

Editorial

Najaf a Political Minefield for U.S.

The battle between the U.S. occupation forces in Iraq and the Mahdi Army of Muqtada al-Sadr has been raging in the heart of Najaf for more than two weeks. The reports coming out of Iraq are contradictory and confusing, with claims of a peace agreement one day being denied the next. In addition, most independent journalists have been driven out of the city by the U.S. military so it is difficult to get a clear picture of what is actually happening on the ground. However, it is much clearer what is happening politically as a result of the determined resistance in Najaf.

As a result of the struggle waged by the Iraqi resistance fighters in Najaf, the interim Iraqi government of Ayad Allawi has been thoroughly discredited politically. Allawi has issued an ultimatum virtually every day about what he will do to the resistance fighters if they refuse to lay down their arms and every day he has had to backtrack on his bluster. For its part, the U.S. military

is unable to press home its attack for fear of damaging the Imam Ali Mosque where the fighters have taken shelter. The Imam Ali Mosque is one of the most sacred religious institutions of the Islamic world and its destruction or damage could lead to political unrest throughout the Middle East.

The inability of the Iraqi Interim Government or the U.S. military to suppress the resistance in Najaf has created a situation in which all of the hopes and aspirations of the Iraqi people for freedom and democracy are focused on this one battle. If the fighters are allowed to leave the mosque with or without their weapons it will be seen as a victory for the Mahdi Army. If they are crushed, they will be seen as martyrs for the cause of Iraqi liberation. In this situation, the Americans simply cannot win politically.

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Commentary

Venezuela Exposes Strategic Weakness of U.S. Imperialism

There was a time when U.S. imperialism could do just about anything it wanted in Latin America. It installed and removed governments at will and, if the people objected, it unleashed the death squads to make them disappear. The crushing defeat of the U.S.-sponsored opposition groups in last week's recall referendum in Venezuela indicates that those days are gone; U.S. imperialism can no longer do whatever it pleases in Latin America.

Hugo Chavez was elected president of Venezuela in a landslide victory in December 1998 and again in July 2000. He came to power on a wave of dissatisfaction with the pro-U.S., neo-liberal policies of the previous government. Although Venezuela is one of the largest oil producers in the world and the state has

a monopoly on oil production the vast majority of Venezuelans have seen no benefits from the exploitation of their country's natural wealth. For decades oil royalties have been kept artificially low in order to increase the profits of the American buyers, while the revenues that have been generated have been expropriated by the economic elite of Venezuela. As a result, over 80 percent of the population lives in poverty, half of them in abject poverty.

During the 1998 and 2000 election campaigns, Chavez promised to institute reforms and improve the lives of the poor. However, the Board of Directors of the state-owned oil monopoly refused to release a

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significant portion of the company's profits to the state, claiming that to do so would jeopardize the industry. Unable to finance the reforms he had promised, Chavez' popularity rapidly declined.

If the Bush administration had been patient, Chavez would have likely lost the next election in 2005 and a pro-U.S. government would have taken power again. However, in a classic display of unbridled imperialist arrogance, the Americans thought they could take advantage of Chavez' dwindling popularity to engineer an immediate regime change in Venezuela. The various opposition groups in Venezuela were called to the U.S. embassy and preparations for a military coup began in broad daylight. The short-lived coup took place in April 2002, with Chavez being arrested and transported to an island off the Venezuelan coast. The newly installed "president" promptly suspended the constitution, fired the Supreme Court judges and pledged a round-up of pro-Chavez forces. However, Chavez was prepared for the coup and military forces loyal to him arrested the new "president" and defeated the coup, which lasted a little more than one day.

In the wake of the failed coup Chavez purged the armed forces of those generals who had backed it, replacing them with officers loyal to the government. He also escalated a campaign of organizing Bolivarist Circles throughout the country, especially in the poorest communities. Bolivarist Circles are neighbourhood committees responsible for organizing social services and defence of the Chavez revolution. In this respect they are basically local organs of revolutionary state power, similar to Cuba's Committees for the Defence of the Revolution or Russia's soviets. Although disguised as defensive manoeuvres, these measures actually represented a major revolutionary offensive against the wealthy elite, smashing, to a significant extent, the state power of the capitalists and establishing a state in the hands of the poor.

Despite this setback, the U.S. imperialists and their Venezuelan allies continued their plots to overthrow Chavez. Various opposition leaders talked openly of another coup and plans were hatched for a major economic showdown with Chavez, similar to the events that took place in Chile before the American coup there. In late 2002, a general strike was organized, centering on a complete shutdown of the oil industry. In most sectors the general strike fizzled within days, but it con-

tinued to affect oil production for several weeks. Responding to this attack on Venezuela's economy, Chavez ordered that all striking workers and managers in the state-owned oil monopoly be fired and replaced with workers willing to do their job. The Board of Directors was also fired and replaced with members loyal to the government. Within a short time, production levels were back to pre-strike levels and the new Board authorized the transfer of some of the profits to the state.

The access to oil revenues allowed Chavez to begin implementing his election promises. Schools and medical clinics were opened in the poorest districts. When Venezuelan doctors refused to staff the new clinics, Chavez reached an agreement with the Cuban government to bring in more than 10,000 doctors from Cuba to treat the poor.

Still determined to effect a regime change in Venezuela, the U.S. and its allies most recently organized a recall petition in the hope of forcing Chavez from power. Despite widespread documented cases of fraud, Chavez allowed the results of the petition to stand and the referendum was held on August 15, with Chavez receiving almost 60 percent of the votes. The Americans had been counting on a traditional low turnout of the poor to win the vote, but about 80 percent of eligible voters went to the polls, testament to the organizing abilities of the Bolivarist Circles and to the determination of the poor to support the first and only president who has ever addressed their needs.

The significance of these events should not be underestimated. The Cuban revolution was able to survive in part due to the threat of Soviet retaliation if the U.S. invaded. No such threat exists in the case of Venezuela. The revolution which is unfolding in Venezuela has been able to survive and grow stronger due in part to the determination of the Venezuelan people, but also due to the fact that the U.S. imperialists are powerless to do anything about it. Their allies within Venezuela are weak, divided and discredited, while the bulk of U.S. forces are bogged down in Iraq.

There are indications that the Bush administration is finally coming to terms with the realities it faces. Both the Organization of American States (OAS) and the Carter Center have declared that the elec-

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Palestinian Prisoners Begin Hunger Strike to Protest Inhuman Conditions

On August 15, 1,600 Palestinian prisoners in four different Israeli prisons began a hunger strike aimed at improving the conditions faced by the over 7,000 Palestinians detained in Israeli jails. In announcing the strike, the Palestinian Prisoners Society issued a statement that accused Israel of “robbing us of all our rights, treading on our dignity and treating us like animals”.

The demands of the hunger strikers include a call for prison guards to stop conducting repeated strip searches, allowing more prisoners family visits (40 percent are currently denied any visits), access to public telephones and improved sanitary conditions.

The Israeli government response was typical of an occupying colonial power. Israeli Internal Security Minister Tzahi Hanegbi told reporters: “As far as I am concerned they can strike for a day, a month, onto death.” He refused any negotiations with the hunger strikers and instead announced that in response to the strike, which had been deemed contrary to regulations, prison officials have confiscated televisions and radios, stopped the sales of cigarettes and sweets and barred all visits. Israeli prison officials would deal with the hunger strike by setting up barbeques and grilling meat

in front of the strikers, he added.

According to Hanegbi, the treatment the hunger strikers are protesting is necessary to “prevent prisoners from organizing further terror attacks” from their cells. However, the majority of Palestinian prisoners currently detained in Israeli jails have not been found guilty of organizing any attacks but have simply been rounded up on suspicions and held indefinitely.

According to the Israeli Public Committee Against Torture, “torture, ill treatment, humiliation and incarceration in inhuman conditions” have all increased sharply in the last year. The Committee published a report on Israeli prisons earlier this year, based on the analysis of affidavits and testimonies given by dozens of Palestinian prisoners.

In July, Israel’s Public Defender’s Office also criticized conditions in Israeli detention centres, charging that they were “overcrowded, violent and unsanitary, with many prisoners having to eat and sleep on bare floors.”

Protests in solidarity with the strikers have been held in Bethlehem and in the Gaza town of Beit Hanoun.

For Your Information

Plight of Palestinian Prisoners

The Palestinian people have the highest rates of incarceration in the world. Since the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip in 1967, an estimated 650,000 Palestinians - or 20 per cent of the Palestinian population - have been imprisoned in Israeli jails or detention centres. One Palestinian writer has noted that in 1989, during the first intifada, Israel detained 50,000 Palestinian men between the ages of 14 and 55, that is over 15 percent of the entire male Palestinian population in the Occupied Territories at the time. By contrast, during that same year, under the apartheid regime, South African police and security forces detained around 5,000 Africans, or around 0.2 percent of the South African population.

In addition, Palestinian children are also detained and imprisoned, often in the same facilities as adults. There are currently 370 Palestinian children and youth

imprisoned in Israel; during the first three years of the second intifada, a total of 2,000 Palestinian children and youth have been detained.

Every report by independent observers reveals that while incarcerated, Palestinian prisoners face treatment that violates their human rights and the rights accorded to prisoners held by an occupying power under the Geneva Convention. Estimates of the percentage of Palestinian prisoners who are tortured or treated poorly in Israeli jails and detention centres range from 50 to 80 percent. Approved methods of torture used by the State of Israel against prisoners include beatings, choking, pulling hair off the body, prolonged solitary confinement, prolonged sleep deprivation, blindfolding, shackling, threats against family members, constant screaming and deprivation of

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The resistance in Najaf is also a political victory for the Iraqi people in another sense. Since the battle began, the acts of terrorism in Iraq that made daily headlines have almost vanished from sight. Whether they have declined in frequency or are simply no longer newsworthy remains to be seen, but in either case the Mahdi Army has established a model of resistance which engages the occupying forces, rather than innocent civilians. This is an important political advance for the Iraqi resistance movement as a whole.

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tions were conducted in a fair manner, with no evidence of fraud. It is doubtful that either organization would have endorsed the election without at least tacit approval from the Bush administration. Think tanks close to the U.S. government are calling for the Venezuelan opposition to exercise restraint because the U.S. economy cannot afford any disruptions in oil deliveries at this time and the U.S. military cannot send troops to Venezuela, at least until the situation in Iraq stabilizes. It appears that the Americans believe that they will be in a better position to get rid of Chavez by the time of the 2005 presidential elections in Venezuela. In particular, they are hoping that Chavez will use his victory to crack down on the opposition forces, thereby restoring some of their lost credibility.

However, there is every indication that Chavez has far more skills as a revolutionary leader than the U.S. imagines. He has avoided taking pre-emptive actions against the opposition forces, allowing them to develop and carry out their plots and organizing the poor to defeat those plots. At every stage he has been able to use the activities of the opposition to justify broad reforms and restructuring of the state. In 1999 his support was based on general discontent with the status quo and was largely unorganized. Now it is politicized as never before, active and well-organized. In addition, the program of reforms being carried out will guarantee even greater levels of popular support in the future. Furthermore, it appears that the army has been transformed into an instrument of revolutionary change.

While it is highly likely that the U.S. imperialists will continue to carry out activities designed to destabilize the Chavez government, it is difficult to see how their position will improve during the next year. To date, everything that the U.S. imperialists have done has strengthened Chavez. Venezuela is a classic case of the reactionaries lifting a stone, only to drop it on their own toes.

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showers and toilets. Israel has also used deprivation of medication and necessary medical treatments as an interrogation tactic.

Photos published in mainstream Israeli newspapers such as *Ha'aretz* have also depicted Palestinian prisoners hooded and handcuffed, being beaten with truncheons and sexually humiliated – images very similar to those released a few months ago depicting the torture of Iraqis by Americans in the Abu Ghraib jail.

More than half of the Palestinian prisoners held in Israeli jails are currently being detained without any charges. According to the Israeli human rights group B'tselem, the majority of those being held without charges are political prisoners who have been detained for “security” reasons. They have been accused, but never tried or convicted, of inciting violence or encouraging terrorist attacks. “If these same standards were applied inside Israel, half of the Likud party would be in administrative detention,” B'tselem stated in a recent report. Close to 500 Palestinian prisoners being held without charge have been detained under Military Order 1500, which dates back to British colonial rule of Palestine and allows authorities to detain any individual (including children) for up to six months without bringing charges against them. However, this time limit is routinely extended for periods of up to four years.

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