

After the Iraq election: Washington steps in to shape the next government

James Cogan

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The first results for the December 15 election in occupied Iraq indicate that the largest block of the 275 seats in the next parliament will be once again held by the Shiite fundamentalist United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), with most of the remainder held by other explicitly sectarian formations—the Kurdish Alliance (KA) and coalitions of Sunni Arab parties.

Based on the partial count released on December 19, the UIA will win 120 to 130 seats on the basis of large votes from Iraq's majority Shiite Muslim population. The Kurdish bloc is tipped to win 45 or more seats. In the three northern, predominantly Kurdish provinces, the KA won over 80 percent of the vote.

The Iraqi Accordance Front, a coalition centred on the Iraqi Islamic Party, won 19 percent of the vote in Baghdad and over 50 percent in central provinces with a majority Sunni population. The front is tacitly supported by the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), an umbrella organisation of several thousand Sunni clerics. A secular Sunni coalition made up of sympathisers of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party gained a smaller vote. Overall, the Sunni parties may win up to 50 seats.

Some 20 seats appear to have been won by an array of smaller parties, including a Kurdish Islamic movement, regional and tribal-based groups, ethnic Turkomen organisations and Christian associations.

The parties most associated with the US invasion of Iraq were repudiated by the Iraqi people. Despite blanket media promotion, the Iraqi National List of Iyad Allawi secured just 12 to 14 percent of the vote and is expected to win only about 30 seats. Allawi, a longtime CIA asset, was installed as the first interim prime minister of Iraq in June 2004. Among masses of Iraqis, he is viewed as an American-backed thug who endorsed the ensuing US military assaults on the Shiite city of Najaf and the Sunni city of Fallujah.

The other US favourite, the Iraqi National Congress (INC) of Ahmed Chalabi, appears to have won less than one percent of the vote and will hold few if any seats. Chalabi has been on Washington's payroll since the first Gulf War in 1990-1991. In 2004, he was pushed aside when he insisted on continuing a Baathist purge when the US military was seeking to recruit members of the previous regime. While he returned to favour in Washington later that year, he is despised by the Iraqi people. On December 18, *Newsday* referred to Chalabi as the "dark-horse candidate" for prime minister, but added that "many Iraqis regard him as a carpetbagger".

The composition of the next Iraqi government will not, however, be primarily determined by the votes that were cast on December 15. Rather, the regime in Baghdad will be decided by dealing-making and US arm-twisting to ensure that its leading figures implement Washington's demands. Above all, US plans involve opening up the Iraqi oil industry to foreign investors, crushing the anti-occupation insurgency and establishing permanent American military bases to extend US influence more broadly in the Middle East.

The clearest indication that the Bush administration intends to firmly put its stamp on the next puppet regime was the unannounced arrival of Vice President Dick Cheney in Iraq on December 18, just days after the election. Before even informing Iraqi Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari that he was in the country, Cheney held hour-long talks with American ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and senior military commanders. Jaafari and current Iraqi president, Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, were then summoned to the US embassy for a meeting with Cheney.

During the campaign, the Bush administration made little attempt to hide its desire to substantially weaken the influence of the UIA. While the UIA has loyally collaborated with the US occupation, one of its main components, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), has close ties with the Iranian regime. Under conditions where Washington is steadily escalating tensions with Tehran, SCIRI is not considered a reliable enough ally in what may involve military action against Iran.

Over the past several months, Washington has taken steps to undermine the UIA and SCIRI in particular. Above all, the US-led occupation forces have sought the endorsement of the election by the Sunni Arab elite that dominated under the former Baathist regime.

Sunnis make up as much as 20 percent of the population and provide the main popular backing for the armed anti-US resistance. They overwhelmingly boycotted the January 30 vote, assisting the Shiite UIA to win an outright majority in the parliament. This time the Sunni turnout pushed the UIA share to well below 50 percent. To facilitate this, the US military went as far as withdrawing troops from the major Sunni city of Ramadi allowing insurgents to organise the ballot. With masked guerillas guarding polling stations, turnout in the city of 300,000 was estimated at 80 percent.

In the lead-up to the election, the US military also raided Iraqi interior ministry detention centres in Baghdad where

predominantly Sunni prisoners were being tortured by members of SCIRI's Badr Organisation militia. Interior Minister Bayan Jabr is a SCIRI and Badr Organisation leader. The raids were used by Allawi in particular to try to tarnish SCIRI in the eyes of the Shiite population and attract support from Sunnis.

On the day of the election, Khalilzad pointedly declared that the next head of the securities ministry should be "trusted by all communities and not come from elements of the population that have militias"—an implicit call for the removal of Jabr and other SCIRI figures. He accused Iran of being a "predatory state", seeking to "interfere in Iraqi internal affairs", dovetailing with accusations by Sunni politicians that SCIRI is a fifth column for Tehran. Spelling out Washington's agenda, Khalilzad declared: "Since no single party will have a majority there will be a need for a very broad-based coalition."

The US machinations have not brought about the desired result, however. Sunnis overwhelmingly used their vote to express opposition to the foreign military presence, not to support Allawi. A teacher in Baqubah told the *Los Angeles Times*: "The most important issue for me is to get the occupation out." A Sunni voter in the town of Al Zubbiah told the BBC: "We're voting for the foreign troops to go home." A grocer interviewed by Associated Press declared: "Liberation is the most important thing for all Iraqis. I don't care if we die of thirst and hunger, as long as the Americans leave."

In the predominantly Shiite-populated southern provinces of Iraq, despite growing resentment over the catastrophic living conditions that face millions of people, the UIA won 70 to 95 percent of the vote. Nationally, the Shiite list has won well over 40 percent of the total. In Baghdad—the most populous province—the coalition won 1.4 million votes or 59 percent, and at least 30 seats of the 59 seats up for election.

This result in part stems from the participation of the Sadrist movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr in the UIA. In 2004, the Sadrists led an armed uprising among Shiites against the American military. This year the Sadrist leaders have used their support among poor working class Shiites to try to lever themselves into positions of power in the next regime. The Sadrists mobilised a large turnout for the UIA in the working class suburbs of Baghdad and other cities that are effectively under the control of Sadr's Mahdi Army militia and Sadrist-dominated police.

Representatives of the Sunni parties and Allawi's list, which appealed to secular Sunnis and Shiites, have accused the UIA-dominated security forces and Shiite militias of electoral fraud and voter intimidation. They have alleged that pro-UIA police in Basra and other southern cities disrupted the campaigning of other parties and threatened voters as they approached polling stations. More than 1,000 complaints have been filed with the electoral commission for investigation.

In Baghdad, the Sunni parties are alleging outright ballot stuffing to give the UIA a majority. Adnan al-Dulaimi, the head of the Iraqi Accordance Front, warned on December 20: "We will demand that the elections be held again in Baghdad. If this demand is not met, then we will resort to other measures." Whatever the truth of the particular allegations, in the communally charged atmosphere of the campaign, there was no doubt widespread intimidation and

fraud in many parts of the country.

The election outcome portends an even deeper quagmire for the US-led occupation. The Bush administration has consciously stoked up ethnic divisions since the March 2003 invasion to divert the immense social tensions in a communalist direction. The next parliament, even more than the previous one, will be made up of three mutually antagonistic sectarian blocs.

With close to half of the seats, the UIA will effectively be the kingmaker. Under the US-vetted constitution, next president and two vice-presidents, who comprise the presidential council responsible for nominating the prime minister, must be elected by a two-thirds parliamentary vote. As the dominant bloc, the UIA will be in a position to demand that one of its leaders takes the key post.

The election result also ensures that the controversial constitution drawn up by Khalilzad, the Kurdish parties and the Shiite bloc, and adopted by referendum on October 15, cannot be amended without the UIA's agreement. Any amendments require two-thirds support in the parliament.

The constitution undermines the central Iraqi state by permitting the establishment of regional governments with substantial powers over Iraq's oil and gas and the right to establish their own internal security forces. In northern Iraq, the Kurdish elite is pushing to include the oil-rich province of Tamin and the city of Kirkuk in its de-facto state in northern Iraq. In the south, SCIRI advocates a regional state that encompasses nine predominantly Shiite provinces, with close to half the country's population and as much as 60 percent of its oil and gas.

The Sunni Arab elite called for a high Sunni turnout hoping to introduce significant changes to the constitution to strengthen the central government. Instead, Sunnis face economic marginalisation as well as ongoing repression by the US military and a Shiite-dominated regime in Baghdad. After a brief lull during the election, the scale of insurgent attacks against American and government targets has begun to climb.

Whatever the final election outcome, what is certain is that US ambassador Khalilzad, who has played a key role in assembling the US puppet state in Afghanistan, has been tasked by Cheney with fashioning the next government to meet Washington's requirements. The gulf between the new regime and the sentiments of masses ordinary Iraqis will only fuel the existing opposition and armed resistance to the occupation and broaden its dimensions.



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