

### Bush and Bremer Blinked

By Ian Williams | January 23, 2004

The meeting between the UN, the Coalition, and the Iraqi Governing Council on 19 January suggests that the harsh realities of an election year in the U.S. may be making elections more feasible in Iraq. It is also very likely going to speed up the return of the UN international staff there.

However, this is not the UN succumbing to American pressure. Rather, in a stand-off over several months, with Kofi Annan refusing to return under American conditions, Washington has blinked first. Scarcely a week before, it seemed that Paul Bremer was dismissive of the whole idea of the meeting between the IGC and the UN, and unlikely to both-er turning up to the meeting. It was the Iraqis who wanted UN involvement.

And then he swung around a week before and flew to New York for the meeting, where, according to participants, the American team was “extraordinarily polite.” Although Annan is properly cautious, not least after some fairly heavy previous American pressure to send in the UN without condition, he seemed to be giving serious consideration to a bigger UN role.

After the meetings, Annan said that the IGC and CPA had asked that the “UN should quickly send a technical mission to Iraq to advise on the feasibility of elections within the next few months and, if not, what alternatives might be possible.” Taking UN involvement the following year for granted, the issue now is, he said “whether the technical, political, or security conditions exist for general direct elections to take place as early as May this year.” He was, he said, giving this serious consideration, and it is likely that it will go ahead, although not at any great speed.

Annan had previously said, in response to requests by Ayatollah Ali Sistani, that he did not think that elections would be feasible under present Iraqi conditions. But the Ayatollah wanted a more detailed examination, and an announcement from the British in Basra the day after the UN meeting that they

thought that elections were not so far-fetched may help his case.

In fact, initially, the issue for the Coalition, at least the American part of it, was not so much the feasibility of elections to the Legislative Council, but their desirability. The wrong people could end up getting elected. It is not just the expedient friends of democracy in the Pentagon who have such worries. Experience in other transition countries shows the perils of letting the first rush of post-tyrant elections set arrangements and parties in stone. However, British observers think that the Shi'a threat has been over-stated and suggest that the Shi'a are not necessarily either as sectarian or as monolithic a bloc as many fear.

In any case, while democracy may seem the worst of all possible options, it is only so, “except all the others,” in Churchill's words. The IGC knows that any handover of sovereignty to a Coalition-nominated body under the planned arrangements would bear the stigmata of Quislinghood. The two alternatives appeared to be getting Kofi Annan and the UN to bless the timetable and all its details, or elections.

Annan has so far refused because he has insisted on a “vital” role for the UN, one substantial enough for staff to risk their lives for. Neither he nor the bulk of UN staff saw acting as a UN-blue figleaf for the Occupation as a cause for risking martyrdom. Many staff had been unhappy at the UN's role in Iraq sanctions for a long time. The majority profoundly disagreed with the U.S. invasion and did not really see it as the organization's role to provide cover for it.

On the other hand, the more reasonable elements in the Coalition, namely the British and the State



---

Department, have been pointing out that the present UN position—of not returning to Iraq until sovereignty has been restored—is politically untenable. It cannot expect to play the major role it wants in rebuilding a sovereign government in Iraq if it waits until afterwards to go in.

Now, it is clear that the Coalition is indeed prepared to countenance a UN team coming back with recommendations that it would have great political difficulty rejecting, such as recommending an election, or alternatives to a U.S.-nominated Transitional Legislative Council. This is a major change in attitudes, signaled by the arrival of Bremer in New York. In fact, diplomats suggest that for the Bush administration it is now the timetable that is sacrosanct, tied as it is to the U.S. election schedule this year, rather than the details. The pressure is on to declare victory (again) and distance Washington from the continuing mayhem.

The vindictive may remember the series of resolutions that the U.S. squeezed through the Security Council, where the Pentagon input was to try denying the UN any serious role except to do what it was told, and where the rest of the world scrupulously refused to recognize the legitimacy of the invasion and occupation. Those resolutions seem to have disappeared along with the Weapons of Mass Destruction. Reality, on the ground in Iraq and in the polls in America has, for the time being, pushed aside the Pentagon hardliners. It may not last, but there does appear to be a genuine window of opportunity for Kofi Annan and the UN to have an effect.

---

*(Ian Williams is a chief UN Analyst for Foreign Policy In Focus (online at [www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org)). He is also a correspondent for the Nation & Middle East International.)*

---

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPIF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at [www.irc-online.org](http://www.irc-online.org)) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at [www.ips-dc.org](http://www.ips-dc.org)). ©2004. All rights reserved.

## Foreign Policy In Focus

“A Think Tank Without Walls”

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to “making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner.” For more information, visit [www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org).

### Recommended citation:

Ian Williams, “Bush and Bremer Blinkered,” (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, January 23, 2004).

### Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0401iraqelect.html>

### Production Information:

Writer: Ian Williams

Editor: Emira Woods, IPS

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

