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Reply to Alex Callinicos

- Debate - Problems of the Arab and Middle East regions -

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Dear Alex,

Thank you very much for your letter. I am very pleased at this new opportunity to have an exchange with you, all the more because I admire your rare ability to sustain demanding intellectual activity and an academic career simultaneously with very active involvement in practical politics.

Both of us are deeply committed to building the antiwar and anti-imperialist movement, as we have been consistently doing for so many years. It is this very reason that gives our discussion some value as a reflection of different views on the militant left - not an exercise in armchair rhetoric. Moreover, we are able to hold a discussion that sets a good example of a comradely and friendly exchange between people who make real arguments, instead of throwing various epithets in each other's faces and distorting each other's views.

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Gilbert Achcar

Now to comment on the content of your letter. You say that you read my article "On the Forthcoming Election in Iraq" on ZNet and the International Viewpoint site "with a growing sense of dismay." I'm sure I won't surprise you if I say I'm not surprised. The fact is that I wrote my piece with a view to warning sections of the Western anti-imperialist movement against a misreading of the situation in Iraq that might lead to dire political consequences - especially with regard to the efforts being made to restore the level of mobilization reached by the antiwar movement before the invasion of Iraq. Among those sections I wanted to warn, the antiwar movement in the US and Britain - the two countries whose armed forces play the major role in the occupation of Iraq - were prominent in my mind. I have myself felt a "growing sense of dismay" at various positions held in some left-wing circles on these issues.

From this angle, I must say that after reading your letter carefully I was both pleased and bewildered. I was pleased at the fact that my arguments have apparently had an impact on your views - perhaps a further instance of the very kind confidence in my judgment as a "source of orientation" that you express at the beginning of your letter. I was bewildered though by the inconsistencies in your letter, stemming from the fact that you only go halfway in accepting my views and therefore fall into contradictions that are unusual for a sharp mind like yours.

These contradictions revolve around the three key issues discussed in my article: the forthcoming elections, the Iraqi resistance and US designs.

1) The forthcoming elections:

I am glad you agree with me that the argument that the elections are being held under foreign occupation is not relevant per se (though most of those on the left who "denounce" the elections resort to this specious argument). You also acknowledge the indisputable facts: that "the elections were forced onto Bush and Bremer by the mass protests that the Shia Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani called just under a year ago." To remind you of the atmosphere at that time, let me quote from the press of your own party. In the Socialist Worker (London) of 31 January 2004, an article titled "Deeper into the Quagmire" reported:

"In the predominantly Shia Muslim south there were demonstrations tens of thousands strong last week calling for immediate direct elections. The US plan is to hand over authority to a fig leaf Iraqi council in June, while maintaining

the levers of power. The council would not be elected, but instead would be endorsed by local meetings of notables. Those notables would be invited to the selection meetings by the very council members who they would in turn back. The plan has infuriated most people in Iraq."

I am sure that, were you involved closely in the situation in Iraq at that time, you would not have hesitated to express your full support to the Iraqi masses in their struggle to impose elections on the occupiers. Now how would you justify your later shift of position toward the elections? You write:

"But things have moved on since then. Now, whenever any member of the puppet regime shows signs of wavering in the face of the insurgency, it is Bush, Blair, and their creature Iyad Allawi who are adamant that the elections must not be postponed. This reflects the fact that the US has developed a strategy that seeks to use the elections to legitimize the occupation, pressurize the European Union and the United Nations to become more involved in Iraq, and so on."

The core of your argument appears to be as follows: the Iraqi masses - or at the very least the Shia, who constitute nearly two-thirds of the Iraqi population, including the most downtrodden and impoverished sections, and were practically disenfranchised until now - have through their mass protests forced elections on the occupiers. We could support them as long as the occupiers were rejecting their demand. But since Bush and Blair have backtracked and grudgingly accepted their demand, and are now naturally trying to make the most of the elections (with quite limited success actually, as the world press is not failing to report), we should oppose these masses' aspirations to have elections.

Do you seriously believe that this is a mature way of defining a political attitude? That is, by just saying the opposite of what Bush and Blair are saying, no matter why they are saying it and even if it has been "forced" on them? How would you explain the shift in your attitude to the overwhelming majority of the population of Iraq, who insist on having these elections and consider that they have won the right to have them through their struggle? What would you tell those millions who see any attempt at postponing or delegitimizing the elections as a maneuver by the occupiers or by sectarian forces among the Sunnis, neither of whom can tolerate the idea of majority ("Shia") rule in Iraq?

Even if you were not concerned with addressing the Iraqi population, how could you explain to public opinion in the West that the elections that were forced on Bush are illegitimate only because Bush ended up backing them? More importantly, how will you defend the outcome of these supposedly "illegitimate" elections if the majority of the elected assembly clashes with the occupation (a scenario that is quite likely, though not certain since it depends among other things on Washington's attitude)?

It is precisely here that your first inconsistency becomes clearest. You write: "But will the elections produce a legitimate democratic regime in Iraq? No, no more than they did in Afghanistan. The occupation will continue. The puppet regime will remain in office." (You seem to be unaware of the fact that the mandate of Allawi's puppet government ends on 30 January and that the new assembly is supposed to select a new government.) Then you continue: "This means that if there is a relatively authentic popular vote at the end of January, the anti-war movement should demand that the Americans and their allies should withdraw immediately, allowing the new assembly to select a government that reflects the real wishes of the Iraq people."

Now if one deems the elections illegitimate, how can one possibly defend their outcome? How could the new assembly reflect the real wishes of the Iraqi people and be illegitimate at the same time? Don't you see how incongruous this attitude is? My point was precisely to warn you and the whole anti-imperialist left against falling into the trap of declaring the forthcoming elections "illegitimate" just because some armed groups based among the Sunnis and some reactionary Sunni parties are trying to delegitimize them with contradictory arguments.

Please note that I am not saying that the antiwar movement or the anti-imperialist left should support the elections - as long as Washington does not try again to cancel them - and still less that we should support their outcome regardless of the circumstances. [1] I am just saying that it is dead wrong for the movement and the left to condemn the elections in advance, thus probably putting us at odds with the great majority of the Iraqi people. Now, the majority coming out of the forthcoming elections could very well negotiate a deal with Washington granting the US some concessions in Iraq. The Vietnamese Communists (in 1954) and the Algerian National Liberation Front (in 1962) both agreed to major concessions to get rid of the French occupiers of their respective countries; this did not make them less legitimate as representatives of the majority of their people. [2]

2) The Iraqi resistance

Excuse me for quoting my article and emphasising some phrases:

"The so-called Iraqi resistance is a heterogeneous conglomerate of forces, many of them purely local. For a major part, these are people revolted by the heavy-handed occupation of their country, fighting against the occupiers and their armed Iraqi auxiliaries. But another segment of the forces engaged in violent actions in Iraq is composed of utterly reactionary fanatics, mainly of the Islamic Fundamentalist kind, who make no distinction between civilians, Iraqis included, and armed personnel, and resort to horrible acts, like the decapitation of Asian migrant workers and the kidnapping and/or assassination of all kinds of persons who are in no way hostile or harmful to the Iraqi national cause. These acts are being used in Washington to counterbalance the effect of the legitimate attacks against the US troops: the task of presenting the "enemy" as evil is thus made very easy.

"This means, incidentally, that any unqualified support for the "Iraqi resistance" as a whole in Western countries, where the antiwar movement is badly needed, is utterly counter-productive as much as it is deeply wrong (when paved with good political intentions). *There should be a clear-cut distinction between anti-occupation acts that are legitimate and acts by so-called "resistance" groups that are to be denounced.* One very obvious case in point is the sectarian attacks by Al-Zarqawi group against Shias."

You reply by explaining first that "the platform of the anti-war movement should not include support for armed resistance to the occupation" - a statement with which I fully agree, and a principle of which I recently tried to convince some of your own French comrades and others in an antiwar organization I belong to in France. [3] Then you introduce surreptitiously a major shift in the attitude of your party - you write: "Of course we should condemn the kind of kidnappings and beheadings perpetrated by groups like Zarqawi's."

"Of course"? Was it really so obvious? Then why have you refrained from such an explicit condemnation until a vicious campaign was launched against your party and the antiwar coalition you have so effectively built and led in Britain, by some right-wingers in the trade union movement who seized on the pretext of the atrocious torture and murder of Iraqi Communist Party member and trade unionist Hadi Salih? [4] But in any event, aren't we now in full agreement on this issue? Instead of acknowledging this reality, you try to downplay the shift in your own attitude by saying that you "refuse to equate the "Iraqi resistance" as a whole' with the obscenities practised by Zarqawi." Then, "presuming" rightly (isn't it clear enough in my quote above?) that I regard many type of armed activities against the occupiers and their armed auxiliaries as "legitimate," you ask me: "why then warn us at such length against supporting Zarqawi, when only the radical Islamist hard core and a few sectarian-leftist idiots would contemplate doing so?"

The answer to your question is easy: you are the one who chose to "home in" specifically on Zarqawi. Your [5] My warning was much broader and more general. I only mentioned Zarqawi's as a group practicing some of the most

obviously reprehensible activities carried out in the name of “resistance” to the occupation.

3) US designs

Another aim of my article was to stress the fact that Washington is applying a “strategy of tension” in Iraq (to borrow the formula used in Italy to describe the manipulative and deliberate increase of tensions by state or parastate apparatuses in order to sharpen a state of emergency or its practical equivalent). I explained that the way the occupiers are handling the relations between Kurds and non-Kurds in the North and between Shias and Sunnis in the rest of the country might portend a perilous last-ditch “solution.” Washington could switch to “the well-tried imperial recipe of divide and rule, taking the risk of setting Iraq on the devastating fire of a civil war.” I described the occupiers' handling of the elections issue as an element in this strategy, and wrote that “there is serious reason to believe that the real purpose [of the violent assault on Fallujah] was precisely to aggravate the chaotic conditions in Iraq in order to diminish the legitimacy of the outcome of the January 30 elections.”

You write about my assessment: “The idea that, as you suggest, the military offensives against Najaf and Falluja were designed by Washington to stir up chaos and delegitimize the elections seems to me pretty fanciful.” Then a few lines later, you write the following:

But I find some incidents - for example, the drive-by killings of Shias in towns south of Baghdad, allegedly by Salafist militants - very suspicious. Confronted with this kind of pattern, it is only rational to ask *Quis profruit?*, and also to remember the long and bloody history of the CIA, SIS, and the rest of the Anglo-American dirty tricks empire. This danger is widely perceived: Ali Fahdi, an Iraqi doctor who helped make a terrifying film just shown on Channel 4 here in Britain portraying the devastation of Falluja, says “the US military' have “increased the chance of civil war by using their new national guard of Shias to suppress Sunnis' in Falluja.

Fanciful when I write it, realistic when you write the same?

Let me finish this letter, which is already getting too long, by quoting you one last time. You write that “in the next few weeks the movement in the US and Britain especially will face a huge ideological offensive that seeks to portray us as anti-democratic supporters of terrorism.” Then you add: “In this climate, quite contrary to your own intentions, your piece is, to say the least, not helpful.”

I have tried to show you why, on the contrary, my piece is much more helpful than the stance you took until now, if we want to counter effectively attempts at portraying the antiwar movement “as anti-democratic supporters of terrorism.” My piece of 1 January has seemingly already contributed to some shifts in your own position. Let me repeat its conclusion on which I hope we fully agree: “the most urgent task outside of Iraq is to supplement the January 30 elections, and the legitimate actions of resistance to the US occupation and its allies in Iraq, with building as widely and effectively as possible for the March 19 global antiwar demonstration.”

With my very best regards,

Gilbert Achcar

Thanks to Peter Drucker for his helpful editing and comments.

Reply to Alex Callinicos

[1] Nor do I call on the antiwar movement, as you seem to believe, to “endorse Sistani’s as the most fruitful strategy in opposing the occupation.” This is only my personal opinion; I do think that the mass mobilizations he called for (that’s what I meant by the strategy he led, not any other position he has taken) were clearly more effective in forcing Washington to retreat than the armed actions. (In the same way, I do believe that the first Palestinian Intifada with its mass demonstrations and stone-throwing was much more effective than the second one with its resort to firearms and suicide attacks; the use of violence, provided it is not indiscriminate, is not a matter of principle, but a matter of the adequacy of means to ends, the balance of forces and other concrete circumstances.) This does not mean that the armed actions in Iraq are ineffective; they are effective, much more so than in Palestine. I have stressed on numerous occasions the dimensions of the Iraqi quagmire and have spoken in public of a “new Vietnam” (by which I mean only the prospect of a US political defeat in the face of a military quagmire) beginning in the very first months after the invasion.

[2] Of course, this does not mean that we should support any concessions a nationalist leadership makes (you know my attitude toward the PLO’s concessions culminating in the “Oslo agreement,” for instance

[3] Since you mention my “sometime comrades” in Britain (?) - and, incidentally, some British and Irish friends told me that you distorted the position that the IMG held in the 1970s on Ireland - why didn’t you mention instead my “sometime comrades” in the American SWP who played a key role in organizing the anti- Vietnam War movement in the US, and who championed the principle of the “single-issue movement,” choosing very rightly to unify the mass movement around the single demand of bringing the US troops back home?

[4] I am referring to the recent letters to The Independent (7 January) and The Observer (9 January) by leading figures of the Stop the War Coalition. The Iraqi CP’s participation in the institutions created by the occupiers belong to an age-old tradition of opportunism, which previously led various CPs to collaborate with colonial authorities in their countries when the colonial metropolises were allied with Moscow against the fascist Axis in the 1930’s and 40’s. It was not right then, and is no more right today, to target them for brutal killings. (The way Hadi Salih was killed suggests that the criminals were very probably remnants of Saddam Hussein’s dreadful political police.)

[5] assertion that some of my arguments “veer dangerously close to Tony Blair” or are “much too close to the dominant discourse in Washington and London” are rare instances of polemical excess of a kind that the rest of your letter is fortunately devoid of.