Iraqi elections underscore fragility of US occupation

James Cogan
25 February 2009

The January 31 Iraqi provincial elections have resulted in a strengthened position for Da'wa, the Shiite fundamentalist party of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki. Da'wa's "Coalition of the State of Law" obtained about 25 percent of the vote and has gained sufficient seats in 10 provinces to dominate their governments.

The outcome is not the product of popular enthusiasm for the election or Maliki's party. Large sections of the population are profoundly alienated from all the parties that have supported the US occupation. War-weary and exhausted, millions of people had no confidence that anything would be done to address the lack of jobs, basic services and sanitation. Just 51 percent of registered voters cast a ballot.

There are clear indications that many of those who abstained from voting once followed the Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, who gained support in 2003 and 2004 by opposing the occupation and calling for Iraqi resistance. In the poverty-stricken working class districts of Baghdad, previously the main Sadrist stronghold, the turnout was barely 40 percent.

The Sadrist mass base began to dissipate after its representatives joined the pro-occupation government in 2005. During 2007 and 2008, its leadership acquiesced in a series of brutal military operations ordered by Maliki against the remnants of its armed wing, the Mahdi Army. While Sadr still has a following, his influence has dramatically eroded. The two electoral blocs supported by the cleric received between 5 and 10 percent of the vote, winning a small number of seats in 11 provinces.

Demonstrating the incorporation of the Sadrists into the official political setup, Sadr's supporters are reportedly in discussions over entering a coalition with Da'wa and forming the government in some provinces. Less than a year ago, Maliki and Da'wa backed military assaults on Sadrist strongholds in Basra and Baghdad, during which thousands of Sadrist loyalists were killed. Sadr issued a statement this week declaring it was time to "turn a new page" and "forget the past".

Da'wa attracted support from voters who identify with Maliki's claim to be reviving Iraq after nearly two decades of devastating sanctions, war and foreign occupation. Maliki claimed that his crackdown on the Sadrists had established "law and order" and that the security pact he negotiated with Washington was an agreement to end the occupation by 2010. In reality, it allows for an indefinite US military presence.

Unlike previous elections, Da'wa did not run in a coalition with the largest Shiite fundamentalist party, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). Instead, it campaigned as an opponent of ISCI's ambition to transform the southern provinces into an autonomous Shiite region and, in an appeal to Arab nationalist and anti-Persian sentiment, highlighted ISCI's links with the Iranian regime. ISCI lost every province it previously controlled.

In the provinces of Ninevah and Diyala, which have large Sunni Arab populations, nationalist pitches were even more pronounced, directed primarily against the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in the country's north.

The KRG currently has jurisdiction over the three

© World Socialist Web Site

northern provinces of Irbil, Dohuk and Sulaymaniyah. The Kurdish nationalist parties that rule the territory have greater ambitions, however. They aspire to bring the oil-rich province of Tamim and its capital Kirkuk under the KRG, as well as a stretch of predominantly Kurdish-populated territory in Ninevah and Diyala.

The Kurdish claims were tacitly supported by the US in 2003, as payback for the assistance of the Kurdish parties during the invasion and their participation in the subsequent US puppet governments in Baghdad. Clauses in the US-supervised Iraqi constitution stipulated that a referendum would be held in the so-called disputed territories by December 2007, allowing the populace to decide whether to join the KRG.

Arabs, ethnic Turkomen, Assyrian Christians and other minorities who live in the disputed areas fear discrimination under any Kurdish state. The Iraqi Arab elite—both Shiite and Sunni—oppose Kurdish control over Kirkuk and Iraq's northern oilfields. The Turkish government also virulently opposes any strengthening of the KRG, out of concerns that it could encourage greater separatist agitation among Turkey's large Kurdish minority.

Worried about an escalation of ethnic clashes or even a Turkish invasion of northern Iraq, the US has repeatedly prevailed on the Kurdish parties to curb their ambitions. No referendum has been held in the disputed territories and the provincial election in Kirkuk was postponed.

Maliki has used the opportunity to strengthen the position of the central government in the province. In January, he ordered a largely Arab Iraqi Army division to take up positions on the outskirts of Kirkuk, ignoring the protests of the KRG.

KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani warned earlier this month that if the fate of Kirkuk was not settled before US troops pulled out of the city there would be "war between both sides". However, Da'wa's gains in the provincial elections are likely to embolden Maliki to be even more aggressive.

In Ninevah, the January 31 ballot produced a highly volatile situation. The outgoing provincial government was dominated by Kurdish parties, as the vast majority of Sunnis boycotted the previous 2005 election. The Ninevah government will now be controlled by a Sunni Arab-based coalition, Al Hadbaa, whose policies are confrontational. Its stated plan is to ask for central government assistance to force the KRG peshmerga militia that occupied the area in 2003 to leave. The current Kurdish provincial deputy governor stated this week that if non-Kurdish troops moved into the areas, "we will stop them".

This situation underscores the ongoing crisis facing the US in Iraq. Washington needs military assets and troops from Iraq for use in Afghanistan or for other neo-colonial operations, but its occupation of Iraq rests on a fragile political base. Any withdrawal of US forces threatens to create a vacuum in which open warfare could erupt between rival factions of the Iraqi elite.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site