Rigging accusations surround Iraq referendum result

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While no official result has been announced yet in the October 15 referendum on the draft Iraqi constitution, US officials are claiming it was endorsed by the majority of Iraqis. The count, however, is already surrounded by accusations of ballot-rigging and fraud and will to be regarded as illegitimate by wide sections of the Iraqi population.

An overwhelming no vote was registered in at least two provinces with a majority Sunni Arab population, where there is the greatest support for the insurgency against the US-led occupation. In Salah al Din province, which includes cities such as Tikrit and Samarra, voter turnout is estimated to have been 88 percent, with well over 80 percent voting no.

In Anbar province, initial figures show that 97 percent of voters in Fallujah cast a no vote. Turnout across the province, however, was just 32 percent due to a major US military offensive that has been taking place in the area over the past month. In numerous towns and villages in the Euphrates Valley, no polling stations were opened. In Ramadi, the largest city in the province and the site of daily clashes between insurgents and US forces, only a minority of people risked going to vote.

In Diyala province, which has a mixed Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish population, reports indicate that the constitution may also have been voted down, but not by a two-thirds margin. If two-thirds of voters in three of Iraq's 18 provinces voted no, the constitution will be defeated.

Attention is focusing on the result in Ninewa, which includes the major city of Mosul. There are widespread accusations that the voting there has been rigged in order to prevent Ninewa being the third province to reject the constitution. Australian SBS news showed footage of a man methodically filling out a stack of ballot pages with yes votes.

According to the *Chicago Tribune*, UN observers noted "suspiciously high turnouts at some polling stations, as well as suspiciously high numbers of yes votes at some of them." An election official claimed on the weekend that more than three quarters of voters in the province had supported the constitution. Sunni Arabs and ethnic Turkomen, however, who are the majority in the province, turned out in large numbers to vote no.

Reflecting the broader perception among Iraqi Sunnis, politician Saleh Mutlaq told a news conference: "I believe they will rig the result and announce the success of the referendum, but our monitors reported to us that more than 80 percent of the voters in three governorates [provinces] have said no to the draft."

An unnamed representative of a resistance organisation told Reuters: "If the government manipulates things in Mosul and lets the constitution pass, the next thing will be general strikes, demonstrations and an increase in military operations [against the occupation]."

Allegations of rampant electoral fraud have also been raised in the Kurdish province of Irbil and the major Shiite province of Basra in the south.

Across the Shiite south, the constitution was supported by a clear majority of those who voted. Turnout, however, dropped significantly from the elections in January. In Najaf province, for example, turnout was just 56 percent, compared with 73 percent earlier in the year. In Karbala province, turnout was 58 percent, down from 73 percent.

The drop in participation took place despite an intense campaign for a yes vote by the Shiite fundamentalist parties that dominate the Baghdad government—Da'awa and the Supreme Council for the

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Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—and an edict by the leading Shiite cleric, Ali al-Sistani, directing Shiites to support the constitution.

The lack of enthusiasm for the referendum stems primarily from rising disaffection among the Shiite masses. Da'awa and SCIRI won support in the January elections with promises that a Shiite-dominated government would bring about the withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraq and improve living standards. Instead, they rapidly shifted to endorsing the presence of US and other forces in order to crush the insurgency in Sunni areas, while unemployment and the crisis of basic services have worsened.

Across the Shiite south, support is growing for the movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which regularly issues calls for the withdrawal of foreign troops. Sadr, however, refused to call on Iraqis to vote no in the referendum so as to not disrupt the relations he has established with the occupation forces and the Baghdad government. The turnout figures indicates that large numbers of supporters responded by simply not voting.

An unemployed man in Karbala told the *Washington Post*: "The marjiya [Shiite religious leaders] tell us 'say yes', but I don't see any purpose. They told us last time to support the alliance and I did. What did we get?"

A secret opinion poll carried out by the British Ministry of Defence and leaked to the media underscores the animosity toward the US-led occupation among Iraqis of all religious and ethnic backgrounds. According to the nationwide survey, 82 percent of Iraqis are "strongly opposed" to the presence of foreign troops in their country, while 67 percent feel "less secure" because of the occupation. Some 45 percent believe attacks on American and British troops are justified. Less than one percent of respondents said they believed the occupation forces are responsible for any improvement in security.

The passage of the constitution will fuel the hostility. Elections will be held in December to bring into existence a new government in Baghdad that will be obliged to initiate the privatisation of the oil industry and is expected to sign an agreement for the long-term stationing of US troops in Iraq. In order to enhance the wealth and privilege of a narrow layer of the Shiite and Kurdish upper class, the Shiite and Kurdish parties working with the occupation intend to attempt to use the constitution to establish virtually autonomous regions in the north and south with considerable control over oil revenues.

The result will be escalating resistance among Iraqis of all religious and ethnic backgrounds to the neo-colonial agenda of Washington and the actions of the puppet regime it is maintaining in Baghdad.

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