

Iraq referendum produces a divisive and illegitimate result

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The result of the October 15 referendum in Iraq endorsing the draft constitution will only deepen the catastrophe caused by Washington's attempt to establish a pro-US client state in the country. According to the Iraqi Electoral Commission, 63 percent of registered voters, or some 10 million people, cast a ballot, with 79 percent supporting the constitution and 21 percent voting no. The breakdown of the figures, however, shows a population that has been bitterly divided along sectarian and ethnic lines by the Bush administration's policies since the 2003 invasion.

The referendum itself was completely contrived. The Iraqi people had no say in the draft constitution, which was drawn up behind closed doors by pro-occupation parties and US officials, or in what questions would be asked on the referendum. If a free and fair vote had been taken on whether US troops should leave Iraq, the answer would have been a resounding yes. A recent survey by the British Ministry of Defence found 82 percent of Iraqis—from all backgrounds—"strongly oppose" the occupation.

Instead Iraqis were asked to vote on a constitution that creates the mechanisms for the transformation of the Iraqi state into a decentralised federation of "regions", with the key oil-producing areas in the north and south in the hands of the Kurdish nationalist and Shiite fundamentalist parties that have worked with the US occupation. It obliges all future Iraqi governments to re-organise the economy, including the currently state-owned oil industry, on free market principles. Authority over the development of Iraq's considerable untapped oil reserves, which will be contracted to private companies, is stripped from the Baghdad government and handed over to the regional states.

The beneficiaries of the plunder will be transnational energy conglomerates and a narrow layer of the Kurdish and Shiite elite. The predominantly Sunni Arab population in Iraq's central and western provinces faces being marginalised in a resource-poor region. They will be ruled over, however, by a central government controlled by Kurdish and sectarian Shiite parties, whose main concern will be to suppress opposition to the neo-colonial exploitation of the country.

Sunni Arab bitterness toward the constitution found sharpest expression in two majority Sunni provinces where the anti-

occupation insurgency has strong support and US repression of the civilian population has been intense. In Salah al Din province, the no vote was 81.75 percent, with large turnouts in rebellious cities such as Tikrit and Samarra. In the western province of Anbar, where the US military has slaughtered or detained thousands of Sunnis in cities such as Fallujah, Ramadi and Qaim, 97 percent voted no.

In four provinces where the population is a diverse mix of Iraq's various communities, the outcome was a dangerous polarisation that can only intensify the sectarian conflicts that have been developing since the 2003 invasion.

In Baghdad, where the insurgency is most active, the vote was 77.7 percent for and 22.3 against, with the no vote concentrated in Sunni suburbs of the capital. In Tamin province, where the city of Kirkuk has already been the scene of bloody clashes between Kurdish militias with Sunni and Turkomen groups, the result was 62.9 percent yes and 37.1 percent no. In Diyala province, with its mixed Sunni-Shiite capital of Baquba, the vote was 51.2 percent for and 48.8 percent against.

In 12 provinces with a majority Kurdish or Shiite population, where the pro-occupation parties argued that the sectarian constitution was essential to improving the conditions of life for the common people, the yes vote ranged between 95 to 99 percent.

Across the Shiite south, however, growing distrust of the governing Shia parties—Da'awa and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—saw the voter turnout fall markedly compared with the election in January. The government of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari formed earlier this year repudiated its election pledge to demand a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign occupation troops as soon as it took up office in Baghdad.

The suspiciously high yes vote of over 90 percent in southern cities like Amara, Samawa and Diwaniyah, where there is considerable Shiite animosity toward the occupation and the governing parties, led to immediate accusations of vote rigging.

The greatest controversy, however, surrounds the official count in the northern province of Ninewa, where the majority of people in the capital Mosul are Sunni Arab, Turkomen or other ethnic minorities opposed to the constitution. After a

10-day delay, the no vote was declared to be 55 percent, against a yes vote of 45 percent.

Sunni political leaders responded to the result with allegations of blatant fraud. Saleh Mutlaq, one of the most public Sunni critics of the constitution, told journalists: "It [the result] is clearly a forgery. No respectful forger would produce such an obvious fake that could be seen through so easily." Calling for a recount of the vote in Mosul, Mutlaq declared: "There was a fraud everywhere, but it is Mosul that matters because it was pivotal to defeating this unacceptable constitution."

A no vote by two-thirds of the voters in just three provinces was all that was required to cause the rejection of the constitution nationally. According to figures published by the *New York Times*, if just 83,283 yes votes in Ninewa had been negative ballots instead, the constitution would have been defeated.

Mahmood al-Azzawi, a member of the Sunni-based National Dialogue Council, told Al Jazeera: "Fraud occurred, especially in Mosul. It is too big to have any dispute about. Eighty-six percent of Mosul's residents voted no and that was according to accurate statistics made by over 300 independent supervisors in the province."

The Iraqi Islamic Party, one of the few Sunni organisations that called for a yes vote, issued an official statement declaring voter fraud had taken place in Ninewa and that the constitution was illegitimate.

Predicting that Sunnis would otherwise conclude they could achieve nothing through the US-imposed political process and would turn toward the insurgency, Saleh Mutlaq warned: "Violence is not the only solution if politics offers solutions.... But there is very little hope that we can make any gains in the elections. I call on the free world, I call on the United Nations, to intervene."

The UN, however, is directly complicit in the continuing US occupation of Iraq. Far from criticising, let alone opposing the fraudulent ballot, the UN was instrumental in organising the referendum and in rubberstamping the outcome as legitimate. UN officials dismissed allegations of vote rigging as having no bearing on the result.

In recent years, accusations of electoral fraud in countries such as Serbia, Georgia, the Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan produced scathing denunciations from Washington and US backing for the removal of governments and their replacement with ones more amenable to American strategic interests.

The allegations in Iraq, however, were greeted with denial by the Bush administration and its international allies. White House spokesman Scott McClellan declared the outcome of the referendum to be evidence of the Iraqi peoples' "determination to build a democracy united against extremism and violence". British foreign secretary Jack Straw welcomed it as an "important step in the development of a democratic, stable and inclusive Iraq". Comparable statements were issued from Canberra, Rome, Tokyo and other capitals that have military

forces in Iraq.

The reality, however, is that the ratification of the constitution will deepen the military and political crisis already confronting the US-led occupation. Even as the result of the referendum was being announced, the attempts at self-congratulation in Washington were overshadowed by the media focus on the US death toll in Iraq reaching 2,000.

The marginalisation of the Sunni population and other minorities such as the Turkomen, on top of years of brutal repression, guarantees that the armed resistance will continue to grow. In a blunt statement yesterday, Sunni politician Hussein al-Falluji told Reuters: "Our message to the American administration is clear—get out of Iraq or set a timetable for withdrawal or the resistance will keep slaughtering your soldiers until Judgment Day."

Whatever the exact composition of the next Iraqi puppet government formed in the December 15 elections, to be held under the new constitution, it will not be accepted as legitimate. To keep it in power, US imperialism will be driven into more atrocities against Iraqi civilians to suppress support for the insurgency. There are mounting allegations that the occupation forces are relying on Shiite and Kurdish death squads to terrorise the Sunni population, dragging the country closer to a fratricidal civil war.

Already, over 50 percent of Americans oppose the war and support for the Bush administration has plummeted to less than 37 percent. The stench of fraud that hangs over the October 15 ballot can only further discredit Bush's claims that young US soldiers are killing and dying to bring "democracy" to Iraq. The content of the constitution, and the manner in which it has been imposed on the Iraqi people, makes transparent that the agenda behind the 2003 invasion was not "weapons of mass destruction" or "liberation", but to seize control of Iraq's oil reserves and assert US domination in the Middle East.

To achieve these predatory ambitions, there will not be any withdrawal of US troops or any let-up in the rate of American casualties. In recent days, both US spokesman Major General Rick Lynch, and a report by the Center for Strategic and International Studies, have predicted that more than 100,000 US troops will be involved in major counter-insurgency operations in Iraq until well into the next decade.

The essential precondition for the Iraqi people to determine their own political future is the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all US and foreign troops from the country.



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