result is a document that overturns the secular traditions of Iraq, while marginalising the Sunni Muslim ruling class that held the main levers of power for most of the twentieth century. It threatens to leave the predominantly Sunni population of central and western Iraq living in a resource-poor region, but ruled over by a central government and security forces under the control of Shiite and Kurdish sectarian parties. The sentiment among Sunnis, who have suffered the brunt of US repression over the past two-and-a-half years, is that they have been reduced from Iraqi citizens to a persecuted minority in their own country.

Such is the degree of sectarian heat surrounding the referendum, that it is expected most people will vote according to the edicts of their religious, tribal or ethnic leaders. The pro-occupation official media has predictably given prominence to the calls for a yes vote, particularly those made in the name of the leading Shiite cleric, Ali al-Sistani.

While the expectation is that the constitution will be endorsed, there is nevertheless nervousness among US officials and representatives of the Baghdad government over the prospect of an overwhelming no vote in the predominantly Sunni-populated provinces of Anbar,

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Ninawa, Diyala and Salah al Din. Under the terms of the interim constitution imposed on Iraq by the US in March 2004, a two-thirds no vote in just three provinces is enough to reject the draft.

In one indication of the depth of opposition, Associated Press reported Friday that in the Sunni suburb of Azamiyah in Baghdad "not a single referendum poster was visible". Over the past several months, hundreds of thousands of Sunnis, who boycotted the national elections in January, have registered to vote with the intention of repudiating the constitution.

Desperate to prevent any possibility of the constitution being defeated, the US and its Iraqi allies engaged in last-minute attempts this week to convince at least some Sunni leaders to call for a yes vote. As he did in Afghanistan, US ambassador Khalilzad played the key role in cajoling, bribing and bullying the various factions of the Iraqi elite, all of which, including the Sunnis, are willing to accommodate to the occupation in return for petty concessions and privileges.

A farcical amendment to the constitution was introduced that allows it to be completely rewritten by a simple majority vote in the next parliament within four months of the December elections. This concession was enough for the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party to withdraw its opposition and declare the constitution was one that any Sunni could support. As a result of the drawn out haggling, many Iraqis have not even received a copy of the document they are meant to vote on today.

Washington Post correspondents in Baghdad dryly noted on October 14: "Excitement over the charter seems low, and officials' ongoing deal-making—long after the August 15 deadline for a draft and weeks after the transitional parliament approved a supposedly final version for a national vote—has fostered a perception among many that the constitution will mean whatever politicians want it to mean."

To reach voting stations, Iraqis will have to navigate their way through an intimidating security lockdown, particularly in Sunni areas. Tens of thousands of troops and police are manning checkpoints and roadblocks. Since Thursday, all businesses have been ordered to close and a 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. curfew is in force. All private vehicles were banned from the roads as of Friday night. The borders have been closed.

In parts of the western province of Anbar, however, there may be no voting at all. For the past two months, the Euphrates Valley—a focus of the insurgency—has been subjected to a massive US military offensive. Polling stations are unlikely to open.

Two years ago, there was no shortage of US officials and media commentators declaring the overthrow of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime would trigger the flowering of democracy throughout the Middle East. Now, there is a general acceptance in Washington that Iraq is heading towards a sectarian civil war and that the most brutal methods will be required to secure US interests.

Regardless of the referendum's outcome, the stage has been set for an escalation in the scale and desperation of the insurgency in Sunni areas, where large numbers of people are likely to conclude they have nothing to lose from supporting the armed resistance to the occupation. The inevitable response of the US military and its puppet government will be stepped-up repression.

The US-created Iraqi security forces, which have been primarily recruited from Shiite and Kurdish supporters of the governing parties, are being ideologically prepared for atrocities that overshadow those committed in cities like Fallujah and Tal Afar.

Statements by members of the First Brigade of the Iraqi Army this week provided a chilling indication. Shiite Sergeant-Major Asad al-Zubaidi told a Knight Ridder correspondent: "When we [the Iraqi military] are in charge of security the people will follow a law that says you will be sentenced to prison if you speak against the government, and for people like Saleh Mutlak [a leading Sunni politician] there will be execution."

Standing within view of the main Sunni Umm al Qura mosque in Baghdad, Shiite Sergeant Ahmed Sabri declared: "Every man we've had killed or wounded is because of that mosque... Just let us have our constitution and our elections in December and then we will do what Saddam did—start with five people from each neighbourhood and kill them in the streets and then go from there."

The fundamental truth about today's referendum is that Iraqis have been set against one another on a reactionary sectarian basis so that the American ruling class can bring into existence a pro-US dictatorship and plunder the country's oil and gas.

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