

US ambassador “will remain the critical behind-the-scenes power,” says New York Times

## Iraqi election to rubber-stamp continued US occupation

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The Bush administration and the American media are, predictably, hailing the December 15 election as a giant step towards democracy in Iraq. In reality, as they well know, Thursday's balloting only provides a parliamentary screen—and a very thin one—for continued US occupation and domination. Whatever the outcome of the voting, real power in the oil-rich country will remain firmly in the hands of the American military and the chief US representative in Baghdad, Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad.

The period leading up to the election suggests that rival factions in Iraq are preparing feverishly for civil war. Nearly all the major parties and coalitions contesting the election focused their campaigns on religious or ethnic appeals, and post-election conflicts could produce a communal bloodbath leading to the breakup of Iraq, or intensified US military operations.

This week another huge torture chamber run by the Badr Organization, the largest Shi'ite militia, was uncovered, at a Ministry of Interior facility in Baghdad. More than 600 prisoners were found, many of them showing signs of starvation or torture. Sunni parties highlighted the discovery, broadcasting video interviews with prisoners and denouncing the government of Prime Minister Ibrahim Jafaari for trying to cover up the existence of the prison until after the vote.

The commander of the Badr Organization, Haidi Amery, issued a public threat Tuesday against former interim Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, the longtime CIA asset who heads a secular party and is favored by the Bush administration to lead a future coalition regime. Referring to Allawi's past membership in the political party of Saddam Hussein, Amery said, “We are warning now: We will raise our weapons as we did before if the Baathists come to power again.”

In the southern Iraqi city of Nasariya, thousands of Shi'ite demonstrators rioted in reaction to comments critical of the senior Shi'ite clergy made by a commentator on the Al Jazeera television network. They attacked and burned offices of Allawi's party as well as an office of the Iraqi Communist Party, which is in an electoral alliance with Allawi. Hundreds of uniformed policemen marched in similar protests in the Shi'ite holy city of Najaf, brandishing weapons and chanting slogans for the United Iraqi

Alliance (UIA), the ruling bloc of Shi'ite religious parties.

Last week a conference of Shi'ite political leaders in Najaf recommended that the nine southern provinces where Shi'ites predominate establish a regional security force. Abdul Aziz Hakim, leader of the largest Shi'ite party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) reiterated his plan, made possible by the new constitution, to establish an autonomous region for the nine provinces. This would represent a separate Shi'ite state in the making, with nearly half Iraq's population and land area and more than half its oil.

There were indications of brazen attempts to rig the voting. On Sunday, officials in Baghdad said they were investigating a 400 percent increase in the number of registered voters in Kirkuk, the oil-rich northern city that has been a flashpoint of conflict between Kurdish, Arab and Turkoman groups. Some 81,000 names have been struck from the voter roles by auditors checking for fraud and duplication. There were also reports, widely circulated in the media but denied by the government, that an oil tanker filled with pro-UIA ballots had been detected and stopped at the Iranian border.

The election is likely to produce a deadlocked parliament that may be unable to fulfill the role assigned it under the constitution drafted under US auspices and narrowly ratified in nationwide balloting October 15. The first task of the new assembly will be to elect a president and two vice presidents, who will in turn select the prime minister, the day-to-day head of government and the most powerful state official.

A two-thirds majority is required for the election of the president, making a prolonged stalemate very possible given that the Shi'ite United Iraqi Alliance is expected to get something less than half the seats, with the balance held by the Kurdish coalition, Sunni religious parties, and secular blocs led by Allawi and Ahmed Chalabi, another longtime US stooge.

The Sunni parties have been induced to participate in the election with the promise that the new parliament will discuss a series of amendments to the new constitution, which was overwhelmingly opposed in the Sunni-populated provinces. But such changes—some directed at the more extreme provisions for decentralization, others aimed at preventing the imposition of a

fundamentalist Islamic religious code in areas like women's rights and family law—would themselves require a two-thirds vote of approval in the legislature, followed by approval in another nationwide referendum.

Both the prospect of a deadlocked parliament and the reality of continued US military occupation ensure that whatever regime emerges from the December 15 election will be a puppet of Washington. As *New York Times*—a fervent editorial supporter of the election—admitted in its news analysis the day of the vote, “American officials fully expect that for months after the Iraqi election on Thursday the American ambassador in Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, will remain the critical behind-the-scenes power in the creation of a factious coalition to run the country.”

For all the talk of democracy, the Bush administration has no intention of conceding what the vast majority of the Iraqi people clearly want: the rapid withdrawal of the US military. All the major parties, with the exception of the Kurdish alliance, claim to support an end to the occupation of their country. Even the opinion polls conducted by Western news organizations show that two-thirds or more of Iraqis want US forces withdrawn as quickly as possible. But the Bush administration not only refuses to propose a timetable for withdrawal, it has begun construction of a series of heavily fortified military bases that would be available to the Pentagon indefinitely.

Ambassador Khalilzad has made little effort to disguise his role as US proconsul in charge of an only nominally sovereign Iraq. On Tuesday he bluntly contradicted the accounts of the second Baghdad torture center provided by the Jafaari government, which sought to minimize the brutality. “It was far worse than slapping around,” he said, adding, “We are very committed to looking at all the facilities. It’s unacceptable for this kind of abuse to take place.” The US embassy has sought to use the torture revelations to undermine Jafaari and the UIA, considered too close to Iran, and build up the Sunni and secular coalitions.

The same day Khalilzad issued a public warning to Iran, which has major influence on SCIRI and other groups in the UIA. “There’s predatory states, the hegemonic states with aspirations of regional hegemony in the areas, such as Iran,” he said. “While we would like good relations, as good a relationship as possible between Iraq and its neighbors, we do not want Iran to interfere in Iraqi internal affairs.”

This is a staggering piece of hypocrisy, coming from the representative of the most predatory government in the world, one that aspires to global, not merely regional, hegemony, and which has 160,000 troops and tens of thousands of intelligence and security agents presently engaged in much more than “interfering” in Iraq’s internal affairs.

Khalilzad’s comment was not just a display of arrogance. It underscores one of the principal purposes of the American occupation of Iraq: this tortured country is to be used as a launching pad for further acts of US military aggression in the Middle East. For all the talk of limited withdrawals of US troops in the course of the coming year, any soldiers pulled out of Iraq are more likely to end up in Iran or Syria than to come home to their families.

This is the context in which to judge Bush’s latest speech on the

Iraq war, delivered December 14 at the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington. He echoed Khalilzad in making thinly veiled threats to Iran and Syria, while once again running through the standard litany of White House lies about Iraq. (According to a compilation by [washingtonpost.com](http://washingtonpost.com), in his four Iraq speeches over the past two weeks Bush mentioned “democracy” 83 times, “freedom” 68 times, “security” 75 times, and “victory” 42 times).

In a subsequent interview with Fox News, Bush declared that he “absolutely” would have invaded Iraq even had he known then that Saddam Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction. This statement underscores that WMD was only a pretext for an invasion already long planned for other reasons.

What were those other reasons? Fox diplomatically did not ask. But there is one feature of Iraq which has remained constant through all the lies and manipulations of the Bush administration, as well as the vicissitudes of invasion, occupation and rebellion: Iraq remains the possessor of the world’s second-largest oil reserves, which are now under the control of American imperialism, and destined, under the US-dictated constitution, to be made available to American oil companies.

Rounding out this degrading spectacle is the Democratic Party, the nominal opposition to Bush in Congress. Before his Wednesday speech, a group of 17 pro-war House Democrats assembled in the Roosevelt Room of the White House to receive an hour-long briefing from Bush, Vice President Cheney, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, General Peter Pace (chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) and Khalilzad, who, accompanied by top US commander General George W. Casey, addressed the group by satellite from Baghdad. The Democrats generally praised the report, saying that it set a new and more realistic tone for US prospects in Iraq.

Forty-one Senate Democrats signed a letter to Bush this week, urging him to make 2006 a “year of transition” in Iraq, a phrase which allows the Democrats to express hope for some withdrawal of American troops, but only in the event that forces of the Iraqi puppet government are available to replace them—the same formula advanced by the White House. The letter urged Bush to “tell the leaders of all groups and political parties in Iraq that they need to make the compromises necessary to achieve the broad-based and sustainable political settlement that is essential for defeating the insurgency in Iraq within the schedule they set for themselves.”

In other words, like the White House, the Democratic Party seeks a military victory over the Iraqis who are fighting the US occupation.



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