

back down on indirect elections 'and at the same time, after a year's steadfast refusal, to seek a UN role in the country's political evolution.' (*Guardian* <<http://tinyurl.com/4td76>>)

The ayatollah's opposition led finally to the principle of direct elections being written into UN Security Council Resolution 1546, passed on 8 June 2004. (Available from the Foreign Office website <<http://tinyurl.com/43dlz>>)

THE ORIGINAL PLAN: COUP NOT ELECTIONS

President Bush's ultimatum on 17 March 2003 did not call for free elections in Iraq. Bush said merely, 'Saddam Hussein and his sons must leave Iraq within 48 hours.' (<<http://tinyurl.com/7ob3>>) According to the *FT*, this was intended to 'encourag[e] a last minute coup more than the Iraqi leader's departure from Baghdad.' (*FT*, 19 Mar. 2003, p. 3)

'**Coup fever** seems even to have infected Downing Street. In November 2002, Britain's top academic Iraqi experts were summoned to brief Blair... The first thing Blair said to the academics was: "What do we do after the coup?" They were dumbfounded.' (*Sunday Times*, 11 Jan. 2004, News Review)

If Saddam and his sons had left Iraq, as demanded, this would have left the political-military-intelligence-judicial-bureaucratic-police system created by Saddam Hussein intact. The US-UK plan was not to hold free and fair elections in Iraq, but to provoke a coup against Saddam, or, failing that, to hold together the Iraqi system, maintaining '**Saddamism without Saddam**'.

Plan B was to spare and retain the Iraqi military leadership as a means of controlling the country. The aim was to make the Iraqi armed forces 'come over' so that it could be used to 'police the country after Saddam had gone', according to British sources. (*Observer*, 2 Feb. 2003, p. 1. There is more documentation on these issues in *Regime Unchanged*, Pluto, 2003.)

The plan was not 'regime change', but '**regime stabilization, leadership change**'. Saddam's system was to be retained, under US-UK management. Washington and London feared—and still fear—democracy in Iraq.

It is clear from the record that **the United States had no intention of establishing democracy in Iraq when it invaded.**

Washington has been forced to allow direct elections to the Iraqi National Assembly—forced by the majority of Iraqi people, led by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. The alternative was a mass uprising by the Shia majority which the US would have been incapable of controlling.

The 'ripple of change' in the Middle East is actually the result of a successful challenge to US power, forced on a reluctant conqueror.

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A Ripple Of Democracy

No Credit To Washington Or London JNV Anti-War Briefing 78 (15 Mar. 2005)

A RIPPLE OF CHANGE

The US and Britain are claiming credit for recent dramatic events in the Middle East. George W. Bush said on 5 Mar., 'In the last five months, we have witnessed successful elections in Afghanistan, the Palestinian Territory and Iraq; peaceful demonstrations on the streets of Beirut; and steps toward democratic reform in Egypt and Saudi Arabia... freedom is on the march.' He focused on the role of the Iraqi elections on 30 Jan., and implicitly took credit for the elections. (White House website <<http://tinyurl.com/585qf>>)

Tony Blair, for his part, says that there 'may only be a ripple of change at the moment but it is happening throughout the Middle East.' As usual, the Prime Minister seeks to move attention from the damaging issue of the illegal invasion of Iraq, to the alleged benefits of its occupation: 'that is why in the end whatever positions people take on Afghanistan or Iraq, if you can establish democracy there it is of huge importance to again providing an example of how countries can develop.' (*Guardian*, 2 Mar. <<http://tinyurl.com/5qslb>>)

There is little doubt that the Middle East is experiencing 'a ripple of change'. There is also little doubt that the Iraqi elections have played a significant part in these political shifts. The question is who is responsible for the progress.

THE AYATOLLAH OF DEMOCRACY

The *Financial Times* notes that the 30 Jan. elections in Iraq, when more than 8 million Iraqis defied intimidation to vote for a national assembly, have had considerable impact in the Middle East: 'This heroism, of a people who have endured wars, sanctions and three decades of Saddam Hussein's form of fascism, struck a deep chord in the Arab world.' The question is who was responsible for this outbreak of democracy.

The *FT* remarks: 'The triumphalists in Washington who now claim total vindication for their almost totally bungled strategy are right to point out that

these elections would not have taken place under Mr Hussein. **But they should reflect that the reason they took place was the insistence of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who vetoed three schemes by the US-led occupation authorities to shelve or dilute them.** Mr Sistani is the man who has held the Iraqi ring.’ (*FT*, 5 Mar., p. 10)

HURRYING UP: SEPT. 2003

At first, the US had what it called an ‘unhurried’ approach to the transfer of power to the Iraqi people. On 23 Sept. 2003, President Bush told the UN General Assembly that ‘self-government for the people of Iraq... must unfold according to the needs of Iraqis, neither hurried, nor delayed by the wishes of other parties.’ (White House <<http://tinyurl.com/of16>>) In other words, political change should ‘unfold’ (and be ‘delayed’) according to the needs of the US.

At this point, the US plan was that a (US-appointed) constitutional convention would meet to agree a new constitution, to be confirmed by a referendum, after which there would be elections of some description. There were no timetables or deadlines for any of these processes.

Within days of Bush’s speech, under pressure from France and others for a swift handover of power, the US finally began setting a timetable for the process. (*Guardian*, 27 Sept. 2003 <<http://tinyurl.com/3lmo1>>)

THE SISTANI CHALLENGE

The crucial point made by Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, Iraq’s leading Shia cleric, was that, whatever the timetable, the process had to be truly democratic.

The ayatollah condemned as ‘**fundamentally unacceptable**’ US plans to **appoint** the Iraqis who will begin drafting a new constitution. He wrote in July 2003: ‘The occupation officials do not enjoy the authority to appoint the members of a council that would write the constitution.’ The ayatollah called for a general election ‘so that every eligible Iraqi can choose someone to represent him at the constitutional convention that will write the constitution.’ (*Guardian*, 2 July 2003 <<http://tinyurl.com/6mhjr>>)

INDIRECT ELECTIONS: THE NEXT US GAMBIT

Within months, the US had taken another major U-turn, but still did not accept the principle of direct elections. In mid-Nov. 2003, once again in a mood of panic, Washington announced a new plan for ‘transferring sovereignty’ to an ‘elected’ Iraqi government. First a provisional legislative assembly was to be selected by regional “caucus” meetings (by 31 May 2004). Then that assembly would elect a provisional Iraqi government (by 30 June 2004), and this would immediately have ‘sovereignty’ ‘transferred’ to it by the US.

Crucially, there was to be **indirect selection** to the national assembly. Anton La Guardia, Diplomatic Correspondent for the *Telegraph*, noted that ‘The “caucus” process to select the provisional legislature will be far from democratic.’ (*Telegraph*, 26 Nov. 2003, p. 18) ‘As the law is being drafted, the [Iraq Governing] council will set up 15-person committees in each province that will be responsible for selecting participants for the caucuses where members of the transitional assembly will be chosen... vetted by the selection committees.’ (*Washington Post*, 16 Nov. 2003 <<http://tinyurl.com/6ytqt>>)

SELECTION NOT ELECTION

So, **US-appointed** politicians would **select** a committee in each province which would **select** a group of politically-acceptable local worthies, which in turn would **select** a representative for the province to go forward to the national assembly. This highly-filtered body would then be allowed to **elect** a provisional government. Democracy, Washington-style.

Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, member of the Governing Council, noted that one tribal council head had included more than 20 members of his own family in the local caucus’. (*FT*, 29 Nov. 2003, p. 9) Democracy, Washington-style.

THE SISTANI CHALLENGE (AGAIN)

Ayatollah al-Sistani once again called for direct elections. The US refused. ‘The coalition and Iraqi officials insist that some creative way will be found to appease Mr Sistani without holding an election, and a committee is now looking at options.’ (*FT*, 3 Dec. 2003, p. 13) Democracy, Washington-style.

The Shia clerical establishment responded by organising demonstrations, demanding prompt **direct** elections, as the US presented its plans for indirect elections to the UN. 100,000 Shias demonstrated in Baghdad, and 30,000 demonstrated in Basra, Iraq’s second city. The crowds shouted ‘yes, yes to elections, no, no to occupation.’ (AP, 19 Jan. 2004 <<http://tinyurl.com/3owr5>>)

‘Worst of all for Washington, Sistani has made it clear that no government which is undemocratically appointed will have the right to ask American troops to stay.’ (Jonathan Steele, *Guardian*, 19 Jan. 2004 <<http://tinyurl.com/6h6hd>>)

THE AYATOLLAH’S TRIUMPH

Salim Lone, former director of communications for the UN in Baghdad, remarked on 3 Feb., 2004: ‘The Bush administration’s resistance to acknowledging any of the disasters of its Iraq policy seems finally to have been broken by the refusal of Ali al-Sistani, the powerful Shia grand ayatollah, to back down from his insistence that only elected bodies can preside over the restoration of his country’s sovereignty.’ The ayatollah had forced the US to