

# Iraq election to exacerbate slide toward civil war

**James Cogan**  
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The electoral alliances that have been formed to contest the December 15 election in Iraq are a further indication that the US occupation is plunging the country toward civil war. The main coalitions have all been organised on a sectarian basis and are advocating policies that will inevitably trigger clashes among the rival factions of the Iraqi elite.

After failing to defeat the US-vetted constitution in the referendum on October 15, three political parties based among the Sunni Arab population have formed a coalition to contest the 275 seats in the parliament. Sunnis overwhelmingly boycotted the first election in January this year in response to calls by Sunni political and religious leaders. In last month's referendum, however, large numbers registered and voted in order to express opposition to the proposed constitution.

Other layers of the Sunni establishment, who more closely reflect the views of the Sunni-based insurgent groups, fighting a guerilla war against US and Iraqi government forces, have rejected participation in the elections. The Association of Muslim Scholars, the umbrella organisation of some 3,000 Sunni clerics, denounced the constitution as a "conspiracy against our Iraq" and declared that it would "not take part in any political process".

The constitution establishes the mechanisms for the transformation of Iraq into a federation of largely autonomous regions. A Kurdish regional government is already in place in the north and is seeking to extend its jurisdiction to the oil-rich areas surrounding the city of Kirkuk. In the predominantly Shiite Arab south, Shiite fundamentalists aspire to establish a regional government encompassing more than half of Iraq's territory, population and oilfields. Sunni Arabs, who make up approximately 20 percent of the population and are concentrated in the resource-poor provinces in the country's centre and west, are threatened with being marginalised.

Despite warnings that its divide-and-rule strategy could trigger a civil war, the Bush administration promoted the constitution as the best means of realising the predatory war aims of the 2003 invasion—the sell-off of Iraq's oil to US-based energy conglomerates and the establishment of permanent US military bases on Iraqi territory.

The constitution obliges all future Iraqi governments to develop the oil industry on "market principles". In exchange for the collaboration of the Shiite and Kurdish establishment, the document gives regional governments, rather than the central government in Baghdad, control over the revenues from new oil

production. At the same time, with Shiite Arabs and Kurds making up some 75 percent of the population, the Shia and Kurdish parties expect to also control the central government and therefore the Iraqi army and interior ministry forces being trained and armed by the US military.

The Shiite fundamentalist parties that dominate the current government will be running again as the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), with the perspective of once more mobilising the vote of the majority Shiite population to deliver them the key positions in the next government.

That prospect can only drive more layers of the Sunni population into active support for the insurgency. There is already considerable evidence that the US-recruited and trained interior ministry police are functioning as little more than death-squads, hunting down Sunni opponents of the occupation and murdering them. Hundreds of corpses have been discovered in Baghdad and other cities—blindfolded, often handcuffed and shot through the head or horrifically tortured to death.

In the coming election, the UIA will consist not only of the Da'awa party of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari and the Iranian-linked Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), but also the Sadrist movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. In an agreement reached last week, the Sadrists announced they would participate "officially" in the Shiites bloc, rather than "unofficially" as is currently the case. A statement in Sadr's name declared that he is not personally endorsing any candidates. However, the entire Sadrist network of mosques, charities and militiamen, especially in the working class districts of Baghdad, is being mobilised behind the UIA.

The decision points to the motives behind Sadr's refusal to call on his supporters to vote no in the October 15 referendum, despite his many previous denunciations of sectarianism. The upper echelons of the Sadrist movement have the same ambition as the leadership of Da'awa and SCIRI—to exploit the US occupation to elevate the Shiite elite into the dominant positions of power and privilege in Iraq, at the expense of the Sunni establishment that was sponsored by the former Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein.

Sadr's support for the UIA comes at a time of growing alienation from Da'awa and SCIRI among the Shiite masses. In January, they made promises to improve living conditions and demand a deadline for the withdrawal of US and foreign troops. They have delivered nothing. The frustration was reflected in the referendum, with the turnout rate among Shiite falling sharply to

less than 60 percent in some southern provinces, despite edicts by the main Shiite religious leader, Ali al-Sistani, for people to vote yes.

The participation of the Sadrists may assist in shoring up the vote for the UIA in the Shiite heartland. But the longer-term impact will be to undermine the support for Sadr and his movement. Until now, the Sadrists have been viewed by millions of Shiite working class and urban poor as the only organisation prepared to articulate their deeply-felt opposition to the US invasion and their sense of unity with other Iraqis of all religious and ethnic backgrounds. In April and August 2004, thousands of Shiites took up arms in response to appeals by Sadr and fought US troops in Baghdad, Najaf, Karbala and other southern cities. Since signing a ceasefire last September, however, the Sadrists have steadily shifted from radical denunciations of the occupation and collaboration with it, to joining Jaafari's cabinet, and now to seeking a prominent role in the next US puppet regime.

Sadr's decision will also exacerbate sectarian tensions between the Sunni and Shiite elite. His movement had been looked to by Sunni insurgents as potential allies against the occupation and the Shiite parties collaborating with the US forces. Now, the Sadrists have openly aligned with Da'awa and SCIRI. In a foretaste of what may ensue, 14 Sadrist militiamen were killed in clashes with Sunni fighters last Thursday in a village to the south of Baghdad. On the weekend, the bodies of 11 Sunnis from the area were found executed by "unknown" killers.

In northern Iraq, sectarian tensions are also escalating in the wake of the referendum. The two Kurdish nationalist parties—the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdish Democratic Party—that control the virtually autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq's three northern-most provinces intend to once again stand in the election as a united bloc. Any rival political formation will face considerable obstacles campaigning in the region, not least due to the intimidation by the local military and police units, all of which were recruited from members of the PUK and KDP *peshmerga* militiamen.

Kurdish parties want to use the new constitution to extend their territory to include the province of Tamin, and particularly the oil-rich area surrounding the provincial capital of Kirkuk. The document obliges the next Iraqi government to hold a referendum in Kirkuk and "other disputed areas" by December 31, 2007 over whether to join with the KRG. In the meantime, the Kurdish parties are resettling back into the area tens of thousands of Kurds who were forced out by the Baathist regime. Arabs who moved into the region are having their land repossessed and given to Kurdish families who can claim title on it. The *Washington Post* on October 30 reported armed clashes over land disputes in the past several months.

In the city of Mosul, in Ninewa province, there are rising sectarian conflicts between local Kurdish and Sunni powerbrokers over positions and privilege. Hundreds of Arab police and civilians demonstrated on October 29 over the Kurdish-controlled local government's sacking of the Sunni head of the provincial police. Some 65 percent of Mosul's one million people are Sunni Arab or other ethnicities, while Kurds make up about 35 percent.

Fueling the hostilities, Sunni and ethnic Turkomen leaders allege

that the government-controlled Electoral Commission rigged the result of the October 15 referendum in Ninewa. A no vote of over two thirds in the province, along with the overwhelming no vote in two other majority Sunni provinces, was all that was required to defeat the constitution. Amid widespread reports of ballot-stuffing to weaken the opposition, the official figure in Ninewa was 55 percent no and 45 percent yes.

In preparation for the December election, various exiles who were once Washington's favourites are manoeuvring to play the role of kingmaker in the next parliament.

Iyad Allawi, who the Bush administration selected as the interim prime minister of occupied Iraq in 2004, has assembled a coalition of parties and groups that the *New York Times* described as "the most eclectic gathering of allies since Iraqi exile groups met before the war". Among the organisations that have joined with Allawi, a long-time asset of American and British intelligence agencies, is the Stalinist Iraqi Communist Party.

Ahmed Chalabi, who played a key role in fabricating the lies that Iraq possessed "weapons of mass destruction" and is currently one of the deputy prime ministers of the Baghdad government, has left the Shiite UIA and intends to contest the election under the name of his formerly CIA-financed organisation, the Iraqi National Congress (INC).

Chalabi fell out with Washington and in early 2004 the INC offices were raided by US troops. The fact that Chalabi is back in favour is highlighted by his trip to the US next week for meetings with White House officials, including Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Like Allawi, Chalabi will only win a small percentage of seats. However, the requirement that the government must be endorsed by two-thirds of the parliament means they may become central in the horse-trading that follows the elections.

The sordid machinations that surround the election underscore the inability of any faction of the Iraqi ruling class to advance the interests of the population. After more than 30 months of occupation, which has brought untold death, destruction and suffering, and promises only more, no Iraqi bourgeois organisation has been capable of putting forward a perspective that unifies the masses against US imperialism. Nor have any been capable of making a consistent appeal for support from the hundreds of millions of working people in the US and elsewhere who are deeply opposed to the eruption of militarism.

Every party taking part in the Iraq election warrants nothing but the contempt and hostility of the international working class. Whether Sunni, Shiite or Kurdish, the Iraqi elites have reconciled themselves to the conquest of the country and are engaged in sectarian infighting aimed at securing the most profitable position in an American client-state. In Iraq and throughout the Middle East, the critical issue is the development of an international socialist movement and perspective.



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