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Iraq debate

2nd Reply to Alex Callinicos

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

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Dear Alex,

Thank you for your reply to my reply. We are discussing important issues here. Unfortunately, I think you've resorted to some regrettable polemical tricks. Let me deal with those briefly before addressing the substantive issues.

You begin by trying to ridicule me by distorting what I wrote. Had I in fact said that I wanted to "educate" sections of the Western anti-imperialist movement, etc., your sarcasm about my alleged "pedagogic purpose" would have been warranted. But what I actually wrote is that I wanted to "warn" those sections "as brothers and sisters in struggle, not as kids and pupils" against what I considered to be a very serious error of judgment over the situation in Iraq.

Isn't it the duty of every person who is dedicated to building the movement to warn it against the pitfalls one sees looming ahead, especially on issues and areas of which one can legitimately claim to have some specific insider knowledge?

The key argument in your rejoinder, regarding the elections, is your claim that you did not write that they will be illegitimate, but only that they will not produce "a legitimate democratic regime" with a new emphasis on "regime." Then you explain (I leave the style aside) that you only meant that "Bush and his proconsul John Negroponte will [not] surrender control of the country to a popular assembly after the elections."

If that were indeed what you wrote and meant, I would certainly not have objected, since I already wrote in my original article, the one to which you were reacting: "What will Washington do after the January 30 elections? It is difficult to predict. The Bush administration has a clear strategic objective: securing control of Iraq for the long haul." I added that they might resort, if faced with an assembly wanting them out, to carving the country up along religious sectarian and ethnic lines according to the tried-and-true imperial recipe of "divide and rule."

But the truth is that you quoted only one bit of a sentence from what you wrote in your previous letter, whereas I commented on the whole argument. You actually wrote: "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." [emphasis added]

One doesn't need to be an expert in philology to understand that what you meant was not (only) that there will be continuing occupation and control of the country by the US, but that the "puppet regime" will remain in office. The Iraqi equivalent of what exists in Afghanistan is the Allawi government. But if Allawi's list were to "win" the elections as Karzai did in Afghanistan, there would be no doubt in anybody's mind that these elections would be quite illegitimate (rigged, or whatever) in light of what is known of the mood of the Iraqi Arab population. Then immediately after this absolutist assertion, you write:

"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." [emphasis added]

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So which is it? The assured continuation of the puppet regime or a government reflecting the real wishes of the Iraqi people? Can't you see the inconsistency here?

I take note gladly of what you write about the position you took in Britain regarding some reprehensible types of violence in Iraq. Any quibble about that would be misplaced on my part, since I am fully in solidarity with your anti-imperialist struggle against the Blair government. What is essential in my view is that your position on the resistance in Iraq, whether new or consistent from the start, coincides substantially with the one I expressed.

Therefore, in light of that and of what you say about the elections in your recent letter "where you acknowledge that "participation (on the basis of opposition to the occupation) is, like armed resistance, a legitimate political response" the "dismay" you felt at reading my original article and the urge you felt consequently to write a letter improving it, appear now to be largely overcome. Whether I contributed to this outcome is quite secondary.

But let me move on. You believe that the armed actions in Iraq are more effective than the mass movement of the Shias. I beg to differ, as they say in aristocratic English. If Washington only faced an armed insurgency among the Sunnis (20% of the population) and had the support of the Shias (60%) as well as the Kurds (another 20%), do you seriously think that it wouldn't be able to crush the insurgents "even if that meant several Fallujas or worse?"

On the other hand, even if there were no armed insurgency at all in Iraq, isn't it obvious that Washington and London would have all the trouble in the world keeping their troops there in the face of mass demonstrations of the population to get them out? Just imagine how much easier your task in Britain would be, and the task of the whole antiwar movement in the US and worldwide "and how much more effective the movement would be "if Iraq had been experiencing mass demonstrations to kick the troops out, like those that toppled the Shah of Iran or, again, those Sistani called in January 2004, rather than indiscriminate killings and beheadings.

Of course, these are my preferences. You declare that "it's important to distinguish one's preferences from realities" (though the mass mobilization strategy has already been used in Iraq). Nevertheless, expressing strategic preferences is a legitimate and necessary component of what we as fighters for social justice are supposed to do, namely learn from historical experience and promote the best forms of struggle (those entailing the lowest cost in human lives and destruction provided they are effective in achieving our legitimate objectives) in the appropriate places.

To conclude, let me address your question about Sistani's attitude. What I wrote about him in my original article should be clear enough. Sistani is a socially retrograde Islamic leader "a category toward which your co-thinkers are generally much more conciliatory than I am. It is obvious that I cannot share his strategic goals. He wanted elections and wants a timetable for the withdrawal of the occupation forces because he is committed to majority (Shia) rule under his own tutelage. I am definitely in favor of majority rule "as a permanent rule, not as a means to any non-democratic end whatsoever "but with a radically different social and political agenda. Moreover, Sistani is definitely not a "staunch anti-imperialist" and the kind of attitude he will end up adopting toward the US is certainly not clear. That is why I wrote in my previous reply to you this passage that seems to puzzle you, although it is perfectly understandable:

"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. 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."

It seems we now agree on that, to my satisfaction as I've already said. The attitude to be adopted toward what will

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come out of the election is something we shall define in due time according to the concrete circumstances, not on the basis of useless guesses in advance. Now you ask me about Sistani: "He used the Najaf crisis in August to sideline Sadr, his most important political rival among the Shi'ites. And he stood by while Falluja was flattened. I wonder why you don't respond to what I said about this in my earlier letter." Well I had already written the following in my original article:

"The attempt at crushing Moqtada al-Sadr's movement culminated in the Shia city of Najaf. Sistani, after having let the young al-Sadr reach a situation where he was on the verge of a crushing and bloody defeat, obviously in order to tame him, intervened to stop the US onslaught and thereby confirm his unchallengeable leadership of the Shia community."

As for Falluja, I definitely condemn Sistani's belated half reprobation of the US onslaught, if that's what you want to know (and had any doubt about it!). However, the whole picture should be taken into consideration. It is well known that the Shias have been specifically oppressed for decades, in addition to the terrible oppression suffered by the Iraqi population as a whole under Saddam Hussein. Very soon after the fall of the Baathist regime, they started being targeted indiscriminately in deadly attacks claimed by Sunni groups, using a vicious sectarian "quasi-racist" vocabulary to describe the Shias. One has to acknowledge one thing at least: the Iraqi Shia forces, inspired by Sistani, have had until now the great merit of not falling into this trap and not retaliating with the same kind of violence and the same type of language, choosing instead to draw a clear distinction between sectarian fanatical groups and the bulk of Iraqi Sunnis. Given what Sistani knew "or was told" about the nature of the forces that were dominant in Falluja before the last US onslaught, a mixture of Baathists and Sunni fanatics according to most reports, it is hardly surprising that he did not mobilize against it. Note that Moqtada al-Sadr himself, though verbally more disapproving, did not mobilize either.

You ask me again: "I also wonder what you think about the apparent retreat by the electoral list endorsed by Sistani from demanding an American pull-out after the election." My answer: I don't think anything about a non-event. Mouwaffak al-Rubbaie, who is quoted in the Financial Times article you cite, is not a leading figure of the "Unified Iraqi Coalition" (the key leaders being al-Hakim and Sistani himself behind the scenes) and he represents no force but himself and some family connections (though the real forces could use him at some point, for this very reason, as a compromise figure). It is obvious and certain however that a Shia dominated government won't call for the immediate withdrawal of all US troops "the main Shia forces never said they would. They want to negotiate a withdrawal timetable designed to enable them to build up armed forces under their own control capable of countering Baathists and Sunni fanatics who will never abide by majority rule, and who doubtless will carry on and intensify their sectarian attacks after a Shia-dominated government comes to power.

Anyway, one has to keep always in mind the issues at stake. Regardless of what this or that Shia figure might say, it is indisputable "and all the reports are unanimous about it" that the overwhelming majority, if not the totality, of the Iraqi Shia masses (two-thirds of the Iraqi population, and the poorest of the poor) badly want three things: the elections, majority rule and the occupation troops out. No anti-imperialist should forget this decisive fact when defining his/her stand on the situation in Iraq.

Finally, allow me to amend your concluding sentence. Instead of: "Whatever our differences, we stand together against this monstrous American Empire," I would rather end with: Whatever our differences, we stand together against this monstrous imperialist system and all its lackeys and allies, including the governments of our own countries. I have no doubt that you will fully approve my amendment.

All the best,

Gilbert