

Washington, predictably, hails Iraq constitution vote

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In separate statements Sunday, US President George W. Bush and his secretary of state, Condoleezza Rice, claimed the completion of the constitutional referendum in Iraq as a victory for US policy in the occupied country.

Bush hailed the vote as yet another “milestone” in the US effort to install a client state in Iraq. “We’re making progress toward an ally that will join us in the war on terror,” he declared.

Rice, speaking in London, called the vote “another really important step forward.” Iraqis, she said, “just keep moving inexorably toward permanent elections in December when they’ll have a permanent government.”

The US secretary of state called the election a victory for the US-backed constitution. “The assessment of the people on the ground, who are trying to do the numbers and trying to look at where the votes are coming from, is there’s a belief that it can probably pass.”

Appearing later in the day on NBC’s “Meet the Press,” she retreated from this prediction, aware that it substantiated the well-founded belief among Iraqis that the entire constitutional exercise has been engineered and managed by Washington to serve its own strategic purposes.

“I think we have to wait to see what the results of the referendum will be, but the fact of the matter is that they had a democratic process,” she said in the television interview.

At least one Sunni nationalist leader condemned Rice’s earlier statement as an indication that the results of the referendum were being fixed on orders of the US government. “I believe it is a signal to the Electoral Commission to pass the constitution,” Saleh al-Mutlak told the press in Baghdad

To pass the constitution required a simple majority “yes” vote nationwide. Rejection needed a two-thirds “no” vote in at least three of Iraq’s 18 provinces.

Iraq’s Sunnis, who constitute 20 percent of the population, voted overwhelmingly against the draft constitution, apparently defeating it by at least a two-thirds margin in the provinces of Anbar and Salahuddin. In the other two majority Sunni provinces—Ninevah and Diyala—local officials were claiming a majority “yes” vote.

Ninevah includes Mosul, a city of more than 1 million inhabitants that is at least 80 percent Sunni. Yet, according to

Iraqi officials, a tally of 260 of the province’s 300 polling places turned up only 80,000 “no” votes, compared with 300,000 in favor of the constitution.

Such figures are comprehensible only as an indication of either a mass Sunni boycott of the poll or massive vote fraud.

Ninevah province also includes the city of Tal Afar, scene of the recent US military siege that demolished entire neighborhoods and turned most of its residents into refugees, with no place to vote.

Similar US actions in western Iraq also prevented polling stations from being set up in many predominantly Sunni towns and villages. In Anbar province—which includes the cities of Fallujah and Ramadi, centers of opposition to the US occupation—between 60 and 70 of the province’s 209 polling stations never opened, effectively disenfranchising about a third of the population.

There were few armed attacks on polling stations. While the US media attributed this absence of violence to robust security efforts, it seemed likely that those carrying out armed resistance made a political decision to suspend their actions in order to allow opponents of the constitution to cast ballots.

Initially, Iraqi officials said that a provisional tally would be announced on Thursday, with official final results released on October 24. On Sunday, however, they indicated the outcome could be declared earlier—no doubt based upon Washington’s political expediency.

US officials have claimed that the vote in Iraq represented a major step forward because this time there was participation by Sunnis—who overwhelmingly boycotted the election of a parliament last January. Sunni voters had boosted the overall turnout to an estimated 63 percent, with close to 1 million more voting than in the last poll. The Sunni turnout, Rice claimed, showed that they “are now invested in the process.”

Yet press interviews with Sunni voters suggested something very different—a view of “the process” as an inexorable march toward neo-colonial subjugation and civil war that they are determined to bring to a halt.

“I have no power, I have had no water for three days, I live in the harshest conditions I have ever known,” Abdul Hamid Ghaffouri, a Sunni clothing salesman in Baghdad told the *New York Times*. “Can you tell me any reason I should vote yes?”

“Do we vote for the massacres of Fallujah, for the massacres of Quaim?” Wisam Ali, another Baghdad voter asked the *Washington Post*. “The government is Persian and the occupation is American. When the Americans withdraw from Iraq, then we’ll agree on a constitution. God willing, we’ll scuttle this one.”

“We do not see ourselves or see our future in this draft,” Gazwan Abd al-Sattar, a 27-year-old Sunni Arab teacher voting in Mosul, told the Associated Press. “The Shia and Kurdish authorities who drafted it are promoting their own interests, not those of all Iraqis.”

While both the Bush administration in Washington and the Blair government in London seized upon the referendum to claim success for their policies in Iraq, one of their closest Iraqi allies offered a markedly different view in the aftermath of the vote.

“This is one of the stages of civil war we are right in now,” Iyad Allawi, the former Iraqi exile leader and CIA asset who was installed as the prime minister of an interim government for six months last year, told Britain’s *Sunday Telegraph*. “What you have is killings, assassinations, militias, a stagnant economy, no services. With the help of the world, we must try to avoid moving further and deeper into these stages.”

Allawi added that, while suicide bombings are the most widely covered acts of violence in Iraq, the growing activities of both Sunni and Shia death squads were a far more serious threat. “On a daily basis there are assassinations and liquidations,” he said. “In Jordan, I was told that the official figures of Iraqi students trying to move to Jordanian universities is 14,000. We have an exodus of doctors from Iraq. These are all the ingredients of much wider problems.”

The overwhelming Sunni opposition to the constitution combined with evidence that the Sunni vote was either suppressed or went uncounted will undoubtedly fuel support for the armed resistance both to US occupation and to what is widely seen as the ethno-religious partition of the country.

While leaving a host of specific questions about Iraq’s “democratic” form of government unresolved, the draft constitution sets the stage for the country’s dissolution into largely autonomous regions—Kurdish in the north, Shia in the south and Sunni in the center. The first two would control the vast bulk of the country’s oil wealth, with Iraq’s more than 5 million Sunnis left in a landlocked territory with few resources.

The entire process, which is supposed to lead to the election of a new parliament in December, has been carried out under the terms of the “Transitional Administrative Law” dictated by the former US proconsul Paul Bremer.

The constitution’s provisions were elaborated under the domination of Washington’s current representative in Baghdad, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad. Consequently, the document is crafted with the aim of furthering US interests and securing the geo-strategic aims that motivated the US war and occupation from the beginning.

One of the principal changes in the Iraqi constitution concerns property relations. While the country’s old constitution declared that “national resources and basic means of production are owned by the people,” the new draft commits the incoming government to “the reforming of the Iraqi economy according to modern economic bases, in a way that ensures complete investment of its resources, diversifying its sources and encouraging and developing the private sector.”

In other words, it lays the legal foundations for the privatization of the country’s oil wealth and its transfer to US-based energy conglomerates.

Khalilzad’s hand in the drafting process was seen in the elimination of an article contained in earlier versions of the constitution declaring, “It is forbidden for Iraq to be used as a base or corridor for foreign troops. It is forbidden to have foreign military bases in Iraq.”

Clearly, Washington intends to keep troops and military bases in Iraq for a long time to come and does not want to be subject to such constitutional niceties.

These provisions written into the draft at Washington’s behest constitute a textbook illustration of why, under the Geneva Conventions, occupying powers are barred from rewriting the legal systems of the countries that they occupy. Hailed as another “turning point” in the struggle for “democracy,” the draft constitution represents in the final analysis a continuation and deepening of the war crimes carried out by US and British imperialism in launching their war of aggression against Iraq.

While the constitutional referendum was intended to deliver a propaganda boost to the plummeting support within the US for war in Iraq, it appears unlikely to have any significant effect. Whether the draft is approved or rejected, the resistance to the occupation and the violence against Iraqi civilians will both continue.

On the day of the referendum itself, five US soldiers were killed by a roadside bomb in the western city of Ramadi, bringing the total US military death toll to 1,975.

In an apparent act of retaliation, US warplanes bombed areas east of Ramadi on Sunday. A doctor reported that the local hospital received the bodies of 25 people along with 8 wounded from the bombardment.



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