

Editorial

Iraqi Election Results Deepen U.S. Crisis

With the release this past week of the official results of the Iraqi elections, the situation facing the U.S. occupiers has become decidedly worse. The United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), a coalition of Shiite religious parties, won a clear majority of 140 out of 275 seats. An alliance of Kurdish parties won 26 percent of the votes and a similar percentage of seats. Meanwhile, the party of Interim Prime Minister Allawi won only 14 percent of the votes, not enough to play a significant role in the new government.

The UIA consists of parties representing a wide range of political opinion within the Shiite community, from relative moderates to supporters of Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the Mahdi Army who officially called for a boycott of the elections. However, they are united on a number of key demands, including a demand for a timetable for the withdrawal of all

multinational forces from Iraq. American officials, including U.S. president George W. Bush, have repeatedly asserted that they will not entertain any timetable for withdrawal of their troops from Iraq and have stated that the occupation may last for more than a decade. This sets the stage for a showdown between the newly-elected government and the occupying forces in the near future.

For their part, the Kurdish parties are attempting to use their showing to push for the expansion of the Kurdistan Autonomous Region to include more of the oil fields of northern Iraq. If they succeed in their aims, the Kurdish region of Iraq could become economically self-sufficient and set the stage for Kurdish secession from Iraq. Such a move would

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Commentary

There is Nothing Free About Trade With the U.S.

According to media reports, the recent negotiations between top-ranking trade negotiators from both Canada and the U.S. were amicable, despite the failure to reach an acceptable agreement on the outstanding question of softwood lumber. American negotiators were dispatched to Toronto for last week's meeting only after Canada threatened retaliation in the ongoing softwood lumber dispute, which has resulted in the loss of tens of thousands of jobs in Canada, chiefly in British Columbia, and in billions of dollars of lost exports.

The retaliation being threatened by the federal government is an export tax on Canadian lumber, one that would presumably even further reduce exports to the U.S. This is a far cry from the kind of

retaliatory measures the B.C. government and lumber capitalists had been calling for – they wanted a plan which would impose substantial export taxes on a number of essential Canadian products, such as oil, natural gas and hydroelectricity. The Martin government, however, has made “normalizing” relations with the U.S. a priority, and has not been open to linking different trade issues. In this regard, it has the strong support of Alberta Premier Ralph Klein, whose province's cattle industry has been decimated by the closure of the U.S. border but who has categorically rejected linking the oil and natural gas that flows from Alberta to the U.S. to the resumption of the cattle trade.

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Growing Fascization of Life

Following the September 11 terrorist attacks in the U.S. in 2001, legislation was enacted in both Canada and the U.S. which extended broad, sweeping powers to police and military personnel to interfere in the lives of ordinary people and to suspend civil liberties. In the U.S., the Patriot Act was passed with little to no opposition from legislators, while in Canada, a security bill introduced in November 2001 encoded in Canadian law as standard practice the violation of basic civil rights of all Canadians.

In both countries, the draconian measures were justified as an essential part of the war on terrorism. The experience of the past four years has been that this legislation has served to speed up the growing fascization of life in Canada and the U.S. There have been many notorious examples of this, from the revelations of torture and abuse in the U.S. concentration camps set up at Guantanamo Bay in Cuba and in Afghanistan and Iraq, to the role the RCMP has played in deporting Canadian citizens to face torture in other countries.

In Canada three other examples of the growing impunity of police forces have recently been in the news. In British Columbia, Texas troopers, engaged to train RCMP officers in violating civil rights, pulled over a driver on a highway and demanded to search his car with no warrant. The driver, a Vancouver police officer, refused to submit to the search. He was pulled over again shortly afterwards by another Texas trooper/RCMP team, pulled from his car in front of his child and had his car searched, despite his repeated objections that he had done nothing wrong and the search was being conducted illegally. When the Vancouver police officer went public with his story, the official response from the RCMP was that his rights would not have been violated if he had identified himself as a police officer when he was pulled over.

In Winnipeg, an Aboriginal youth was shot to death after a confrontation with three police officers. The youth, armed with only a screwdriver, was, according to eyewitness accounts, wiping tear gas from his eyes when he tripped and was shot. The officer who shot him claimed the youth was lunging

towards him, somehow suggesting the only response in such a situation would be to shoot to kill. Winnipeg reporters investigating the story found several witnesses to the shooting who refused to come forward because they said they were scared of police retaliation if they testified about what they saw.

Another instance concerned police officers in Edmonton who led a sting operation targeting a reporter and members of the civilian police commission who had criticized police practices in the city. According to transcripts, the officers' aim in targetting these individuals was to catch them driving drunk – in other words, to publicly humiliate them and destroy their credibility.

In 1997, when RCMP officers pepper-sprayed protesters at an APEC Summit, it caused such a crisis that the Chretien government had to set up a Royal Commission to make the issue go away. Today, such abuses of police power have become routine, underscoring the growing fascization of life.

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When the U.S.-Canada Free Trade Agreement (FTA) was signed Canadians were promised a new era of prosperity based on unfettered access to the U.S. market. At the same time, concerns raised about the impact of the deal on Canadian sovereignty were dismissed as ill-informed and fear-mongering. Instead, the U.S. has been quick to close its borders to a wide range of Canadian products – softwood lumber, steel, cattle, beef, tomatoes, potatoes, the list goes on – that have in any way harmed American capitalists, while refusing to accept any limitations on exports of its own goods and services. All the while, the Canadian ruling class preaches against offending the Americans at the risk of slamming their border closed to even more Canadian goods.

The softwood lumber case is an excellent example of how free trade has worked. The U.S. has repeatedly charged that Canada unfairly subsidizes its softwood lumber industry because the stumpage fees charged by the government for cutting lumber on Crown (i.e., publicly-owned) lands is much less than

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Ontario Proposes Increased University Tuition

Bob Rae, former NDP Premier of Ontario and currently education advisor to the Liberal McGuinty government, released his report on higher education on February 7. Entitled “Ontario: a Leader in Learning”, the report claims to signal a new commitment to higher education for all. However, once the rhetoric and obfuscation are stripped away, what remains is a proposal for increased tuition fees and an increase in the enormous student debt load carried by tens of thousands of university students who already cannot afford the huge costs of post-secondary education. This initiative could have serious repercussions across Canada if other provinces choose to follow suit.

The report comes after an extensive “consultation” process involving hundreds of submissions, town hall meetings and Round Table

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the fees charged by U.S. capitalists. No trade organization has ever upheld the validity of these complaints. Indeed, several bilateral and multilateral trade organizations have dismissed the American complaints. Nevertheless, the U.S. government has imposed import tariffs on Canadian softwood lumber in violation of the FTA and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

The U.S. tariffs on softwood lumber resulted in the immediate elimination of 30,000 jobs in the Canadian lumber industry. The overall effect on the Canadian economy and on the communities where those workers live has resulted in the loss of tens of thousands more jobs.

The United States is not interested in “free trade”, but in predatory trade. Any economy based on trade with such a trading partner will never be allowed to develop to its full potential. If the Canadian economy is to have any future, the current disastrous strategy of integration with the U.S. economy must be abandoned. Canada must develop its economy by expanding the domestic market and by building trading relations with other countries on the basis of mutual benefit and mutual respect.

discussions all across Ontario. Rae’s preamble to the report brags about how exciting this “debate” on education has been. However, this process has once again proved to be a smokescreen meant to give the appearance of democracy while the end result is a report which does not reflect the views of the people who took the time to prepare submissions and engage in discussions. Rather, it serves the monopoly capitalist interests, which was its intended purpose from the beginning.

One of the key recommendations of the Rae report is that tuition fees will be set by each institution, i.e. deregulation of tuition fees province-wide, with the added provision that the provincial government will ensure “predictability, transparency and affordability” for students. It does not take a degree in rocket science, as they say, to “predict” the outcome of this. Tuition fees are bound to go through the transparent roof. At the same time, the report proposes balancing these increases with grants to low-income students, but the grant ceilings, income thresholds and expected tuition levels are such as to guarantee that few students will receive any net benefit from these grants.

More students will need to turn to larger amounts of student loans in order to pay for their education. In order to ensure sufficient collateral to back the loans, parents of students needing money will now be able to access student loans on their behalf, thus further indebting families for decades to come. Meanwhile, students from wealthy families will be able to afford tuitions no matter how high they go. It will only be low and middle-income students who will have to pay beyond their means for higher education.

The monopoly capitalists of Ontario want to use the post-secondary institutions to produce graduates who will be able to better serve their corporate interests. As they will be the main beneficiaries of this “new commitment” to higher education, they should be the ones to pay. Instead, they have devised a scheme to further impoverish people through higher debt loads to the financial institutions which administer the student loan programs. The Rae report is a shameful attempt to present this act as if it was a benefit to students.

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further destabilize the region, encouraging similar Kurdish independence movements in Turkey and Iran. Since at least the first Gulf War in 1991, the Americans have been using the threat of Kurdish secession to put pressure on the governments of Turkey, Iran and Iraq and it appears that they are still playing the same game. However, ultimately the U.S. imperialists will betray the Kurdish people, just as every other imperialist power has in the past.

The vast majority of Iraqi Sunnis boycotted the elections, as did most of their main electoral parties. This has resulted in a significant section of the population – that section which is currently the main force behind the anti-occupation resistance struggle – having virtually no representation in the new government. To a certain extent this is not really relevant because elections held under conditions of foreign occupation are a largely meaningless concept. Under such conditions, the only thing that the occupied people can vote for is an end to the occupation. The Shiite population has done just that by voting for the UIA, while the Sunni population “voted” for the same thing by boycotting the election. In addition, the Shiite leaders have indicated their intention to include prominent Sunni leaders in their new cabinet in order to oppose the Balkanization of the country.

However, the rifts between the Sunnis and Shias in the south and the Sunnis and Kurds in the north are significant in that they provide the U.S. occupiers with plenty of opportunities to fish in troubled waters and foment civil strife. In the final analysis, the only way for the Americans to justify keeping their troops in the country is to create a situation of continuing violence and/or civil war in which they can claim they are needed to protect Iraqis from themselves. In this regard, there are strong indications that various terrorist organizations – those who direct their attacks against civilians – are continuing to provide vital assistance to the U.S. imperialist occupiers. These terrorists, apparently affiliated with al Qaeda, provided the Bush administration with a much needed justification to invade Afghanistan and Iraq when they attacked the World Trade Center and Pentagon on September 11, 2001. They have continued to launch

attacks against civilian populations around the world in a manner which assists the U.S. in justifying its permanent “war on terror”. For several weeks now these terrorist groups within Iraq have been targeting Shia religious leaders and worshippers, as well as Kurdish civilians. If the aim of these groups is to drive the foreign occupiers out of Iraq, then attacking Shia leaders who are also demanding that the Americans leave simply makes no sense politically. Such attacks only make sense from the point of view of the occupiers who desperately need the Iraqi population to be divided and fighting amongst themselves.

To date the main Shiite religious leaders have called for calm amongst their followers and asked them to refrain from striking back against the terrorists. They have taken the position that these terrorists represent neither the will of the Sunni population nor the interests of the Iraqi people as a whole. However, the next few months are certain to test the patience of the Iraqi people. Given the historical links between imperialism and terrorism, it is a virtual certainty that as the position of the U.S. occupiers becomes more and more untenable the frequency of terrorist attacks against the Iraqi people will also increase. How the Iraqi people and their leaders respond to this challenge will determine, in large part, whether Iraq emerges as a united and independent country or as another Lebanon.

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