

<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/spip.php?article342>



Iraq

# On the forthcoming election in Iraq

- IV Online magazine - 2005 - IV363 - January 2005 -

Publication date: Wednesday 12 January 2005

---

**Copyright © International Viewpoint - online socialist magazine - All rights reserved**

---

**The hypocrisy of the Bush administration is limitless: when George W. Bush and his buddies boast about the forthcoming election in Iraq as an achievement of the civilizing mission that they supposedly took upon themselves in bringing democracy to backward Muslims, they sound like a boss boasting about having raised the wages of the workers in his factory as an illustration of his eagerness to improve their living standard, when, in reality, the raise was imposed on him by the workers going on strike.**

[<https://www.internationalviewpoint.org/IMG/jpg/fal1.jpg>]

The fact of the matter is that democracy has never been more than a subsidiary pretext for the Bush administration in its drive to seize control of the crucially strategic area stretching from the Arab-Persian Gulf to Central Asia, a pretext ranking after others such as Al-Qaida or the WMD. Most of the vectors of US influence in this area are despotic regimes, from the oldest ally of Washington and most antidemocratic of all states, the Saudi Kingdom, to the newest allies, the police states of such post-Soviet Mafia-like republics as Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan, operating through such great champions of democracy as generals Mubarak of Egypt and Musharraf of Pakistan.

Washington favors elections only if and when they are most likely to be won by its henchmen. When Arafat, facing Bush and Sharon's challenge to his legitimacy, suggested holding elections in the Palestinian territories, the proposal was categorically rejected, since it was clear he would win overwhelmingly, as the Palestinian people would vote for him in defiance of Israel and the US. It is only after his death that they accepted that elections be held, not without heavily interfering in the process, intimidating another candidate into withdrawal, harassing others, and campaigning blatantly for the man of their choice - as did Blair, who paid Abu Mazen visit for this purpose.

True, elections were organized in Afghanistan, but only because there were no real stakes: the Taliban and other anti-US forces were prevented from participating, and no Afghan warlord would have risked antagonizing the US seriously for the sake of winning a position as nothing more than a representation of US authorities in Kabul. The Afghan warlords know that their control of their fiefdoms is much more effective and unfettered than Karzai's control over the capital, which is the only piece of real estate where he exerts some kind of power, by proxy. They accepted him for "president" a second time through a mockery of elections in the same way that they accepted him the first time through their horse trading with Washington before the fall of Kabul - though he was a non-entity in terms both of social basis and military force, his collaboration with the CIA being his "credentials." Karzai was accepted precisely because he was perceived as no real threat to any of the warlords.

A parallel does not exist in Iraq. There the US occupation has been faced from the start with a power-vacuum that its invasion created, aggravated by Bremer's neocon-inspired move to dismantle whatever remained of the Baathist power apparatuses. Apart from the de facto autonomous Kurdish area in the North, there were no warlords in Iraq with any real power. Thus Washington faced the "democracy paradox" (Huntington), created by the fact that the overwhelming majority of Arab Iraqis were - and are even more now - hostile to US control of their land, and hence any truly representative democratically elected government would seek to get rid of the occupation.

This "paradox" led to another: the US, the standard-bearer of democracy, which had altruistically occupied Iraq to bring the benefits of democracy to backward Muslim people, tried to postpone as far as possible the prospect of holding elections and to replace them with appointed bodies and a US-designed permanent constitution. This is what Proconsul Bremer sought to impose in June 2003, only a few weeks after the end of the invasion. He was countered by none other than one of the most traditionalist members of Iraq's Muslim Shia hierarchy, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Husseini al-Sistani. The confrontation between the two men escalated until the Ayatollah called for demonstrations to impose democratic elections on the occupiers: in January 2004, huge numbers of people poured into the streets of

several Iraqi cities, especially in the Shia areas, with hundreds of thousands shouting “yes to election, no to designation.”

To be sure, the Ayatollah had his own motivations, which were no more a “pure,” “Jeffersonian” (as they like to say in Washington) attachment to democracy than Bush and Bremer's were. His calculation was simple: the Shia constitute the overwhelming majority of the Iraqi population, almost two-thirds, and yet they have always been downtrodden by various kinds of despotic rulers. Instituting an electoral mechanism would allow the Shia to legitimately dictate the fate of the country. The electoral process is the best channel through which the Shia can exert their majority rights and sort out the balance of forces among them at one and the same time - since there is no more or less unified Shia political movement in Iraq comparable to what existed in Iran under Khomeini's leadership. Sistani - who never adhered to Khomeini's doctrine of *velayat-e faqih* (“leadership of the jurisprudent,” a formula pointing to the pyramid-like rule of the Shia quasi-clergy) - would still see to it that the laws and regulations of the country conform to Islamic rules (the Shariah, his own most rigorist fatwas, etc.). On this issue, too, Sistani is intransigent.

Bremer had to backtrack, for fear of facing a massive anti-US pro-democracy insurgency that would have ruined the last pretext for Washington's occupation of Iraq. Through a face-saving mediation by the UN, Bremer, and his bosses in Washington, agreed reluctantly to hold elections no later than the end of January 2005. (The UN envoy was none other than Lakhdar Brahimi, who as a member of the military-backed government supported the interruption of the electoral process in Algeria in 1992, when the Islamic Salvation Front was about to win a majority of seats.) The Bush administration thereby bought itself several months in order to devise a way out of its dilemma.

Had the elections been organized in the first months following the invasion, as Sistani insisted, they would have taken place in a much more orderly, all-embracing and therefore legitimate fashion. Washington would have been faced with an indisputably legitimate government asking it to withdraw its troops from Iraq. To prevent that from happening, Bremer argued hypocritically that there were no available electoral lists and that it would take a long time to prepare them. Sistani replied that the food-rationing lists and cards established under UN supervision were perfectly suitable for the purpose. The occupation forces eventually agreed, but with a delay of more than one year, during which time the situation in Iraq deteriorated to its present tragic condition.

In a sense, the US occupation produced this deterioration - whether deliberately or not, it is difficult to tell, though the most likely scenario is that, once again, the apprentice-sorcerers in Washington have gotten results they were not consciously seeking. Having accepted to hold elections, Washington went into a thorough revision of its policies in Iraq: a vicious onslaught against the most prominent rebellious forces in the country - the Fundamentalist-Nationalist-Baathist alliance in the Sunni city of Fallujah, as well as the Shia Fundamentalist movement of Moqtada al-Sadr - in order to try to strengthen its hold on the country. The neocons' buddy Chalabi was replaced with the CIA-collaborator Allawi as the key Iraqi US stooge, and a farcical “transfer of sovereignty” was organized surreptitiously on June 28, 2003. Allawi tried to play it tough, proclaiming a state of emergency, reinstating the death penalty, etc. and, above all, endorsing with his very transparent Iraqi cover the continuing onslaught by US forces.

The attempt at crushing Moqtada al-Sadr's movement culminated in the Shia city of Najaf. Sistani, after having let the young al-Sadr reach a situation where he was on the verge of a crushing and bloody defeat, obviously in order to tame him, intervened to stop the US onslaught and thereby confirm his unchallengeable leadership of the Shia community. The second assault on Fallujah, in the immediate aftermath of the US elections, seemed to make no sense. The US occupation could not have any illusion - at this point in time - about its ability to stop the violence in the country by resorting to such violent means. Instead, there is serious reason to believe that the real purpose was precisely to aggravate the chaotic conditions in Iraq in order to diminish the legitimacy of the outcome of the January 30 elections.

## On the forthcoming election in Iraq

---

Washington's duplicity could not be more blatant: on the one hand, Bush and his Iraqi official stooges state their firm commitment to hold the elections on time; on the other, Allawi's "party" joined a coalition of Saudi/Wahhabi-linked Sunni groups in demanding the postponement of the elections. The Iraqi Sunni "president" echoed staunch US allies in the region, like the Saudi and Jordanian monarchies, in warning of an Iranian conspiracy to get hold of Iraq as a major step toward establishing a "Shia crescent" stretching from Lebanon to Iran, a new version of the "axis of evil," more formidable than even Bush's original one. The Saudi/Wahhabi-linked Muslim Brotherhood, the key component of which is its Egyptian branch, denounced the elections under the guise that they are to be held under occupation. Its Iraqi branch, the Islamic Party, after having registered for the elections, announced its withdrawal, and joined the Sunni "Council of Muslim ulamas" in denouncing the elections in advance.

The fact is that the sharp increase in the level of violence fostered by the US occupation's own onslaughts jeopardized greatly the likelihood of a meaningful turnout of electors in the areas where the Sunni mixture of Fundamentalist-Nationalist-Baathist forces is active. Therefore, whatever their intentions, the Sunni forces proclaiming their withdrawal from the electoral race, are just acknowledging the fact that the major part of their potential electorate will very probably stay cautiously at home on the day of elections. Not that the Sunni population is politically convinced of the need to "boycott" the elections: earlier polls had shown them to be massively willing to enjoy, like their fellow citizens, this first pluralistic election after decades of despotism in their country. But they have been definitely frightened by deadly threats from various "resistance" groups into shunning the elections.

The so-called Iraqi resistance is a heterogeneous conglomerate of forces, many of them purely local. For a major part, these are people revolted by the heavy-handed occupation of their country, fighting against the occupiers and their armed Iraqi auxiliaries. But another segment of the forces engaged in violent actions in Iraq is composed of utterly reactionary fanatics, mainly of the Islamic Fundamentalist kind, who make no distinction between civilians, Iraqis included, and armed personnel, and resort to horrible acts, like the decapitation of Asian migrant workers and the kidnapping and/or assassination of all kinds of persons who are in no way hostile or harmful to the Iraqi national cause. These acts are being used in Washington to counterbalance the effect of the legitimate attacks against the US troops: the task of presenting the "enemy" as evil is thus made very easy.

This means, incidentally, that any unqualified support for the "Iraqi resistance" as a whole in Western countries, where the antiwar movement is badly needed, is utterly counter-productive as much as it is deeply wrong (when paved with good political intentions). There should be a clear-cut distinction between anti-occupation acts that are legitimate and acts by so-called "resistance" groups that are to be denounced. One very obvious case in point are the sectarian attacks by Al-Zarqawi group against Shias. This being said, it has been clear until now that the most fruitful strategy in opposing the occupation is the one led by Sistani, and that attempts at derailing the elections and de-legitimizing them in advance can only play into the hands of the US occupation.

Those most active in trying to derail the elections are not really concerned by the fact that they will be held under continuing occupation. After all, the history of decolonization is full of instances of elections or consultations held under occupation as major steps toward independence and the evacuation of foreign troops. For many years, the Palestinians have been fighting for the right to hold elections under Israeli occupation. This argument is a thin disguise for the fear of holding elections on the part of forces who know that they are condemned to be in a minority or to be completely marginalized in free elections. (This also holds true for Allawi, whose total lack of popularity would be expressed in the outcome of any fair elections, though he is compelled to act according to his mandate and cannot state openly his true wishes.)

To this is added the argument of the likes of Zarqawi, recently endorsed by Bin Laden: the elections are impious because they are held under "positive," i.e. man-made, law, whereas the only "legitimate" elections are those held under the rule of the Shariah. The utterly reactionary character of this argument needs no comment. But the truth is that there is a common ground here between Bin Laden and Sistani: both of them believe that the Shariah should be the main, if not unique, source of legislation. The difference is that Bin Laden, aside from being much more fanatical,

## On the forthcoming election in Iraq

---

is dedicated to his crazy belief that he could achieve victory through terrorist violence, whereas Sistani - who warned the UN and others against any consecration of the regulations introduced by the occupation (for example, through referring to them in a UN resolution) - wants to secure control of power through elections first, in order to have the parliament elaborate a constitution and laws to his taste.

The real mood of the Shia population and their view of the elections was pretty well expressed in a report by Washington Post reporter Anthony Shadid, commenting on the main Shia popular neighborhood of Baghdad: "Shiite empowerment is just one facet of the clerical campaign, and it is usually couched in coded language. More common are visceral appeals to an electorate that has grown fatigued and disillusioned with the carnage of war... At one end of the road, banners promised a new era of stability with the vote. At the other, they cast the election as the surest way to end an occupation that has grown increasingly unpopular. 'Brother Iraqis, the future of Iraq is in your hands. Elections are the ideal way to expel the occupier from Iraq,' one white banner proclaimed. 'Brother Iraq, your vote in the elections is better than a bullet in battle,' an adjacent sign read" (December 7, 2004).

The electoral slate prepared under the auspices of Sistani, the "Unified Iraqi Coalition," encompasses the broadest range of Shia forces, from Chalabi (definitely a "man for all seasons") to al-Sadr (who tries actually to hedge his bets: while having people of his entourage on the unified slate, he states that he won't personally "enter the political game"). The slate gives pre-eminence to the pro-Iranian "Supreme Council of Islamic Revolution in Iraq." To its credit, this list took pains to include Sunni, Kurdish and Turkmen candidates, including tribal leaders, so as not to be a sectarian slate - though it is being labeled as such by the media. The list will certainly receive an overwhelming majority of the votes if the elections proceed on January 30. This will give way to a Parliament and a government in which Shia Fundamentalist forces, more or less friendly with Iran, are hegemonic. A central item in the program of the coalition, which says it will assert the "Islamic identity" of Iraq, is to negotiate with the occupation authorities a date for the withdrawal of their troops from the country.

What will Washington do after the January 30 elections? It is difficult to predict. The Bush administration has a clear strategic objective: securing control of Iraq for the long haul. But Washington does not know how to achieve this goal or how to reconcile it with the forecast result of the elections, which an anonymous senior official residing in Baghdad's Green Zone aptly described to the New York Times as a "jungle of ambiguity" (December 18, 2004). One scenario, which has been greatly facilitated by the behavior of the occupying forces, is the one that many neocons came to favor after the collapse of their illusions about securing control of Iraq "democratically": a de facto, if not de jure, carving up of the country along sectarian lines (Israel's favored scenario from the beginning).

In order to retain control of the land, Washington could very well resort to the well-tried imperial recipe of divide and rule, taking the risk of setting Iraq on the devastating fire of a civil war - both sectarian (Shia v. Sunni) and ethnic (Arab v. Kurd). The way in which the US occupation is letting the situation deteriorate between Kurds and Arabs in the North, without trying earnestly to broker a compromise that would be satisfactory to all, as well as the way it has dealt with the issue of the elections fostering tensions between Shia and Sunnis, is very revealing in that regard.

This grave danger will keep hanging over the heads of the Iraqi people unless the situation quickly reaches a point where Washington's objective would shift to getting out of Iraq at short range and at minimal cost and damage to US interests. For that point to be reached, the combination of pressure from the Iraqi people from within and pressure from the antiwar movement abroad - above all in the US - is indispensable. This means that the most urgent task outside of Iraq is to supplement the January 30 elections, and the legitimate actions of resistance to the US occupation and its allies in Iraq, with building as widely and effectively as possible for the March 19 global antiwar demonstration.

*January 1, 2005*

## On the forthcoming election in Iraq

---

This article was first posted at ZNet. Thanks to Anthony Arrove for his kind editing of this piece.