

Editorial

## Iraq Referendum Results Change Nothing

The Independent Electoral Commission of Iraq has announced that the draft constitution has been endorsed by a majority of 78 percent and that only two provinces rejected it by more than two-thirds. This clears the way for national elections to take place on December 15.

The referendum had all the hallmarks of an American-organized vote, including voter turnout exceeding 100 percent in some sections of the province of Nineveh. An Australian television network actually showed footage of a man in Mosul filling out stacks of “Yes” ballots. As the initial results came in, even various American officials were forced to admit that the numbers from Nineveh indicated massive voting fraud. Nevertheless, despite this evidence the Electoral Commission has declared that there were no significant incidents of fraud and the

Bush administration has professed the results to be a great “victory for democracy”.

However, regardless of the spin put on the results by the Americans and their Iraqi allies, even according to the official results the draft constitution was rejected in three predominantly Sunni provinces by margins of 96 percent, 81 percent and 55 percent. In other words, the referendum has resulted in further deepening the divisions in Iraqi society between the Shias, Sunnis and Kurds and has further pushed the country on a path towards all-out civil war. There have been suggestions that this is one of the goals of the Bush administration, to permanently weaken Iraq by turning it into another Lebanon, torn apart by civil strife. If this is, indeed, the case then it is a very short-sighted policy which is unlikely to even allow the U.S.

*See page 4: Iraq Referendum*

## Paul Martin Tries to Salvage the FTAA

Less than a month after sounding the alarm over NAFTA because the Americans have refused to comply with a NAFTA panel ruling on softwood lumber, Prime Minister Paul Martin urged the countries of the Americas to put their faith in a continent-wide free trade pact to solve their economic problems. Martin made the opening speech November 4 at the Third Summit of the Americas, being held in Mar del Plata, Argentina. He was asked to open the summit because Canada hosted the last Summit five years ago in Quebec City.

Canada spent billions of dollars on security around that summit, including turning the historic city into a police state through the construction of a giant concrete and metal fence around the summit site, deploying thousands of police and soldiers and

arresting hundreds of protestors. Yet, apparently without irony, Martin told the leaders of 34 countries of the Americas (Cuba is excluded): “In Quebec City, a little less than five years ago, we came together again and reached a ground-breaking consensus about democracy.”

However, he said, “perfecting democracy does not complete our task”, adding, “We also need to strengthen our economies from within.” He urged delegates to take up the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) as a means to achieve this, warning that without adopting such an agreement, the continent will be completely marginalized by the economies of India and China.

Canada has backed the FTAA since the Americans first proposed it during the Clinton

*See page 2: Salvaging the FTAA*

# Venezuela to Become Full Member of Mercosur

Venezuela is scheduled to become a full member of the Common Market of the South, Mercosur, in December. Mercosur currently has four full members - Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay - with Chile and Bolivia participating as associate members. Venezuela has been an associate member since July 2004.

Mercosur's four principal members unanimously approved Venezuela's request to become a full member last week during a side meeting at the fifteenth annual Ibero-American Summit, held this year in Spain. Uruguayan foreign minister Reinaldo Gargano made the announcement during an October 16 news conference at the summit.

Venezuela's inclusion in Mercosur, "will give a new dimension to Mercosur, as it will reach from the Caribbean to Tierra del Fuego and makes it possible that the Community of Andean Nations (CAN) and Mercosur unite in a single free trade association with formidable power in the world," said Gargano. Venezuela is currently a member of CAN, along with Colombia, Ecuador and Peru.

The expansion of Mercosur comes just two weeks after South American leaders agreed to establish a Community of South American Nations

(CSN), which will eventually supplant both Mercosur and CAN and will include every country in South America.

The strengthening of trade agreements between the Latin American nations is viewed with open hostility by the Bush administration, which has been unable to impose the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) agreement that was initially proposed by the Clinton administration as a mechanism to ensure American domination of the economies of the region. The FTAA was scheduled to take effect in 2005, but negotiations for its implementation were frozen at the FTAA summit held in Miami in November 2003, when Venezuela, Brazil and a group of Caribbean nations refused to sign off on a number of provisions in the agreement.

Since then, Venezuela's Chavez government has proposed the Bolivian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA), an agreement which will encompass all the nations of Latin American and the Caribbean on the basis of mutual support, assistance and increased trade. Cuba and Venezuela have both already signed ALBA and Venezuelan government officials say the country's entry into Mercosur is the next step to expanding the agreement across the hemisphere.

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## *Salvaging the FTAA...from page 1*

administration. Originally scheduled to come into effect this year, the FTAA has been stalled by opposition from a number of governments in the region, including Brazil, Venezuela and several Caribbean countries. All have expressed their concern that the agreement will serve as a tool for the Americans to further dominate smaller economies in the region.

Enter Paul Martin, to promote the FTAA as the saviour for the Americas. "A Free Trade Agreement of the Americas is not about making the hemisphere safe for capitalists. It is about providing opportunities for our workers, and better goods and services for our consumers, from the bottom rung of the income ladder to the top," Martin said. "This is not a geopolitical agenda. It's a people's agenda. A democratic country with a stake in the global

economy can grow; it can invest its wealth in essential social programs such as health and education, as well as in technology and innovation – unlocking the potential of its own people. Freer and fairer trade will lift more human beings out of poverty than all of the assistance programs in the world combined."

However, none of Martin's hyperbole can erase the experience of the world's peoples over the past two decades. As country after country adopted the neoliberal globalization model, millions more people found themselves reduced to abject poverty, with wealth concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Entire nations in Asia, Africa and Latin America have been reduced to the status of beggar states, unable to provide any of the basic necessities to their populations after years of cutbacks to ensure that their economic policies were consistent with free trade agreements.

## **Europe Cautions U.S. on Iraqi Referendum Results**

While representatives of U.S. imperialism hailed the results of the Iraqi referendum on the constitution as a victory for Iraq, European representatives struck a much more cautious tone. The only exceptions were representatives of the Blair government in the UK and the Berlusconi government in Italy, both of which openly support the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq despite widespread public opposition.

However, even British representatives avoided the hyperbole of the Americans, all of whom described the referendum as a victory for democracy and a triumph over terror. British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw said the Iraqi people “have shown again their determination to ... take part in the democratic process,” adding “this is an important step in the development of a democratic, stable and inclusive Iraq”. Italian Foreign Minister Gianfranco Fini was less cautious, stating the referendum “marks the beginning of a new era of dialogue and reconciliation among all Iraqi people, beyond ethnic and religious differences and shows that politics has defeated the violence of terror.”

The possibility that the Americans would use the referendum and the Iraqi elections now scheduled for

December, as a pretext for withdrawal seemed to be the unspoken fear shared by European leaders, all of whom stressed the situation in Iraq is extremely precarious. It would seem the Europeans are quite content to have the Americans presiding over a costly and largely futile occupation. To this end they stressed the problems on the ground in Iraq.

European leaders and commentators said the results clearly demonstrated the fragmentation of Iraq and the vulnerability of the country as a nation. The EU foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, for example, said “the results, while overall positive, shed light on deep-seated divisions among the communities of Iraq. It is important to exert all efforts to overcome these divisions.” German and Russian foreign affairs ministers made similar comments, with both stressing the urgency of ensuring that Iraq not be allowed to disintegrate into open civil war.

The Europeans seem content to continue to provide limited funding to Iraq (for example, the European Commission contributed 80 million Euros to Iraq’s Independent Electoral Commission) while leaving the Americans with the much larger bills of occupation and reconstruction.

## **Arab League Proposes Reconciliation Conference for Iraq**

Over two years after the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, the Arab League last month finally made its first public remarks on the situation in the country. Worrying that conditions in Iraq have grown steadily worse since the overthrow of the Saddam Hussein regime, and that the country is now on the brink of civil war, the League has begun to stress the importance of reconciliation.

The League, comprised of the world’s 22 Arab countries, sent a delegation including League leader Amir Moussa to tour Iraq on October 17 and 18. “This is an Arab mission to help Iraq,” Arab League Assistant Secretary General for Political Affairs, Ahmad bin Hilli told Al-Jazeera television network. “We are here to talk about the building of Iraq. We have talks to our brothers in Iraq about the best ways to help them preserve the high interests of Iraq, not the interests of any specific group.” The League has announced it plans to organize a reconciliation conference to be held at an as-yet undetermined time.

In the past, the Arab League has been dominated

by countries with strong ties to U.S. imperialism (Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Kuwait, Baharain, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates) and has refused to issue a condemnation of the U.S. invasion of Iraq two years ago, despite the overwhelming opposition to the invasion in the Arab world. This popular opposition has, if anything, grown stronger since the March 2003 invasion, with coverage of American atrocities against the Iraqi people appearing daily in Arab newspapers and on Arab television.

However, the continued support for U.S. imperialism by some of the League’s members has meant that it has not been able to openly condemn the occupation. The delegation’s recent visit is seen as an oblique criticism of American incompetence in Iraq. The League’s main concern seems to be to prevent civil war, with many Arab leaders worried that a Sunni or Kurdish insurrection in Iraq could spread beyond the country’s borders and threaten their own regimes.

*See page 4: Arab League*

### ***Iraq Referendum...from page 1***

to withdraw some of its forces, as it so desperately needs to do.

At best, the Americans have achieved a minor propaganda victory, although one which is seriously undermined by the evidence of massive fraud. The referendum results are clearly not accepted by the vast majority of Sunni Iraqis, who constitute the main support for the ongoing insurgency. The December elections will also do nothing to solve this problem for the Americans. As a result, the insurgency will undoubtedly escalate in the coming months. Since there has been no indication that the Iraqi army is capable of establishing order in any part of Iraq, the U.S. will be unable to significantly reduce the number of occupation troops.

Furthermore, if a full-scale civil war were to break out in Iraq the whole region would be dragged into it. Turkey has already made it abundantly clear that it will not tolerate an independent Kurdish state on its borders and will invade northern Iraq to prevent such a state from being established. Similarly, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia are not prepared to accept the creation of a pro-Iranian Shi'ite state in the southern provinces of Iraq. Of course, the Sunni also cannot accept a division of Iraq which would see them cut off from the oil-rich northern and southern regions of the country. Furthermore, none of Iraq's neighbours, except for Israel, wants to see Iraq turned into a source of constant strife in their own countries. So, while civil war may serve the short-term interests of the Bush administration, in the longer term it could seriously undermine the fundamental basis of U.S. imperialist domination of the entire region, which is the convergence of interests between the U.S. imperialists and Arab reactionaries.

The ethnic and religious division of Iraq is a relatively recent phenomenon which lies squarely at the doorstep of the Americans. When the U.S. wanted to put Saddam Hussein in power and keep him there it played the Sunni card; to remove him it was forced to play the Shia-Kurdish card. This has created and exacerbated differences between the various sections of Iraqi society, leading to the current tragic state of affairs. However, the Americans are discovering that it has opened a Pandora's box that it was easier to enter Iraq than it is to leave. Given the U.S. agenda to control Iraqi oil and the conflicting interests of numerous countries and ethnic groups in the region, it is very difficult to see any way out of the current situation which does not involve yet further tragedy for the Iraqi people.

### ***Arab League...from page 3***

The planned reconciliation conference, appears to be the League's attempt to establish some form of government in Iraq that could exist in the event of an American withdrawal from the country. Despite immense pressure from the U.S.-installed Shi'ite and Kurdish coalition government in Iraq that any conference the League organizes must exclude the resistance movement, the League has so far been firm that any conference must include all sides.

The League delegation to Iraq held meetings with members of the Iraqi government as well as with representatives of all the different political forces in the country. The decision to include all political representatives in a reconciliation conference was rejected by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani immediately after meeting the delegation, saying while "moderate Sunnis were welcome", no one involved in violence could be included.

However, in an interview with the BBC League leader Moussa said the reconciliation conference needs to include all factions in Iraq to try and avert civil war. "The situation is so tense, a civil war could erupt at any moment, although some people would say it is already there," he said. Moussa also told the BBC "There are a lot of people ... playing games with the future of Iraq and there is no clear strategy, there is no clear leadership." The League, Moussa says, also plans to convoke a special meeting of Arab foreign ministers in December to further discuss the situation in Iraq.

## **Modern Communism**

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**To contact the Manitoba Branch of CPC(M-L):  
Fax: 477-6741  
Email: mrc-cpcml@mts.net  
Internet: www.modern-communism.ca  
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