

Iraqi election for a new US puppet regime

James Cogan
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The third parliamentary election held in Iraq since the US invasion of the country in March 2003 took place yesterday, with some 6,529 candidates, 86 political parties and 20 electoral coalitions competing to win 325 seats in the legislature. A preliminary result is expected to be announced on Tuesday and a final result by the end of the month. Initial indications suggest that none of the main coalitions will win an outright majority.

The voting was disrupted by some 100 small explosions in areas of Baghdad and other cities that killed as many as 38 people. Overall, however, a massive security operation involving hundreds of thousands of Iraqi troops and police, supported by US aircraft and helicopter gunships, prevented anti-occupation opponents from carrying out threatened attacks on polling stations.

The reportedly high turnout among voters elicited a predictable response from the American political establishment and in the media. President Barack Obama declared it was proof that “the future of Iraq belongs to the people of Iraq”. Defense Secretary Robert Gates said it “was a good day for the Iraqis”. The *New York Times*’s report hailed Sunday’s voting as “arguably the most open, most competitive election in the nation’s long history of colonial rule, dictatorship and war”.

Concealed by such empty statements is the real state of Iraq. Over one million people have been killed and at least two million are living as refugees in neighbouring countries. The majority of the population has suffered a staggering decline in living standards. Entire cities and suburbs are still in ruins as a result of US bombing and other operations to suppress Iraqi opposition to the invasion. Depleted uranium munitions have contaminated much of the country. A BBC report this month documented a terrible increase in birth defects in the Anbar province city of Fallujah, which was virtually destroyed by American forces in 2004. Women are now being advised not to get pregnant. The most affected area is the working class suburb of al-Julan, where boys as young as 14 fought and died to protect their families and homes from US marines.

Far from its “long history of colonial rule” ending, Iraq has been reduced over the past seven years to a de facto colony of

the United States. It continues to be occupied by close to 100,000 American troops. Its so-called sovereign government takes no major decision without consulting the massive US embassy that dominates the central Baghdad skyline. The candidates who stood yesterday are representatives of the venal ruling elite that has been prepared to collaborate with a destructive and brutal occupying power in the hope of gaining privilege, position and wealth.

US General David Petraeus coined the term “Iraqcracy” last month to describe the flagrant resort to bribery, intimidation and sectarian, tribal or ethnic appeals that marked the efforts of Iraqi politicians to win popular support. This reality, which the US occupation has created, will determine the make-up of the next Iraqi government. It can be stated in advance and without fear of contradiction that it will be an unstable pro-US puppet regime, riven by communalist tensions that could lurch into open civil war.

Four coalitions are likely to win the bulk of the seats in parliament.

* The current prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki, contested the election at the head of the State of Law bloc, which is made up of his own Shiite fundamentalist Da’wa party and a section of the Sunni Arab “Awakening” movement in Anbar. The Awakening refers to the process during 2007 in which insurgent commanders convinced some 100,000 predominantly Sunni fighters to cease fighting and in return received lucrative US pay-offs. The rank-and-file insurgents received a US-paid stipend and a guarantee from the occupation forces and Maliki that they would stop the slaughter of Sunni civilians by US-backed Shiite death squads in the Iraqi military.

Maliki has sought to create a base of support within the bloated 600,000-strong security apparatus and among those sections of the population who simply want stability to rebuild their shattered lives. He has projected himself as a “strongman” who is prepared to suppress any opposition. In 2008, Maliki ordered major operations against those elements of the Shiite Mahdi Army militia in Basra, Amarah and Baghdad that had refused to obey the orders of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr to lay down their arms and collaborate with the occupation. Maliki

has also sought to whip up anti-Kurdish Arab nationalism, by opposing a constitutionally required referendum in the oil-rich province of Kirkuk on whether to affiliate with the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) in the country's north.

* The main Shiite religious parties, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the political movement of Moqtada al-Sadr, stood as part of the United Iraqi Alliance coalition (UIA). The alliance is expected to win a significant proportion of the seats in the majority Shiite provinces of the country's south and the working class Shiite districts of Baghdad, such as Sadr City. The UIA has indicated it is prepared to enter into coalition with Maliki's State of Law, as long as Maliki is not the prime minister. Throughout the election campaign, its rivals have repeatedly labelled the UIA as a puppet of the Iranian regime. Moqtada al-Sadr fueled the accusations by making a pre-election appeal for support from a press conference in Tehran.

Statements by US officials have left little doubt that Washington is hoping to see a considerable weakening of the UIA in the Iraqi parliament. The alliance has waged a campaign focused on whipping up sectarian Shiite fears of a political resurgence by elements associated with the former, Sunni-dominated Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. A UIA-controlled body, the Justice and Accountability Board, successfully banned hundreds of Sunni and secular candidates from standing in the election on the grounds they supported or had promoted Baathist ideology.

* The bloc with the greatest sympathy from the Obama administration appears to be the Iraqiya coalition headed by former prime minister Iyad Allawi and current vice-president Tariq al-Hashemi. Iraqiya campaigned as a secular and nationalist opposition to both State of Law and the more overtly Shiite fundamentalist UIA. Allawi is a tried and tested servant of US imperialism. He was intimately involved with the Bush administration in plotting the US invasion of Iraq and was installed as the head of the first government created by the occupation regime in 2004.

Iraqiya and Maliki's State of Law vied for support from similar social layers—the security forces and the middle class, both Shiite and Sunni. It has made numerous condemnations of the UIA as an Iranian front and painted Maliki's government as incompetent and sectarian. Nevertheless, there has been considerable speculation that Iraqiya will seek to form a coalition government with State of Law but with Allawi as the prime minister.

* The main Kurdish parties again stood as a bloc, the Kurdish Alliance. They were challenged by a break-away grouping, the Movement for Change, which according to polling could win as

many as 10 of the 43 national parliamentary seats elected in the Kurdish region. As in the previous parliaments, the Kurdish bloc will be seeking to function as kingmaker, delivering office to whichever of the larger Arab-based factions is prepared to give the best terms.

Depending on the result, the formation of a new government could be protracted. After the December 2005 election, it took close to six months for the Shiite coalition to install Maliki as prime minister and parcel out control of state ministries to various allies, the Kurdish bloc and token Sunni representatives. In 2010, the process could be even more volatile, as it is likely that two or three combinations may be able to get a parliamentary majority and form a government.

The primary function of the next government will be to continue to legitimise the US claim that Iraq is now a sovereign state. It will nominally preside over the withdrawal of US combat troops in August and the “end” of the occupation at the end of 2011, when the remaining US forces are supposed to leave. In reality, the US plan is for an indefinite presence in the country. The “Strategic Framework” between Iraq and the US, which was drafted in the final months of the Bush administration and endorsed by Obama, dictates that there will be a “long term relationship in economic, diplomatic, cultural and security fields”. The US military will not be leaving its major bases at places like Balad, Al Asad and Tallil.

The overall American strategy, and the real motive for the 2003 invasion, continues to be to dominate the Middle East and its energy resources in order to dictate terms to the United States's European and Asian rivals. Whatever its final composition, the next Iraqi government will remain a pawn in a broader game of great power rivalries.



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