On the road (block) to Freedom...

Anarcho

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Contents

A little relevant history 3
Elections, but not democracy 4
The ideological war 5
Democracy in Action 6
Mission Accomplished? 6
The war continues 7

In spite of Bush, Blair and the media being all a gush over the successful Iraqi elections, it is useful remember the fact that the US has systematically held "successful" elections in the countries it is occupying or whose dictators it is backing. The term for this process is called "demonstration elections,".

It was a nation at war, with a militant insurgency fighting the might of the US military. And yet it went to the polls. Officials of the occupying power said they *"were surprised and heartened today at the size of turnout"* despite of a *"terrorist campaign to disrupt the voting."* A *"successful election has long been seen as the keystone" in the President's strategy of "encouraging the growth of constitutional processes."*

The *"hope here is that the new government will be able to manoeuvre with a confidence and legitimacy."* This *"could have been dashed either by a small turnout, indicating widespread scorn or a lack of interest in constitutional development, or by ... disruption of the balloting."* The high turnout *"was a welcome surprise"* and even higher than the previous US Presidential election.

Is this joyous reporting of democracy in action about Iraq today? No, it is from the **New York Times** about the South Vietnam presidential elections in 1967 (*"U.S. Encouraged by Vietnam Vote"*, 4/9/1967: p. 2). Like today, the media pointed to the size of the popular vote and the inability of the Vietcong to destroy the election machinery as the *"the two salient facts."* Strangely, the electors backed the generals who have been ruling South Vietnam since a military coup two years previously. This did *"not, in the Administration's view, diminish the significance of the constitutional step"* that had been taken.

So in spite of Bush, Blair and the media being all a gush over the successful Iraqi elections, it is useful remember the fact that the US has systematically held "successful" elections in the countries it is occupying or whose dictators it is backing. The term for this process is called "demonstration elections," an attempt to show that US commitment to democracy is deeper than lip service by holding an election. Yet it is only the appearance of democratic norms and its end result is not in question. And that is the case here.

A little relevant history

But first we need some context. Amidst all the politicians back-patting each other, it would be good to remember that the Bush Junta initially opposed one-person, one-vote elections of this sort. First, it was going to turn Iraq over to Chalabi within six months but that fell through. This was replaced by the notion that US Viceroy Paul Bremer would exercise personal rule for a few years. In November, 2003, Bremer announced council-based elections in May of 2004. This election would have been restricted to the US/UK created provincial and municipal governing councils, the members of this small elite being (unsurprisingly) pro-American.

This was when people power kicked in. Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani immediately gave a fatwa denouncing this and demanding free elections mandated by a UN Security Council resolution. Bush was reportedly "extremely offended" at these demands and Bremer was soon ordered to get his appointed Interim Governing Council fight Sistani. Sistani then brought thousands of protesters into the streets in January of 2004, demanding free elections. Faced with a massive show of popular rebellion, Bush caved in bar on one issue — the timing. He got the elections postponed to January 2005 which allowed the chaos to grow even worse.

So if it had been up to Bush and Blair, Iraq would have been a benevolent dictatorship under Chalabi or, at best, it would have had stage-managed elections based on the votes of handful of pro-American notables. It was people power that changed the equation, not the (non-existent) benevolence or democratic ideals of US imperialism.

And why the huge delay? The official rationale was that the US objected that they could not use UN food ration cards for registration, as Sistani suggested. Yet, in the end, that is exactly what they did use. The real reason is obvious. Shaping a nation state in line with the needs of US imperialism takes time. The Bush Junta recognised before the invasion that a democratic Iraq would not stand for the strategic goals the war was fought for: controlling the oil reserves and establishing military bases to project US imperial interests in the Middle East. Quick elections would have scuppered these plans and so the US rejected them.

Elections, but not democracy

So after having elections thrust upon them by people power, the US worked hard to ensure that the processes they put in place made sure the occupation would continue, no matter the result. Not that the result was left totally alone. In spite of the usual overblown rhetoric by Bush and Blair, the election itself fell totally short of accepted electoral standards. If it had been held by, say, Saddam, Britain and America would have been the first to denounce it. Apparently Bush is to be portrayed as the bringer of democracy to Iraq by the simple fact that this so-called election took place. Sadly the facts do not support such a position.

The occupying forces have been unable to provide the necessary security for truly aboveboard democratic elections. But that has its advantages. An under-reported, but extremely significant, fact about the elections has been that they were held under a state of emergency that has lasted months and that the candidates' identities have been withheld for security reasons until just before them. This means no public campaigning, no speeches, no basis for choosing between one candidate and another. So people where voting for people they did not know who belonged to party lists whose policies were hardly clear. In addition, there was a US-appointed election commission. Such facts have not got in the way of the hype.

All this undoubtedly helped the current US appointed prime minister who ran under the slogan of a *"strong leader for a safe country."* He has huge name-recognition in a field where most candidates had little chance or time to get themselves known. Television coverage also favoured Allawi, who was constantly in the news as well as dominating the paid advertising on the satellite channels. The role of funding from US sources must have been significant.

Bush did say that American forces would withdraw from Iraq *"if the new government that is elected on Sunday asked him to do so"* but added that *"it seems like most of the leadership there understands that there will be a need for coalition troops at least until Iraqis are able to fight."* That is wishful thinking in the extreme. Few Iraqi *"understands that there will be a need for"* the occupation of their country. According to a recent poll, majorities of both Sunni Arabs (82%) and Shiites (69%) favour US forces to withdraw either immediately or after an elected government is in place. Even the Kurds want the US to leave. A genuinely democratic election would have to reflect this fact.

Yet it is very doubtful that the US would allow those seeking an immediate or absolute end to its presence into Iraq's highest offices. This explains the complicated voting procedures and

the need for overwhelming majorities in the new National Assembly. In this way the current set of US puppets can play a key role in the inevitable coalitions produced by the elections and, consequently, ensure US interests are served. It may even result in Allawi being kept on as a gesture to the Americans, particularly as none of the big religious parties is in a mood to confront them.

Then there is the Sunni boycott of the vote. There is scope for making up the "Sunni deficit" by appointing Sunnis to the drafting committee. If they did, then the occupiers have a powerful weapon to get what they want as representatives of all three communities need to agree to proposals. If they ignore the Sunni's then they have a potential veto as any constitution is to be put to a referendum in the autumn. If more than a third of voters in three of Iraq's 18 provinces vote it down, the draft falls. Sunnis form a majority in at least four provinces. This could be a long-term problem for the US, but in the short-term the appointment of Sunnis has obvious appeal.

The ideological war

Of all which suggests that those who seek to turn the issue away from war onto democracy are missing the point. For example, pro-war leftist David Aaronovitch states that *"that, now, is all that matters. Not whether you were for or against the war, for or against Blair, for or against Bush. Are you for or against democracy in Iraq? The rest is air."* (*"Now it's time for the war critics to move on"*, **The Guardian**, 1/2/05) Yet the obvious reply is that the Iraqi election was not democracy. Saddam had elections. It did not make his regime democratic.

And so the elections are playing their role in the ideological war being waged to legitimatise and normalise the occupation. That you can oppose the sham of the US run elections because you favour real democracy should never be forgotten. Yes, democracy in Iraq is a noble goal but a democracy shaped by US imperial interests will hardly inspire or be a genuine democracy. Do not forget that the Iraqi National Assembly has limited powers nor that the US is well practiced in creating regimes with elected parliaments but where real power remains with the military (or itself).

As long as the state bureaucracy retains control of the politicians in the interests of big business then a little formal democracy is perfectly acceptable — just like at home!

And, of course, come our election we will be treated to moralising and guilt-tripping appeals against voter apathy with comparisons to the brave voters of Iraq. That these voters may become just as apathetic as their British counterparts when faced with politicians who ignore their wishes in favour of corporate and imperial power and say one thing before getting elected and another once in office goes without comment.

So now the Iraqi's can also get the joy of electing politicians who say one thing in opposition and do the opposite once in office. They, too, can experience the kind of democracy in which they protest in their hundreds of thousands against a policy only to see their "representative" government simply ignore them. And they too can see their representatives bend over backward ensuring corporate profits and power while speaking platitudes to the electorate.

Democracy in Action

We have a taste of this process at work already in Iraq. On December 22, 2004, Iraqi Finance Minister Abdel Mahdi informed the world that Iraq wants to issue a new oil law that would open its national oil company to private foreign investment. In other words, to sell off the resource that provides 95% of all Iraqi revenues. As he explained: *"I think this is very promising to the American investors and to American enterprise, certainly to oil companies."*

It is doubtful most Iraqis want that. Mahdi, it should be noted, ran in the elections on the ticket of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution, the leading Shiite political party and which also belongs to the United Iraqi Alliance which Sistani instructed his followers to vote for. Such a promise made just before the election smacks of a deal to reassure the Americans, to swap Iraq's oil for political power.

The US holds the strings in Iraq. It controls the military, the money (the $24 billion in U.S. taxpayer money allocated for the reconstruction) and the rules governing Iraq's economy. These last two are overseen by US-appointed auditors and inspector generals who sit in every Iraqi ministry with five-year terms and sweeping authority over contracts and regulations. So the economic neo-liberal reforms imposed by Bremer have been hard-coded into the new "sovereign" state. The US has announced that troops will be staying until 2006 (at least) and point-blankly refused to even talk about timetables. Any Iraqi politicians will have to adjust to this reality, making a quick withdrawal of troops unlikely — regardless of popular wishes. This suggests that the will of the Iraqi people will continue be ignored in the new "democratic" Iraq.

This is not all. The new Iraqi Transitional Government (ITG) will be subject to the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL). How diligently the ITG will execute the bidding of Washington is uncertain. However, the dispersal of power and the checks and balances between various branches of the government should ensure a willing puppet. For example, the judiciary will emerge as a prominent player in national politics as it is the interpreter of the TAL. The Supreme Court has the power to challenge virtually any decision that it believes to contravene the TAL.

This means that the judiciary has the ability to block legislative and executive actions of the ITG. It is legal answer to anything the National Assembly might have to say about the occupation and the war is waging on the people of Iraq or anything else. Who are the members of the judiciary? Article 43(b) of the Transitional Administrative Law provides the answer: *"All judges sitting in their respective courts as of 1 July 2004 will continue in office thereafter, unless removed from office pursuant to this Law."* In other words, the branch of government which can block the actions of the National Assembly was installed by the occupiers. All legislation, including the constitution of the Iraqi state itself, will be those acceptable to the occupying power.

Mission Accomplished?

Even a high turnout does not change the fact that this is an illegitimate, occupier's election organised to achieve the goals of the US occupation. And what were these goals?

While the powers that be are justifying the Iraq war purely in terms of regime change, the reality is different. Given that Bush and Blair both explicitly rejected the idea that the war was about liberating the Iraqi people, it seems the height of hypocrisy to use it to retroactively jus-

tify the war. Are we expected to forget the promises that Saddam could remain in power if he disarmed? Nor should we forget that the Iraqi people are occupied, not liberated.

So Saddam may be gone, replaced by a US appointed interim PM who is a CIA agent, but that was not the proclaimed reason for the war. WMDs, the rationale which was used to justify the invasion, are quietly forgotten, as are any suggestions of a tie between Saddam and Al Qaeda or 9/11. Iraq, it is fair to say, is a base for terrorism but that is only due to the actions of the US/UK and can be discounted as a rationale. It seems ironic, in light of this, to justify the war in Iraq in terms of democracy when Bush and Blair's systematic lying to, and ignoring of, the general population showed a deep contempt for it at home.

And do not forget that other, more believable goals, have been achieved. Access to Iraqi oil, for example, has been achieved (barring economic sabotage by insurgents). The building of military bases in Iraq has started, with up to 14 "enduring" instillations being prepared to project US power into the heart of the Middle East. So Vice President Dick Cheney's Defense Policy Guidance report of 1992 has been achieved: *"Our overall objective is to remain the predominant outside power in the [Middle East] region and preserve U.S. and Western access to the region's oil."*

What a coincidence!

The war continues

Ultimately, that 8 million Iraqis voted is not the measure of success. Nor will it stop the insurgency any more than any of the previous milestones (such as catching Saddam, or destroying Fallujah, or transferring "sovereignty") did. January was the third bloodiest month for the occupying forces. Will the insurgents lay down their arms? No. Will the terrorists end their campaign? No. The war Bush declared over on May 1st, 2003, will continue unabated.

Nor does it mean that the Iraqi people are free. Far from it, they are still under occupation and they know it. So when Bush said that the *"world is hearing the voice of freedom from the centre of the Middle East"* he was right only insofar as it was the voice of a people who want freedom from the US! Indeed, the election itself was a victory for the voice of freedom ***against*** Bush. Yet while the Iraqis undoubtedly went to the polls to end the US occupation, the sad fact is that they have simply legitimised it. The elections were not designed to challenge US power, indeed they a means of justifying the continuing foreign presence than providing democracy for the Iraqis.

Now, after the election, the reality is the same as it has always been: that the only institutions in Iraq with real power are the US and UK military. Any Iraqi government will lack both the power and the effective institutions to impose its will on the country (or the insurgents). The long-awaited government will almost certainly still be reliant on US and UK power to govern. So even if the Shia religious parties were to get enough seats in the assembly, their options would be limited by the fact they need US troops to both keep them save and impose their decisions.

Which shows the hypocrisy of the politicians' attacks against the insurgents. Condi Rice, for example, asserted that the Iraqis want a future *"based on democracy, on the vote, not on the gun."* Needless to say, democratic government is also based *"on the gun."* Without the means of coercion represented by the gun, it would simply be ignored. But, it will be argued, democratic state violence has the consent of the people. Yet according to a recent survey, 53% of Iraqis believe that ongoing attacks in Iraq are a legitimate form of resistance. Does support for violence make it

right? Or does violence become acceptable only if the state directs it to maintaining the political and economic rule of a few over the many? Apparently.

Only a systematic boycott of the election would have shown a clear opposition to the occupation and hastened its end. Sadly the concept of a boycott was hi-jacked by the extreme Islamist terrorists in Iraq. A coerced boycott is the last thing anarchists seek as it can be dismissed as a product of intimidation. Those segments of the insurgency which target ordinary Iraqis have as little concern for them as US imperialism. Therefore, the millions of Iraqis who voted, as well as the UN electoral team and the Iraqi election commission staff, deserve our respect.

Yet this should not blind us to the political impact of the vote nor the constraints in the election and the assembly it has produced. The only elections that will ultimately matter for Iraq are those organised and supported by Iraq's people. They will be elections held without foreign occupation and without a CIA agent as president. It will take time. But the time will come and it will come in spite, not because of, the USA.

But that will not create genuine freedom, only a representative democracy. Condi Rice, like Bush, talked about *"liberty"* and *"self-government"* being *"universal values."* Yet representative democracy is not "self-government." It is about alienating power to a few people who then (mis)rule in your name. To call it "self-government" is nonsense. Similarly, while democratic governments tend to be less oppressive than others it does not follow that this equates to liberty. But what can you expect from politicians who routinely call foreign occupation "liberation" and who are systematically undermining human rights at home?

Freedom means a significantly different form of democracy, one which is based on mandating delegates rather than picking masters to govern in the name of a people muted by hierarchy. One that does not stop at the workplace door but rather eliminates economic autocracy (capitalism) along with political hierarchy (the state). It will be about direct democracy, the process of collectively managing join interests, rather than alienating power to a handful of politicians, bosses and bureaucrats. In other words, libertarian socialism.

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