

# Iraq elections: a democratic façade for a US puppet state

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Predictably, the Bush administration has told the American people that the elections in Iraq tomorrow will be a democratic milestone for both the country and the broader Middle East. The truth is that they will only produce greater conflict between the country's main religious and ethnic groups, intensified social and class tensions and greater hostility among the Iraqi people toward the US-led occupation forces.

The entire US-controlled political process this year—the January 30 elections for a transitional government, the drafting of a new constitution and the referendum on October 15—has been aimed at giving the veneer of legal legitimacy to the plunder of the country's oil and gas and the formation of a puppet government that will sanction an indefinite US military presence in Iraq.

This week's ballot is the final stage. At stake are 275 seats in the next parliament, which will sit for the next four years and elect both the president and prime minister. Each of the country's 18 provinces has been allocated a number of seats based on population. Baghdad, for example, the most populated province, will elect 59 parliamentarians. A total of 230 will be elected in the provinces. The remaining 45 will be chosen by a national proportional method.

Even if it wanted to, the new government would have next to no ability to reverse what the US invasion and occupation has already set in motion. Iraq's economy is devastated, with unemployment close to 50 percent, growing malnutrition, dysfunctional social services and rampant corruption. The new constitution has already placed new oil developments under the control of regional or provincial governments, which have the power to sign long-term contracts with transnational companies.

To enforce this framework, the US military and the Iraqi security forces are conducting bloody operations in areas where guerilla resistance groups are active, at the cost of hundreds of lives each month. While there is talk of withdrawing up to 20,000 American troops next year, the foreign occupation force in Iraq will remain well over 100,000 for the foreseeable future.

Far from addressing this reality, the election campaign has been dominated by sectarian and communal appeals. The main coalitions and parties contesting the election have all accommodated themselves to the neo-colonial occupation and the corporate plunder of the country. They have no answers to the social catastrophe facing millions of Iraqis.

Ability to nominate as a candidate was severely restricted. Under the electoral laws imposed on Iraq by the US occupation, only

people aged over 30 who possess a high school diploma were eligible. Given that the median age in Iraq is just 19, and that only 55.9 percent of the men and just 24.4 percent of women can read and write, the majority of the population was excluded from standing.

Iraqis are being urged to vote according to their religion, ethnicity, tribe, education level, region or even city. The main ambition of the contesting parties is to use the election to lever their particular faction of the ruling elite—whether it is Shiite, Sunni, Kurdish or other groupings—into political positions within a US-dominated Iraq that can be used to bargain for privileges and wealth.

Clerics and militias are urging Shiite Muslims—the majority of Iraq's people—to vote again for the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA)—a coalition between the Da'awa movement of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the Sadrist movement of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr and a dozen other religious groups.

In 2004, the Sadrists fought major battles with the US military and declared their solidarity with the resistance organisations that exist among the Sunni Arab population. There was even speculation at one point that the Sadrists would develop an electoral alliance across the sectarian divide with the Sunni organisations. Over the past year, however, the movement has steadily adapted itself to the occupation and put aside its differences with SCIRI in order to gain political positions. In recent months, Sadr struck a deal with SCIRI to participate in the UIA, in exchange for nominating as many as one-third of the candidates.

The UIA is predicted to win the largest number of seats in the parliament despite growing opposition toward Da'awa and SCIRI. During the January election, they promised a timetable for the withdrawal of US troops and guaranteed rapid improvements in living standards. The UIA-led government has done neither. There is also evidence that the Shiite-dominated interior ministry and armed forces are carrying out killings, torture and intimidation and imposing Islamic law on secular Iraqis.

The Sadrists, however, still enjoy support among the Shiite urban poor, ensuring a sizeable vote for the UIA in Baghdad and other cities. Moreover, the UIA has once again been given the implicit endorsement of Ali al-Sistani, the leading Shiite cleric in Iraq, which is expected to consolidate its vote among rural Shiites.

However, the UIA is unlikely to win a parliamentary majority as

it did in January. Sunni Arabs, who overwhelmingly boycotted the earlier election in protest at the US occupation and its atrocities in Fallujah, are being urged by religious leaders and resistance groups to vote this time. The Sunni-based coalitions include an alliance of Islamic fundamentalist parties, the Iraqi Accordance Front, and a coalition of secular parties, the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue, which espouses a similar ideology to the Baathist party of Saddam Hussein.

The Sunni lists may win as many as 60 to 70 seats. The Bush administration and US embassy in Iraq has been actively appealing to sections of the Sunni elite and former Baathist regime to join the puppet government in Baghdad in order to split the armed resistance to the occupation.

A former Iraqi army officer connected to the resistance told the British-based *Telegraph* on December 11 that guerilla fighters would be protecting Sunnis from threats by Al Qaeda to disrupt voting. "Sunnis should vote to make political gains," he declared. "We have sent leaflets telling Al Qaeda that they will face us if they attack voters." The newspaper also cited Abu Abdullah, a resistance leader, who branded Al Qaeda chief Musaab al-Zarqawi as an "American, Israeli and Iranian agent who is trying to keep our country unstable so that the Sunnis will keep facing occupation".

In the predominantly Kurdish provinces of northern Iraq, the Kurdish Alliance (KA) coalition is expected to win as many as 50 seats. The KA is centred on the Kurdish nationalist Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). Its perspective, and that of the Kurdish elite it represents, is to participate in a federal Iraqi government to ensure that the city of Kirkuk and the lucrative northern oil fields of Iraq are incorporated into the territory of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which rules northern Iraq as a virtual separate state.

The US embassy and the occupation forces appear to be working to ensure a high vote for the coalitions headed by the longtime American puppets, Iyad Allawi and Ahmed Chalabi. Despite the UIA's collaboration with US imperialism, the Shiite fundamentalists are not Washington's preferred governing party. SCIRI has close links with the Iranian regime, which may become the next target for US aggression. Sadr's organisation is viewed with continuing suspicion due to its anti-occupation uprising last year.

In November, the US military raided a detention centre where Iraqi security forces recruited from SCIRI's Badr Organisation militia were torturing Sunni prisoners. The media in Iraq has used the revelations to agitate for a high Sunni turnout and to tarnish the image of the UIA and SCIRI. At the same time, large sums of money, ostensibly from wealthy contributors across the Middle East, have flowed into the coffers of Allawi's Iraqi National List coalition to finance blanket television and newspaper advertisements.

Allawi, a secular Shiite, former Baathist and CIA asset who assisted in the planning and preparation of the US invasion of Iraq, was installed by the Bush administration as the interim prime minister in June 2004. In August 2004, he sanctioned the US military assault on the Najaf to dislodge Sadrist fighters who had taken control of the main Shiite religious sites in the city. In

November 2004, Allawi gave his blessing to the bloody US offensive against the predominantly Sunni Arab population in Fallujah.

During his tenure as interim prime minister, Allawi recruited large numbers of the Hussein regime's agents into the CIA-controlled Iraqi intelligence agency. At the same time, US special forces worked with the Iraqi interior ministry to establish the police commandos—the formation now being held responsible for the extra-judicial killings and torture of hundreds of anti-occupation opponents.

Among many Iraqis, Allawi's reputation for brutality is such that he is referred to as "Saddam without the moustache". Nevertheless, his campaign is directly appealing to the many secular Iraqis of all religious and ethnic backgrounds who are alarmed at the growing sectarian divide in the country. He is being presented as a lesser evil to the fundamentalists and as someone who can maintain Iraq's unity. One of the organisations that has joined his coalition and is assisting to perpetuate this lie is the Iraqi Communist Party.

The Iraqi National Congress (INC) of Ahmed Chalabi is also being promoted as an alternative to the Shiite fundamentalists. Chalabi is one of the main Iraqi exiles who collaborated in the US invasion and is a committed advocate of the free market restructuring of the economy.

In early 2004, Chalabi fell from favour with Washington due to his insistence on de-Baathification at a time when the US military was actively recruiting former Baathists into the new Iraqi security forces. He resurrected his political fortunes by negotiating a ceasefire between the Sadrists and the occupation. He joined with the UIA for the January election and, in the horse-trading that followed the ballot, was named as one of the transitional government's deputy prime ministers.

Last month, Chalabi visited Washington and was feted by the Bush administration. While his INC will not win many seats, the US backing for Chalabi is likely to see him assume a prominent position in the next government. The *Washington Post*, citing unnamed White House officials, referred to him as Vice President Dick Cheney's preferred candidate for prime minister.

The final result of the election may not be known until the New Year. As well as the voting inside Iraq, as many as 1.5 million Iraqi émigrés are entitled to vote. Even before a result is in, however, US officials in Iraq will be engaged in sordid behind-the-scenes negotiations between the competing factions to determine the make-up of a government that meets the interests of Washington.



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