

# The Real Story of the Iraqi Elections

By Gareth Porter | February 8, 2005

The U.S. government and most pundits have painted Iraq's recent elections as a great victory over the Iraqi insurgents, who opposed them, and as a vindication of the Bush administration's policy of bringing democracy to the Middle East. Amid the orgy of self-congratulation over the bravery of Iraqi voters, officials and commentators have ignored the most important story of the election results: a Sunni electoral boycott that demonstrates a level of support for the insurgency in the Sunni triangle that is far greater than what the administration has admitted.

The image of millions of Iraqis dodging bombs and bullets to vote is highly misleading. In fact, given the geographic concentration of the insurgency in Sunni areas, there was never any possibility that the insurgents could prevent Shiites and Kurds from turning out in great numbers. There were 5,000 polling places in the country, but only 109—2% of the total—came under attack.

The only real uncertainty surrounding the election was whether significant numbers of Sunnis in the Sunni heartland would participate. The administration had considered it a major objective of its policy to weaken the hold of the insurgents on the Sunni strongholds sufficiently to allow the population of those cities to vote. The U.S. command announced in early December that it had decided that it had to establish control over the major strongholds of the insurgency in Baghdad, Mosul, Ramadi and Samarra by the end of the year, so that the Sunnis would be able to vote in the elections. In particular, the command had set its sights on seizing control of Ramadi. Gen. George Casey, the commander of the Multinational Force Iraq, boasted, "We believe a solution in Ramadi is now obtainable."

In light of the U.S. ambitions for at least temporary control over the major Sunni cities, the fate of the elections in those cities is the clearest indicator available of the political strength of the insurgency. Eyewitness press reports from the Sunni strongholds make it clear that the Sunnis were united in honoring the boycott of the elections called for by Sunni clerics aligned with the insurgency. NBC News reported from Ramadi that only about one percent of the

eligible voters in Ramadi went to the polls, including non-Sunni troops and police. In the Sunni sections of Mosul, Steve Fainaru of the *Washington Post* reported that one polling place visited had not had a single voter all day except for the Iraqi soldiers protecting it and at another only 60 people had voted.

In Samarra, which U.S. forces patrolled in force, the polling places were deserted most of the day. The joint U.S.-Iraqi task force providing security for the election reported that fewer than 1,400 people, including the mostly Shiite soldiers and police, out of a total population of 200,000, had cast ballots. The same scene of deserted polling places was reported by Associated Press in the desolated city of Fallujah, where as many as 140,000 carefully screened people have been allowed to return. And in West Baghdad, Iraqi journalists reported that only about 500 of the tens of thousands of temporarily resettled refugees from Fallujah voted.

Based on these partial eyewitness reports, it appears that only about one percent of the Sunnis at most defied the electoral boycott in the main Sunni strongholds, despite the efforts of the U.S. occupation forces to wrest control of those cities from the insurgents. Threats of retaliation undoubtedly intimidated some middle class Sunnis who would otherwise have voted. But most Sunnis boycotted the election because they considered it the illegitimate result of a deal between occupation authorities and the Shiites. A *Wall Street Journal* story about a Christian engineer in a Sunni neighborhood of Baghdad who wanted to vote vividly described the Sunni neighborhood in which he lived, which included many displaced



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Fallujans, as overwhelmingly hostile toward the U.S. occupation and to the election.

The U.S. continues to claim that only a relatively small minority of Sunnis in the country sympathize with the insurgency. The almost complete effectiveness of the election boycott makes it clear, however, that the insurgents now command the loyalty of the vast majority of the Sunni population.

While it is tempting to be carried away with the symbolism of purple Iraqi fingers, the most important message is that there is no possibility of a military solution to the insurgency. Instead the United States must accept the need for a political settlement. Such a settlement requires negotiations between the Shiites who won the election and figures who can speak on behalf the Sunni resistance forces to agree on arrangements for limiting and sharing power in the new political order, a ceasefire and surrender of insurgents, and a timetable for speedy withdrawal of U.S. and other foreign forces.

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*Gareth Porter is a historian and an analyst for Foreign Policy In Focus (online at [www.fpif.org](http://www.fpif.org)). His latest book, Perils of Dominance: Imbalance of Power and the Road to War in Vietnam, will be published by University of California Press in May.*

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