

The Iraq elections

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Sunday Jan 30 Iraq goes to the polls and gets to choose its own government.

Or so we are told. Probably no one who was opposed to the war actually believes this but its useful to look at the flaws in the election process and then to ask what hope is there for the Iraqi people.

The first obvious flaw, is that the election is taking place while Iraq is occupied by a foreign army. Add to this that the current regime was more or less appointed by that army. And that the process is setup to return a national assembly which will have very little power to do anything itself except draft a new constitution.

International election observers will not actually be in Iraq but in neighboring Jordan — presumably peering over the border with very powerful binoculars. Who is standing is actually a secret as is the location of polling stations. It gets even more bizarre, US soldiers have been passing out candy and election material while on patrol¹! Presumably this is the sort of thing that UN electoral division chief Carina Perelli meant when she said that “the US military has been I would say overenthusiastic in trying to help with this election”.

Earlier this month a scandal quietly erupted when the (US government appointed) Prime Minister Iyad Allawi was revealed to have handed out \$100 bills to journalists at a campaign meeting². Some of the opposition parties have been complaining of the lack of media coverage they have received, this might be one explanation.

Even the method of voting is pretty odd. Basically the list of candidates is being kept secret so you vote only for a party/list. There are no constituencies, each party gets a number of candidates elected in proportion to what its (supposed) national vote was. There is a choice of over 90 of these lists and as many are themselves coalitions its not at all clear what, if anything, most stand for.

The lack of constituencies is relevant when you consider that most if not all Sunni Arab votes are liable to boycott the election. If Iraq had been divided up into constituencies this wouldn't matter so much as even a tiny turnout in areas that are predominantly Sunni Arab (i.e. the ‘Sunni triangle’) would ensure a somewhat proportional number of Sunni's were elected. But without any such constituencies the end result will be an Iraqi national assembly comprised entirely of Shia and (Sunni) Kurds. If what you were aiming for was civil war leading to partition there is an absurd logic to this. But maybe this is too cynical?

THE DEBATE IN THE ANTI-WAR MOVEMENT

Of course the joy of being an anarchist is that even if these elections were to be conducted perfectly we'd still recognize that all they would do is bring to power a gang of politicians who the people would have no power over. So to a certain extent we can stand above the squabbling that is taking place in the anti-war movement in relation to the elections. But the squabble is interesting.

Basically some anti-war commentators, most notably Gilbert Achcar have pointed out that if the elections are conducted fairly the results may be very uncomfortable for the US occupiers. In fact it would be likely to “give way to a Parliament and a government in which Shia Funda-

¹ A picture of them in action is at iraqpictures.blogspot.com

² Reported at news.bbc.co.uk

mentalist forces, more or less friendly with Iran, are hegemonic”³. Given all the noise that the US government has been making in recent days about war with Iran this could be a little awkward for them. But in fact the powers of the national assembly are limited, in particular unless it can get a 2/3 majority, so the US designers of the election have probably already covered themselves against this outcome.

Achcar’s suggestion that it might be a mistake to write off the elections in advance greatly annoyed some of the trots involved in the anti-war movement. They tend to quietly have the ‘my enemies enemy is my friend’ and thus try and silence any criticism of the resistance in the anti-war movement. This rather self-indulgent line is based on hoping that Iraqi workers will defeat imperialism for them and never mind if the process of doing so throws them into the hands of Islamists. After the mass executions of the left that followed the Islamist takeover of the Iranian revolution this sort of self serving ‘logic’ from the professors of the western left seems and indeed is a little unpleasant and I don’t intend to discuss it further.

Both positions do seem to flow from a requirement of ‘what would be best for us in the western left’. They ask ‘Would it be better if Iraqis militarily defeat US imperialism for us or would it be better if they defeat it through the ballot box’. Given the suffering our governments have already imposed on the people of Iraq this seems like a very odd way of approaching the question of the Iraqi elections.

Another approach — an internationalist approach — would be to ask what is in the interest of the ordinary Iraqi people and what can we do to show solidarity with them. When you ask that question the choice offered above between a Shia dominated Islamist regime or a Sunni dominated Islamist regime doesn’t seem to have so much to offer. Already huge numbers of women are now forced to wear the veil in Iraq. Over 1,000 Iraqi women have abandoned their university studies. Hinadi, the star dancer of the group ‘el-Portoqala’ was killed by Islamists while visiting her family. Apparently “el-Portoqala sings modern songs, which outraged some Islamists who said the songs were pornographic, liberal and ‘alien to conservative Iraqi society’. In reality the songs merely showed women dancing and posing as lovers”⁴.

WHAT HOPE FOR THE PEOPLE?

If you rely on the mainstream media and the left then Iraq seems to be without hope. The choice it appears is only between US imperialism and Islamist reaction. In fact Iraqi workers have not been sitting by since the occupation — there have been many militant workers struggles in Iraq, it is just nobody bothers to report on them because they don’t fit into the predefined conceptions of the struggle.

There have been rumors and some reports of anarchists active in Iraq but it seems that such forces are not yet significant. However there are other progressive forces who have managed to get news of their activities onto the web. They are also calling for a boycott. In particular the Worker — Communist Party of Iraq declares that “The Election is a Puppet Show to Legitimize the U.S Policy in Iraq.”⁵ They see the intention of the US in this election to be “to impose a

³ See www.zmag.org

⁴ www.wpiraq.net

⁵ See for instance the text of their leaflet announcing demonstrations in England www.wpiraq.net

reactionary Islamic and ethnocentric puppet government.⁶” The WCPI are an interesting neo-Leninist group which broke with orthodox communism out of their experiences in the workers councils thrown up in the Iranian revolution of 1979 and the uprisings that followed the 1991 Iraq war. The conclusions they came to are in some ways similar to that of the Dutch and German Council Communists of the 1920’s. Naturally enough this experience also left them with a healthy hostility towards the Islamist program. They warn that “Iraq has become a battlefield for a war between American and Islamic terrorism and the Iraqi masses are constant victims caught amid the fire between both these terrorist forces”.

They have a fairly comprehensive English language website (at www.wpiraq.net), which includes regular PDF newsletters detailing the struggles they are involved in. There is an obvious enormous gulf between anarchists and Leninists but if we leave that aside for this article the WCPI offer a real breath of fresh air in much of the debate around Iraq. Their real efforts to build union and women’s organizations in Iraq offer at least an alternative that can be built on.

Their recent document “Worker-communism and the Armed Struggle in Iraq:guerrilla war or mass armed resistance?”⁷ is well worth reading as it tries to sketch out an alternative path to ending the occupation. This acknowledges a need for armed resistance but seeks to “avoid the traditional guerrilla-style of armed resistance” substituting one which “focuses on mobilizing and leading the population to reclaim various suburbs, villages, towns and cities and bans both US forces and Islamo-ethnocentric militia from entry”. Significantly for anarchists one of the reasons they give for this alternative form of resistance is that “It encourages the population to intervene in running their own affairs. It will embroil the masses in a process, which will raise their awareness.”

AN ONGOING STRUGGLE

It has become clear that the occupation in Iraq is not likely to be a short term event but something that is intended to go on for years and even decades. The US military machine is deeply entrenched both in Iraq and in the Whitehouse. Ending the occupation will not come about as a result of a march, no matter how big or any other single event.

We need to view the war in Iraq not as a distant event but as part of our own backyard. The fight of Iraqi workers for justice is part of our own fight for justice. And just as we would refuse to accept a struggle led by those who seek only to be an alternative oppressor we should not demand that Iraqi workers switch one oppressor for another.

The election this Sunday will change nothing for the better, even if those it brings to power are somewhat hostile to the US occupation. What we need to be doing is to look for and reach out to whatever progressive forces are struggling in Iraq and show solidarity with these. At the end of the day our fight for freedom is a global fight – or it is no fight at all.

⁶ www.wpiraq.net

⁷ Online at www.wpiraq.net

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