

Can Elections Really Take Place in Iraq?

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

The latest fairy tale from *Arabian Nights* being told in Washington is the following: The U.S. military, together with its Iraqi allies, will continue their Israeli-style sweeps through the major cities of the Sunni resistance, through December, by which time, all armed opposition will be eliminated and peace established. Elections will be held in January 2005, ushering in a new, democratic Iraq, and all will be well in modern Mesopotamia.

Like most fairy tales, this one smacks of fantasy, precisely of the sort that crazy George Bush likes to nurture. The reality of the situation is far more complex, and fraught with paradoxes.

The central paradox is that, unless elections are held in Iraq, hopes for a return to sovereignty, independence, and peace will be dim, if not nil. Yet, the military and political measures being implemented by the U.S. and Iraqi interim government forces, are virtually assuring that no such elections can be held. The suspicion arises, as former candidate Lyndon LaRouche has stated, whether or not the spreading chaos and war were the deliberate policy intent of the Bush-Cheney Administration.

No Vote Without Security

The “security situation”—a euphemism in vogue, for the escalating resistance against the occupation forces—has deteriorated to such an extent, that even UN Secretary General Kofi Annan had to moot the postponement of elections. In a report issued to the UN Security Council on Sept. 8, he said the situation had not improved much since the March 2003 invasion, and he urged the United States to opt for political measures rather than military force. “It must be recognized that the problem of insecurity can only be addressed through a political process,” he said. “This requires a commitment to

stop relying solely or mainly on threats or actual use of armed force and to pursue determined and genuine efforts” to address problems.

Annan said that the violence continued “to pose a very profound challenge for the successful achievement” of voter registration and polling: “In addition to severely disrupting everyday life for Iraqis, the ongoing violence could undermine confidence in the transitional political process, making it more difficult to create the conditions necessary for the holding of elections in January 2005.”

Similar concerns were raised by Jordanian King Abdallah II, during a visit to Paris on Sept. 28.

Such concerns are firmly based on a candid assessment of the military situation: As noted in a Sept. 30 report issued by a private security company, the Special Operations Consulting-Security Management Group, a whopping 2,300 attacks occurred in the month of September alone, covering a vast geographical area, from the northern city of Mosul, down through the Kurdish region, including Kirkuk, through the Sunni triangle area (Tikrit, Samarra, Baquba, Ramadi, Fallujah, and Baghdad), towards Basra in the south.

Nor were these attacks the work of “foreign terrorists” associated with the infamous Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. As revealed in an explosive report in the London *Telegraph* Oct. 4, senior U.S. military officials admitted that al-Zarqawi was largely a bogey-man, being used as a propaganda piece to mobilize the anti-terror war at home. Far from running the show in Iraq, Zarqawi is estimated to have been behind about 6 of the 2,300 September attacks. The number of foreign elements engaged inside Iraq are estimated to be not more than 200 (as opposed to the 5,000 previously stated). If Zarqawi may have been responsible for some kidnappings, he does not lead the resistance. Instead, “the insurgency is led

and dominated not by Arab foreigners, but by members of the Sunni minority,” reported the *Telegraph*.

Faced with this ugly reality, the U.S. response has been to deploy brute force. As Iraqi interim Defense Minister Hazim al-Shalaan pledged, the centers of resistance would be smashed within a month. That was the prelude to the offensive that began in early October against Samarra, and was to continue, city by city, throughout the area.

Yet, most experts agree, that despite heavy casualties, the resistance will not be defeated this way. The Iraqi interim government, therefore, has had to contemplate other options. It has insisted that it would hold the elections, at all costs. Interim Prime Minister Allawi aired a proposal on Sept. 13, for holding partial elections, excluding the areas not under government control. “If, for any reason,” he said, “300,000 people cannot have an election, cannot vote because terrorists decide so, then frankly 300,000 people . . . is not going to alter 25 million people voting.” The 300,000 figure refers to the population of the city of Fallujah, heavily contested but under resistance control. Allawi said Fallujah residents could vote at a later time.

Partial or Full Elections?

This proposal introduces another paradox: If elections are held, but only for part of the population, how can they be considered valid? A spokesman for the Association of Muslim Scholars, the most influential Sunni organization in Iraq, drove this point home in a statement Oct. 6. “We think that if some areas were excluded from the January elections, then this could be a bad omen for the unity of the country, because this means that [the excluded areas] would be separated from the rest of Iraq.” Mohammad Bashar al-Faidhi went on to say, “Such elections would be unfair because many people in some areas would not be able to vote, and their opinions would be neglected. This would affect the credibility of the elections.”

The same organization laid the responsibility for the escalating attacks against Sunni strongholds, and the subsequent placing in jeopardy of elections, squarely at the doorstep of the Allawi regime. “Resorting to iron and fire to prepare for elections is a flawed method,” a statement said. “We throw on the government the responsibility for the injustices suffered by the inhabitants of the city of Samarra.”

Parallel to the moves made by the Sunni religious authorities, Ayatollah Ali Hussein al-Sistani, supreme leader of the Shi’ites, called on the government to halt the bloodshed, and to resort to wisdom to solve existing problems. Concretely, he said, the government should seriously organize elections,



U.S. troops fighting for control of Samarra, Iraq, on Oct. 2. The Iraqi interim government has insisted that it will hold elections in January 2005, no matter what, even if they have to exclude areas not under their control from participating. The Iraqi Association of Muslim Scholars stated that this would be a bad omen for the unity of the country.

and create the conditions under which they can be held. Aya-tollah al-Sistani is the leading force behind the push for elections; it was his ultimatum to the government (and the United States), that a date must be set for elections, which led to the definition of the January date. Otherwise, the religious leader could issue an edict calling for all Shi’ites to join the armed resistance. The call by the Sunni organization also contained an implicit threat to this effect.

Who Controls the Polls?

The most intricate paradox involves the relationship of political-ethnic-military forces in the country. Aside from the fact that the security situation has prevented the United Nations from deploying more than a handful of officials to set up voter registration and polling places, the police forces, which should be available to protect polls, have become the leading target of the resistance. They are therefore not expected to play a major role.

The forces which *are* in control, militarily, are the various militias that belong to different groups. These include the Badr Brigades of the main Shi’ite political organization, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the Mahdi Army of radical Shi’ite Moqtadar al-Sadr (currently in talks with the government), and the Peshmerga militias of the Kurdish parties in the north of the country. There is no doubt in the minds of regional experts, that these forces would control the polling places, and thus be in a position to influence (to put it mildly) the results.

Aggravating this picture is the fact that the escalating conflict has exacerbated ethnic and religious tensions, such as to fuel a centrifugal tendency, away from centralized rule. As reported in all major Arabic press, as well as the *Financial Times*, at the end of September, meetings took place between the members of the municipal councils of several southern provinces: Basra, Missan, and Dhiqar. The subject of the talks was a proposal to band together, to establish a southern region, analogous to the Kurdish region in the north. Sources reported that the leaders of the provinces felt excluded from the central government, and were under-represented in the national assembly that was put together a month ago.

The implications of the proposal are vast: the three southern provinces “account for more than 80% of the proved oil reserves of the country’s 18 provinces and provide a large share of the national income,” the financial daily noted.

At the same time, ethnic conflict in Kirkuk has been expanding, as Kurds continue to repopulate the city, and Arabs and Turkmen are being expelled. Kirkuk, also rich in oil, is being contested by the Kurds as the “capital” of “Kurdistan.” On Oct. 4, between 60,000 and 70,000 people demonstrated in Suleymanieh, calling for a referendum on autonomy. And, in Tal Afar, another city of mixed ethnic population, Kurds are threatening to take control.

This trend towards “ethnicization,” or defining one’s identity in ethnic or religious terms, is something which contradicts the actual history of Iraq, whose identity has been strongly national. The dangerous trend has been confirmed in a recent poll taken by the Iraq Center for Research and Strategic Studies, which showed that more than 52% of those asked, said that they would not cast a vote for a candidate who was not a member of their religious, ethnic, or language group. Most of the more than 100 new political parties, are reportedly little more than groups representing tribes, ethnic formations, sects, or the like. Overall, only 67% said they were likely to vote at all, down from 88% in June.

Change in Washington

Considering the overall picture presented here, it is difficult to imagine that, even with the full backing of the United Nations and the “international community,” anything resembling real elections can take place in January. An international conference is to be held in Cairo, in the last week of December, at which neighboring countries, as well as international powers, will participate, to seek a way out of the Iraq mess. The only way in which the picture could be radically redrawn, is through a change in the political leadership in the United States, in the Nov. 2 elections. Even though a new Kerry-Edwards Administration would not be inaugurated until January, the mere fact of a political change would have a positive impact in the region, and all its players. In his Oct. 6 webcast, LaRouche laid out the parameters for a solution to the Iraq disaster, under a Kerry Presidency—a solution in which LaRouche must place a direct role.