

Allawi has 'established a media committee to impose restrictions on print and broadcast media' (FT, 27 July). The head of the committee - former Iraqi intelligence official Ibrahim Janabi - told the FT that the restrictions would include 'unwarranted criticism of the prime minister' singling out a recent sermon by Moqtada al-Sadr who had 'mocked Mr Allawi as America's "tail." Outlets broadcasting the sermon would be banned he said.' Mr Janabi is planning to relocate to the old information ministry, whose 5000 former employees have welcomed his appointment 'as a first step to regaining their jobs.'

Harris, the US company appointed by the "coalition" to run Iraq's state broadcaster Iraqia, has been told it could lose its \$96mn annual contract if its broadcasts wavered from "the targets we want", Janabi explained. A current affairs editor at Iraqia, who did not want to be named, told the FT, **"I am afraid we will now be a channel controlled by the state, all the signs are they want to use this as a mouthpiece."**

'As long as we win'

It is worth recalling that both the US and Britain have 'form' for occupying other people's countries and then running sham elections.

Thus in the 1920s British-occupied Iraq had all the paraphernalia of elections but 'democracy had little practical reality' and 'Iraqi cabinets were powerless to enforce legislation without the co-operation of the British' (*Independent Iraq*, Matthew Eliot, I.B. Tauris, p. 6 and 8). **The British-installed monarch, Faisal, was even endorsed in 'a bogus referendum' ... in which it was claimed that 96 per cent of the population accepted' him** (*A history of Iraq*, Charles Tripp, p. 48) - just a few percentage points short of the results Saddam himself used to enjoy.

In a similar vein, Daniel Ellsberg recalls a trip to South Vietnam by US Vice President Nixon in the early '60s. "Well Ed, what are you up to?" Nixon asked Edward Lansdale, who was in charge of an interagency group doing political work with the South Vietnamese government. **"Mr Vice President, we want to help General Thang make this the most honest election that's ever been held in Vietnam,"** Lansdale responded. **"Oh sure, honest, yes, honest, that's right,"** Nixon replied **"so long as you win!"** (*Secrets*, p 108). The US later invaded South Vietnam and ran 'demonstration elections' there in 1966, 1967 and 1971 (see *Demonstration Elections: US Staged Elections in the Dominican Republic, Vietnam and El Salvador*, Edward Herman and Frank Brodhead, p.55 - 92).

\$9 trillion

The US is playing for vast stakes in Iraq. **US and British oil companies stand to reap profits from Iraqi oil of anywhere between \$600bn and \$9 trillion over the next 50 years** - even if Iraq's oil production remains under national control - provided only that Iraq enters into production sharing agreements that offer the companies favourable terms (www.globalpolicy.org, 28 Jan). It is not about to hand real control to Iraq's population. Those of us who support Iraqis' rights to determine their own political and economic future need to recognise these realities and take action to change them.

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'AS LONG AS WE WIN'

The US Government and Iraq's elections

a **voices in the wilderness uk** briefing

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Conveniently, the deadline for Iraq's first post-invasion one-person-one-vote election (31 January 2005) falls *after* November's US Presidential election, thus allowing Mr Bush to claim, in the meantime, that Iraq is *en route* to democracy without actually having to confront the problems of having such an election. Indeed the possibility that this election - if it ever takes place - will be meaningful appears remote.

The Problem

An elected government that reflected Iraqi popular would kick US troops out of the country ¹ and is unlikely to be sufficiently amenable to the interests of western oil companies or take an "acceptable" position on the Israel-Palestine conflict.

The basic US problem was succinctly put by Brent Scowcroft, National Security Adviser under Bush Sr: **"What's going to happen the first time we hold an election in Iraq, and it turns out the radicals win?"**, he asked. **"What do we do? We're surely not going to let them take over"** (NYT, 11 April 2003).² Here, of course, 'radical' must be taken in its technical sense, ascertained by examining the historical record: basically, anyone deemed insufficiently subservient to Washington.

'Putting democracy on hold'

Since the invasion the US has consistently stalled on one-person-one-vote elections in Iraq, seeking instead to 'put democracy on hold until it can be safely managed' (Salim Lone, director of communications for the UN in Iraq until Autumn 2003, *Guardian*, 13 April). Indeed, Jay Garner, the first US civilian administrator for Iraq, 'says he fell out with the Bush circle [after he called for swift and] free elections and rejected an imposed programme of privatisation' (*Guardian*, 18 March 2004).

Later, in June 2003, under Garner's successor Paul Bremer, 'US military commanders ... ordered a halt to local elections and self-rule in provincial cities and towns across Iraq, choosing instead to install their own hand-picked mayors and administrators, many of whom were former Iraqi military leaders' (*Washington Post*, 28 June 2003). **Bremer, explained that while there was "no blanket prohibition" against self rule "I want to do it a way that takes care of our concerns ... Elections that are held too early can be destructive. It's got to be done carefully."** **"[I]f you start holding elections, the people who are**

¹ According to a May 2004 poll 86% of Iraqis would want US forces to leave once a permanent Iraqi government is installed (*AP*, 15 June)

² In a similar vein Democratic US Presidential candidate John Kerry recently declared that "It would be unthinkable for us to retreat in disarray and leave behind a society deep in strife and dominated by radicals" (*Guardian*, 9 July).

rejectionists tend to win,” he explained. Iraqis would have to be satisfied with “baby steps”, the US Sergeant charged with running Samarra told the *Post*.

Earlier this year the US blocked calls by Iraq’s most senior Shi’ite cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani for one-person-one-vote elections by 30 June 2004, despite claims by British officials in Basra that ‘early elections in Iraq [we]re viable, with security and procedural obstacles surmountable before ... June 30’ and that ‘an electoral roll drawn up from a mixture of ration, health and identity cards could prove acceptable’ (*FT*, 20 Jan 2004).³

Controlling the elections

Now that it has committed itself – at least on paper - to having elections **the US has already made moves to maintain control over the electoral process.** Indeed, with just weeks to go before the transfer of “sovereignty” – and with barely any press coverage - the US passed two new laws which could have a big impact on any future elections.

The first barred, with immediate effect, members of ‘illegal militias’ from “holding political office for up to three years after leaving their illegal organisation” (*Guardian*, 8 June) - a move plainly aimed at the Sadrist movement, led by Moqtada al-Sadr, which draws many of its followers from the desperately poor Shia underclass and has been a thorn in the occupation’s side.⁴ The second ‘states that no party can be associated with a militia or get money from one [and] requires [a US-created] electoral commission to draft a code of conduct barring campaigners from using “hate speech, intimidation, and support for, the practice of and the use of terrorism”’ (*Washington Post*, 27 June). Iraq expert and Professor of History at the University of Michigan Juan Cole told the *Post* that **‘the appointed electoral commission's power to eliminate political parties or candidates for not obeying laws would allow it “to disqualify people someone didn't like” ... liken[ing] the power of the commission to that of religious mullahs in Iran, who routinely use their authority to remove candidates before an election.’ “In a way, Mr. Bremer is using a more subtle form than the one used by hard-liners in Iran to control their elections,”** Cole explained (*WP*, 27 June).⁵

‘Kill or capture’

Of course, less subtle means are also available eg. killing “undesirable” candidates and their supporters. Unremittingly hostile to the occupation, Moqtada al-Sadr is clearly one such

³ Interestingly, the head of the UN’s electoral mission in Iraq has stated that ‘if direct voter registration is deemed unrealistic for reasons such as possible attacks on registration sites, the [Iraqi] commission [in charge of elections] could choose to generate voter rolls through “secondary sources”’, such as the ration cards (*LA Times*, 5 June 2004) – raising the question why elections using such records were deemed impossible for June 2004 but not for January 2005.

⁴ The new order was declared on the same day that it was announced that nine political parties and movements – but *not* the Sadrist movement - had ‘pledged to abide by [a] ban on militias’ (*Washington Post*, 8 June). However the latter appeared to be more nominal than real.

⁵ Asked, in testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, ‘whether anti-American candidates would be allowed to run’ in future Iraqi elections, US Undersecretary of State for Political Affairs Marc Grossman responded: “That’s why we’re going to have an embassy there, and it’s going to have a lot of people and an ambassador. We have to make our views known in the way that we do around the world” (*NYT*, 23 April) – an answer very far from the simple ‘yes’ that a commitment to meaningful elections would require.

‘undesirable’ candidate from the US perspective – and, according to a document obtained by Pulitzer-prize winning investigative journalist Seymour Hersh, **‘last summer ... the Bush administration directed the marines to draft a detailed plan, called Operation Stuart, for the arrest and, if necessary, assassination of Sadr’**, though the operation was cancelled after Sadr was tipped off (*New Yorker*, 28 June).

In late March the US decided to crack-down on the Sadrists and vowed to ‘kill or capture’ Mr al-Sadr (*AP*, 13 April) ⁶. Since then **US and British forces have killed hundreds of members of his militia - along with anyone else who got in their way.** U.S. military officials estimate that they had killed 1500 such ‘insurgents’ (*Washington Post*, 26 June) - and more than 800 Iraqis in Baghdad’s vast Shi’ite slum Sadr City alone (*LA Times*, 7 June) - during April, May and early June.

Killing Democracy

Prior to the US assault on them it had been estimated that the Sadrists would obtain ‘a good third of the seats from the Shi’ite areas’ in free elections (Juan Cole, *DemocracyNow.org*, 14 Jan). Following the assault a poll by the Iraq Center for Research and Studies found that ‘32 per cent of respondents said they strongly supported [Moqtada] Sadr and another 36 per cent said they somewhat supported him’, making Mr Sadr the second most influential figure in Iraq after Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani (*FT*, 20 May).

Clearly an election that excludes the Sadrists would be sham, yet the US first provoked a major confrontation with them and then passed a law which, if acted upon, would bar them from taking part.

‘Democratic militants’

Meanwhile, according to *Newsweek* (7 June), **‘No one is better equipped [to use official powers to manipulate the planned general elections] than [Iraq’s new Prime Minister Ayad] Allawi’ and Iraq’s new interior minister is ‘already muttering about the dangers of “democratic militants”’** (*Economist*, 26 June) - facts unlikely to worry the US government given Mr Allawi’s long-standing links to the CIA (see **voices** newsletter #36 for more on Allawi’s background). “He should be prime minister, period,” one of Mr Allawi’s aides told *Newsweek*, “Not just interim PM.”

Controlling the press
Moves in this direction have already taken place. Though almost unreported here in the UK,

⁶ On 30 May ‘people in the streets of Najaf were handed mysterious fliers with Mr. Sadr’s picture that said “Moqtada was followed by the Iraqi police for his ties to the slaying of Khoei, and due to violent actions he was killed during an attempt to arrest him.” Another flier had a photo of Iraqi policemen and the words “The Justice Ministry tried to arrest Mr. Sadr, but he and his followers resisted fiercely, which drove the Iraqi police to defend themselves.”’ (*New York Times*, 30 May 2004) – raising questions as to how interested the US and its Iraqi proxies were in ‘capturing’ – as opposed to ‘killing’ - Mr Sadr, who was still very much alive. ‘The fliers appeared to have been made by Iraq’s Justice Ministry or its allies to be handed out in case Iraqi policemen killed Mr. Sadr. Somehow, they were distributed prematurely,’ the *New York Times* observed. A ‘senior Iraqi official’ later told the *Telegraph* that, “We should have killed Sadr last year. That would have solved the problem. We Iraqis have suffered and we can inflict suffering. But this time it will be about justice rather than oppression by Saddam’ (*Telegraph*, 21 June 2004).