

Who Are the Progressives in Iraq?

The Left, the Right, and the Islamists

By Frank Smyth | September 21, 2004

One event in Baghdad went unreported this month, not only by the mainstream media but also by the “alternative” press, even though it implies that U.S. control over Iraq’s political future may already be waning. In August, the White House supported the establishment of an Iraqi National Council comprising 100 Iraqis from various tribal, ethnic, and religious groups in an effort to influence the composition of an electoral oversight body. Yet this month, two large political parties, each of which has long been viewed with suspicion by Washington, came out ahead in the voting.

Many criticize the legitimacy of the process by which the Bush administration is hoping to steer Iraq toward national elections next January. The indirect elections took place under war conditions, and the Associated Press reported that mortars exploded near the convention site in Baghdad where delegates gathered. Iraqi delegates also expanded the number of vice-chairs in the national council from two to four. Had they not done so, the results might have been even more troubling for the White House.

In the September balloting, the delegate from the Supreme Assembly for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, Jawad al-Maliki, came in first with 56 votes. This is a Shiite group that Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld lambasted as a tool of Iran during the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq. Another Iraqi even less attractive to Washington, the Secretary General of the Iraqi Communist Party (<http://www.iraqcp.org>), Hamid Majid Moussa, came in second with 55 votes. Meanwhile, Rasim al-Awadi, the delegate from the Iraqi National Accord—the group once backed by the CIA and whose leader, Iyad Allawi, who was supported by the Bush administration to become the Iraqi prime minister—came in third with 53 votes. Nasir A`if al-Ani—the delegate from the Iraqi Islamic Party, a Sunni group, sympathetic to the Ba’athist-based, anti-American resistance operating both west and north of Baghdad—came in fourth with 48 votes.

By any count, getting only one ally elected out of four seats on this potentially all-important electoral

oversight body does not bode well for the Bush administration. After the Iraqi National Council was formed, but before it voted, White House spokesman Scott McClellan, while at President Bush’s family ranch in Crawford, Texas, declared: “The selection of the council is a sign that the Iraqi people will not allow terrorist elements to stand in the way of their democratic future.”

But what if elections in Iraq early next year lead to a government unlike anything ever expected by the Bush administration? The respected Arabist from the University of Michigan, Juan Cole, was among the first to report the Iraqi National Council election results on his blog, <http://www.juancole.com>. “So,” he quipped, “this list is further evidence that the U.S. invaded Iraq to install in power a coalition of Communists, Islamists and ex-Ba’athist nationalists. If you had said such a thing 3 years ago you would have been laughed at.”

My Enemy’s Friends

Many American leftists seem to know little about their Iraqi counterparts, since understanding the role of the Iraqi left requires a nuanced approach. Unfortunately the knee-jerk, anti-imperialist analysis of groups like International A.N.S.W.E.R. has wormed its way into several progressive outlets. Dispatches and columns in *The Nation* as well as reports and commentary on the independently syndicated radio program “Democracy Now” have all but ignored the role of Iraqi progressives while highlight-



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ing, if not championing, the various factions of the Iraqi-based resistance against the U.S.-led occupation without bothering to ask who these groups are and what they represent for Iraqis.

By now several things about the Iraq War seem clear. The U.S.-led invasion was the most dangerous and reckless step taken by the United States since the Vietnam War, and America is already paying dearly and is sure to pay an even steeper price in the future for this imprudent action. More than 1,000 American soldiers have died in little more than a year in a campaign that has undermined U.S. security more profoundly than even candidate John Kerry has managed to articulate. Never has the United States (according to international public opinion polls) been so resented, if not loathed, by so many people around the world. And this is exactly the kind of environment in which al-Qaida terrorists—who *do* represent a real and ongoing threat to the United States and others—thrive.

U.S. activists who demonstrated against the Iraq War made an invaluable contribution by letting the rest of the world know that millions of Americans opposed the U.S.-led invasion. But the enemy of one's enemy is not necessarily one's friend. To think otherwise is to embrace an Orwellian logic that makes anti-war Americans appear not only uninformed but also as cynical as the pro-war protagonists whom they oppose. The irony of the Iraq War is that the Bush administration made a unilateral decision to invade a nation in order to overthrow a leader who ranked among the most despised despots in the world but, in so doing, managed to turn countless people in many nations against the United States.

Who Hated Saddam?

Saddam Hussein's detractors have always included none other than Osama bin Laden, who long derided the Iraqi leader as either an "infidel" or a "false Muslim" nearly every time he has ever mentioned his name in any interview or recorded statement. The most radical of Muslims, in fact, know all too well that no modern Arab government tortured and murdered as many Muslims as did Saddam's Ba'athist regime. No Middle Eastern leader, either, has tor-

tured and murdered as many communists as Saddam did during the decades of his regime.

The Arab Nationalist Renaissance Ba'athist Party has been both anti-communist and anti-Islamic and unabashedly championed ethnic nationalism. In Iraq, the Ba'ath Party under Saddam Hussein instituted a minority-based government. Ethnic Arabs of the mainstream Sunni Muslim faith have long dominated the Ba'ath Party, even though Sunni Arabs today constitute at most 17% of the Iraqi population, just a bit above the percentage of whites in South Africa.

Ethnic Arabs of the Shiite Muslim sect, meanwhile, are nearly as numerous in Iraq as blacks are in South Africa. Anyone interested in empowering the poor should also know that Iraq's Shiite Muslims have long been the most indigent of Iraqis and suffered the most during the U.S.-backed UN sanctions. Shiite males were often little more than cannon fodder for Saddam's various military adventures. Like the Shiites, Iraq's Kurds, about 20% of the population, never enjoyed more than token representation under Saddam.

Resistance to Saddam's rule took many forms from 1979 to 2003, with anti-Saddam groups organized largely along Shiite Islamic, Kurdish nationalist, or Communist Party lines. Each of these groups lost tens of thousands of adherents to brutal counterinsurgency sweeps conducted by the Ba'athist government. Some American leftists apologized for Saddam's government, saying it was no worse than many others in the world. But Saddam Hussein's behavior deserves a category for itself, employing vicious repression and often including the torture and rape of family members of suspected dissidents. Few rulers anywhere in the world were so brutal, with one exception of the CIA-backed government in Guatemala during the 1980s. (Both that government and Saddam's, it is worth noting, were clandestinely aided by the United States during the Reagan administration.)

In more recent years, U.S. leftists were not the only ones who ignored the various Iraqi groups that had long resisted Saddam's tyranny. The U.S. right, led most recently by the neoconservatives of the Bush administration, also ignored these resistance groups

when they sought Iraqi allies during the buildup to the 2003 U.S. invasion. Instead of reaching out to broad-based, anti-Saddam groups like either the Shiite Muslim opposition or the secular leftist resistance, both of which still had either armed or clandestine cadres inside Iraq as late as 2003, the Bush administration allied itself instead with a group of ex-monarchists led by the now-discredited Ahmed Chalabi. A solid member of the old ruling class, Chalabi's father was the wealthiest man in Baghdad in 1958, when Iraq's short-lived, British-imposed monarchy was overthrown. The Ba'athists, eventually led by Saddam, came out on top in the ensuing power struggle, but both the Shiite majority and Iraq's second-largest population group, the Kurds, remained excluded from wealth as well as power.

The Resistance Versus the Revolutionaries

There are several factions fighting U.S.-led forces inside Iraq today, and the heavy-handedness of the U.S. occupation has spurred many individual Iraqi nationalists to join them. American abuses have included breaking into homes, with male troops often manhandling women and terrifying children, firing into populated areas, causing many civilian casualties, and humiliating—as well as torturing—Iraqis inside Abu Ghraib prison.

Yet, all of the organized groups among the Iraqi resistance are reactionary forces of one kind or another. The resistance around and between the cities of Falluja, Tikrit, and Baghdad in the so-called “Sunni triangle” is led by ex-Ba'athists who aspire to return the old minority-based dictatorship to power. As Juan Cole points out, Nasir A'if al-Ani, the Sunni delegate to the Iraqi National Council from the Iraqi Islamic Party, does not even recognize the Shi'a people as a majority in Iraq. (Not even the most recalcitrant Afrikaners in apartheid South Africa pretended that blacks were a minority.)

Others like *The Nation's* Naomi Klein, meanwhile, seem to have naively fallen for the al-Mahdi militia that recently fought U.S. Marines in Najaf. The al-Mahdi militia is a loosely organized Shiite opposition group led by Muqtada al-Sadr. He is a young man who inherited his role after his father and two broth-

ers were murdered by Saddam. Lacking either the maturity or training of a senior cleric, al-Sadr has tried to lure supporters from more-respected Shiite clerics by promoting militant enforcement of the most fundamental tenets of Shiite Islam, including the explicit repression of gays and women.

The third sizable element of resistance inside Iraq is composed of foreign Islamist members of al-Qaida, who, like both the Saudi royal family and Osama bin Laden, practice an even more extreme version of Islam, Wahaabism. This group's recent victims may include two kidnapped Italian women who work for the Italian group A Bridge to Baghdad, which, like U.S. anti-war groups working in Iraq, is explicitly opposed to the U.S. occupation. The American anti-war group, Iraq Occupation Watch, seems to believe that members of the Iraqi resistance may be holding them, pointing out on its website that the abductors should recognize that the Italian women are anti-war activists. On the other hand, Democracy Now's Jeremy Scahill and *The Nation's* Naomi Klein have written in *The Guardian* that a Western intelligence-backed group may be behind the abductions, suggesting that the CIA or others seized the two women to try to discredit the Iraqi opposition.

The Iraqis favored by the Bush administration may be secular, but they are hardly more admirable people. Prime Minister Iyad Allawi is an ex-Ba'athist who left the Ba'ath Party in the mid-1970s. Paul McGeough of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, reported that Allawi personally executed (with a handgun) six Iraqis in a Baghdad police station right before he became prime minister, though no proof of this crime has yet been forthcoming. Prime Minister Allawi's democracy credentials are also not impressive. He has already banned the Qatar-based satellite TV network, al-Jazeera, and has imposed certain forms of martial law.

Neither the resistance groups cheered on by many on the American left nor the governing parties championed by the American right seem to reflect the views and aspirations of most Iraqi people, who seem to be hoping for the rise of groups independent of both Saddam's reign and the increasingly dictatorial Allawi government. Possibilities include moderate Shiite groups and secular leftist ones, through whose

leadership most Iraqis hope to find a way to empower themselves for the first time in their history.

Unfortunately, mainstream Iraqis seem to have been all but forgotten by both the American left and right. Iraqis must be valued for who they are, not as pawns in some partisan political agenda. Such chauvinism might be expected of “America-first” right-wingers, but such a position is hardly defensible for any conscientious progressive. It’s no wonder instead of seeing Iraq’s highly complex and, indeed, contradictory political reality, so many American leftists have chosen instead to cling to the comfort that comes from simple sloganeering.

FOR MORE READING:

Naomi Klein, “Bring Najaf to New York,” *The Nation*, September 13, 2004, at:
<<http://www.thenation.com/doc.mhtml?i=20040913&s=klein>>.

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

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Recommended citation:

Frank Smyth, “Who Are the Progressives in Iraq? The Left, the Right, and the Islamists,” *Foreign Policy In Focus* (Silver City, NM: Interhemispheric Resource Center, September 2004).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/papers/0409progiraq.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Frank Smyth

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

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