

Iraq's constitutional referendum makes a mockery of democracy

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6 October 2005

Iraq's referendum on the draft constitution to be held on October 15 has turned into a farce. Last Sunday, the US-backed ruling coalition of Kurdish and Shiite fundamentalist parties amended the country's electoral laws to virtually guarantee a positive result.

Under the transitional law drawn up by US officials in 2003, originally to guarantee the support of Kurdish parties, the referendum would be lost if a two-thirds majority in three provinces voted no. Sunni organisations and parties have been encouraging their supporters to register and to vote against the draft constitution, making it quite possible that the document will be rejected.

Such a result would be a disaster not just for the regime in Baghdad, but for the Bush administration which has sought to legitimise its occupation through the referendum and national elections planned for mid-December. In the event of a defeat, and if the transitional law were followed, it would mean going back to square one: fresh elections, a new government, a rewritten constitution and another referendum, with no guarantee this one would be accepted either.

Martin Navaias, a defence analyst at King's College London, commented to Reuters: "The fact is the consequences of this referendum being rejected are massive; they're just too ghastly to contemplate. If this referendum is rejected, it's an explicit rejection of the whole political process... It cannot be allowed to fail."

It was no surprise therefore that the Iraqi National Assembly voted to blatantly rig the referendum in favour of a yes vote. Under the amended rules, a two-thirds majority of **registered** voters in three provinces would be required to reject the referendum. In other words, if the turnout did not reach two-thirds or 67 percent, it would be impossible for the draft constitution to be defeated. Interestingly, the same definition was not applied to acceptance of the constitution, which still only required a simple majority of those who vote.

Despite the government's attempts to push the changes through quietly, Sunni leaders reacted angrily and called for

a boycott unless the amendments were reversed. Fearful that a low Sunni turnout would further undermine the legitimacy of the vote, UN and US officials criticised the new rules. As a result, the National Assembly voted yesterday to overturn the amendments.

The furore threatened to derail behind-the-scenes efforts by US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad to engineer a deal to split the Sunni vote. Sunni organisations oppose the federal structure contained in the draft constitution, which would pave the way for the establishment of regional governments in the oil-rich Kurdish north and the Shiite south with extensive powers, including over oil revenues and security forces. The predominantly Sunni central and western provinces would lack resources and influence.

According to an article in the *Washington Post*, Khalilzad has been attempting to convince Shiite and Kurdish leaders to accept Sunni demands for changes to the constitution. To date, negotiations have stalled, after the ruling coalition refused to discuss any changes to the planned federal structure. "We have no objection to changes that help us to achieve mutual understanding but there is no way that we would agree to change the basic principles of the constitution," Shiite negotiator Ali Debagh declared.

The various sordid manoeuvres make a mockery of the Bush administration's claim that the referendum is another step towards democracy in Iraq. The presence of more than 140,000 US troops and ongoing operations against those opposed to the US occupation makes any democratic vote impossible.

The US military has been carrying out major offensives in the western Anbar province, where the population is overwhelmingly hostile to the American occupation. Around 2,500 American troops, along with Iraqi forces, stormed into the towns of Haditha, Haqlaniya and Barwana on Monday as part of Operation River Gate.

Helicopter gunships and US warplanes conducted pre-dawn strikes on the towns destroying bridges over the Euphrates River and cutting off electricity. US snipers took up positions on rooftops and loudspeakers blared out

warnings to residents to stay indoors, as teams of soldiers kicked in doors and arbitrarily detained “terrorist suspects”.

A similar offensive codenamed “Operation Iron Fist” began on Saturday in the towns of Sadah, Karabilah and Rumana near the Syrian border. A *San Francisco Chronicle* article described a pitched battle in Karabilah in which children as young as 11 helped resistance fighters by pointing out US positions. At least five civilians were killed when a US tank fired on a building allegedly containing insurgents.

A *New York Times* report on Monday, detailing US attempts to control the town of Rawa, pointed to the widespread hostility to the US occupation. Describing the town of 20,000 as a “Baathist stronghold”, US officers candidly admitted they had received “little cooperation” from the residents. Since late July, US forces have been hit by two dozen roadside bombs and eight suicide car bombs and have responded with air strikes, random checkpoints and house-to-house searches.

After the latest sweep through the town, US Colonel Stephen Davis and his Iraqi counterpart Colonel Yasser addressed a crowd of 300, angry at the searches and arbitrary detentions. Yasser urged them to vote in the referendum. Davis bluntly warned the residents to expect more reprisals if attacks on US troops continued. “Some of you are concerned about the attack helicopters and mortar fire from the [US] base. I will tell you this: those are the sounds of peace,” he declared.

Far from being aimed at freeing locals from “foreign terrorists”, the object of these US operations is to terrorise and intimidate a population that is opposed to the American presence.

Sunni leaders, who are seeking to exploit popular sentiment to bolster their own position under the occupation, have threatened a boycott if the US offensives are not ended. “If US forces keep attacking Sunni cities, then in three or four day’s time we will announce a boycott of the referendum,” Saleh al-Mutlak of the Sunni National Dialogue Council stated yesterday.

Despite the US diplomatic and military efforts to ensure a yes vote, the outcome of the referendum is by no means certain. After boycotting national elections in January, Sunni organisations have campaigned extensively for supporters to register and vote against the constitution. According to the *New York Times*, US officials and private organisations say that registration now exceeds 80 percent in some Sunni areas. “Nobody will be surprised to lose Anbar, and maybe one other province,” one Pentagon official told the newspaper, adding: “[But] we’re not going to lose three.”

Even if the constitution is adopted, the entire process will be widely seen as illegitimate. Senior US commander in

Iraq, General George Casey, told the US Congress last week that he believed the referendum would pass. However, when asked if the political situation could worsen after the poll, he declared: “I think that’s entirely possible. I mean, as we’ve looked at this, we’ve looked for the constitution to be a national compact, and the perception is that it’s not, particularly among Sunnis.”

Head of US Central Command, General John Abizaid, who also appeared before Congress, declared: “A vote for the constitution doesn’t mean we’re headed for peace and prosperity. Iraq is going to be a pretty difficult security environment for a while.”

Both generals indicated obliquely that the military confronts a Catch-22 dilemma. In his testimony, General Casey said that US troop reductions were needed “to take away one of the elements that fuels the insurgency, that of coalition forces as an occupying force”. But he played down his predictions in March and July of this year that there would be “fairly substantial” cuts in troop numbers by the middle of next year, saying that in a period of heightened uncertainty it was “too soon to tell”.

Casey admitted that efforts to train Iraqi troops and police to replace US soldiers were running into problems. The size of Iraqi security forces is substantial—about 192,000—but few of them have, as Casey put it, “an independence capability”. Only one of the 120 US-trained Iraqi army and police battalions was capable of operating without US forces, down from three in July.

The reason is not hard to fathom. The majority of recruits have joined because the security forces are one of the few available employment options. Many are sympathetic to the armed resistance to the US occupation, if not actual members, and do not want to fight other Iraqis. At the same time, they are widely viewed as US stooges and are regularly the target of insurgent attacks. It is not surprising that most are unwilling to fight unless pushed into battle by their US military “advisers”.

The US-led invasion has created a nightmare for the Iraqi people and a quagmire for American troops. Its aim was never to bring peace and democracy to the Iraqi people, but to subjugate the country and its vast oil reserves as part of broader US economic and strategic ambitions in the Middle East. The sham referendum on October 15 cannot disguise the fact that, in pursuit of its goal, Washington is employing the most ruthless methods of repression.



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