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Against All Odds, Haitians Protest Illegal Regime, Foreign Occupation

By Roger Annis

In the teeth of murderous repression, the Haitian people are finding ways to assert their sovereignty and dignity and demand the return of their constitutional government, overthrown 10 months ago in a Canadian-backed coup.

The two latest expressions of their will occurred in Cap Haitien, Haiti's second largest city, on December 16, and on December 31 in the Belair district of the capital city, Port-au-Prince. In Cap Haitien, 10,000 people staged a march calling for the return of the constitutional government and an end to the widespread repression. They chanted, "Aristide must return!" and "We will never accept the kidnapping of our president!" In Belair, a large protest made the same demands.

Rightist gangs and foreign invaders

On February 29, 2004, Canadian, French, and U.S. military units invaded Haiti and joined with rightist gangs to overthrow the elected government of Jean-Bertrand Aristide. Aristide was forcibly removed from the country and now lives in exile in South Africa. The invasion force then stood by as the rightists unleashed murderous violence against supporters of the ousted government. Several thousands were killed in the months following the invasion, and thousands more have been jailed. (For background to the coup and its aftermath, see Socialist Voice #11)

Protests against the coup regime are not letting up. But they are frequently broken up by "police" and other vigilantes, often under the watchful eye of foreign occupation forces, and sometimes with their direct participation. The march in Cap Haitien was possible because the United Nations force there, composed of soldiers from Chile, guaranteed its security. However, one organizer of the march declared, "Although we see the UN and the police allowing us to demonstrate peacefully today for the return of our elected president, we have no illusion ... their role could turn repressive once again..."

Early on the day of Aristide's overthrow, the United Nations Security Council voted to authorize a multinational occupation force in Haiti. Currently, it is headed by Brazil.

"We cannot forget that it was the same UN that stood by and allowed police to kill unarmed demonstrators in the capital on September 30. It is the same UN that has allowed the illegal

government of Gerard Latortue to fill the prisons with Lavalas [Aristide supporters] and has allowed the former military to return and kill us.”

September 30 protest

Haitians are still reeling from a wave of jailings and killings following a massive pro-Aristide march of 10,000 people on September 30 in Port-au-Prince. Haitian police (that is, rightists in uniform) opened fire on the demonstration, killing several people. In the following days, the rightists set up checkpoints and cordoned off entire neighborhoods, and then detained or murdered opponents of the coup regime.

The UN occupation forces have taken part in killings. The latest UN attack occurred in the Cité de Soleil neighborhood in Port-au-Prince on December 14. Rightist gangs entered the neighborhood and opened fire on residents. Many were killed. When UN soldiers from Brazil and Jordan arrived, protests erupted against their presence. Soldiers fired into the air to disperse the crowds and then shot into the crowds, killing several.

One Cité de Soleil resident told journalists, “[Rightist gangs] began a heavy attack against us and many people were killed. The United Nations then used this as a pretext to invade our neighborhood and end our calls for Aristide’s return. It is clear they are working together to exterminate us.”

Some neighborhoods have organized self-defense to resist the assaults by rightist gangs and UN forces. Officials of the coup regime and the UN forces refer to anyone involved in self-defense as “bandits”; foreign news agencies use the phrase, “pro-Aristide gangs.”

Solidarity efforts abroad

Protests outside of Haiti against the coup regime and the repression are building. Father Jean-Juste, Haiti’s best-known Catholic priest, spoke to a public meeting in Miami on December 7 that was organized to call for the release of prisoners from Haiti’s jails. Another meeting took place in New York City on December 5. It was co-sponsored by the Lavalas and the Parti populaire national.

There was a small demonstration in Vancouver on November 12 on the occasion of a visit to the city by Prime Minister Martin. One protester confronted Martin about his planned visit to Haiti two days later. “Will you be meeting with Lavalas?” Martin was asked. He ignored the question.

Two protests of several hundred people occurred in Montreal on December 10 and 11 outside a conference convened by the Canadian government to discuss the future of Haiti. The conference was attended by several hundred hand-picked invitees, and featured the participation of Gerard Latortue, the “interim prime minister” of Haiti.

“I denounce bitterly what is going on here,” one observer at the conference, Cheryl Albert Gray, 40, told the Montreal Gazette. She is the secretary of the Regroupement des bénévoles Canado-Haitiens. “They’re trying to set up a protectorate in Haiti. If they want to help, that’s good. But we don’t want interference.”

“With what right does the Canadian government call a conference?” asked protester Pierre Antoine Joseph, 60. Another protester, Serge Denis, 57, said, “In Haiti, there are 95% poor and 5% rich. We are here to represent the 95% poor.”

Canadian government: a party to the coup and the killings

The Canadian government is trumpeting its role in the coup in Haiti. Its elite military unit played a key part in the overthrow of Aristide. Five hundred of its soldiers then joined the UN occupation force that “secured” Haiti in the weeks after. Today, 100 Royal Canadian Mounted Police and military officials remain with the occupation force.

“We were the ones who secured the airport in Haiti [on or about February 29]”, Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin proudly told CBC Radio in a wide-ranging interview on foreign affairs on December 13. “Those were Canadian forces who did that. We’ve got to be able to play that kind of role.”

He explained that Canada will henceforth play a more aggressive role in propping up the declining world order led by its principal ally, the United States. He began the interview with this thought: “Foreign policy isn’t only something you study. Foreign policy is something you do.”

Martin boasted that Canada has been part of every recent election in “failed states.” He said Canada will combine electoral showcases with “institution building” in the countries that it or its allies occupy. “My view is, you begin with military security, but you can’t leave it there. What you’ve got to do after that is to begin to put in place the institutions that will allow those democracies [sic] to grow.”

What a contrast to the approach of revolutionary Cuba, which begins by sending—not the military—but a sizeable medical contingent, that served both before and after the coup.

Ottawa’s plans for “institution building” in Haiti were on display at the December conference in Montreal. Several hundred select people were invited to the conference, but the list did not include members of the Lavalas political movement of President Aristide.

At a joint press conference with Latortue on December 11, Martin explained that the Canadian government would focus its efforts in Haiti on creating a more effective police and judicial system, and in helping stage a national “election” in 2005. Meanwhile, his colleague had to fend off questions from reporters about killings and arbitrary arrests and detentions in Haiti. “Nobody in this government has ever been involved in any violations of human rights,” Latortue shouted in reply.

Yet according to Agence Haitienne de Presse, Latortue told journalists in the days following the September 30 demonstration in Port-au-Prince, “We shot them, some of them fell, others were injured, others ran away...”

Canada’s enthusiasm for phony elections is also at play in Iraq. There, it has initiated an international commission to lend credibility to plans of the U.S.-British occupation force to stage an “election” on January 30.

Prison conditions

Conditions in the prisons in Haiti are especially grisly, and increasingly coming under fire from human rights groups. On December 1, a massacre of prisoners took place at the Haitian National Penitentiary in Port-au-Prince. A rare eyewitness report appeared in the British newspaper the Guardian on December 19. "I saw everything," a former inmate, Ted Nazaire, 24, told the Guardian correspondent. Nazaire was released two days after the massacre and is now in hiding. "It was a massacre. More than 60 were killed."

The correspondent interviewed other former inmates, an ambulance driver, and human rights observers, who told similar versions of Nazaire's story. Visits to the prison have been barred since December 1.

A report by the Institute for Justice and Democracy in Haiti confirms that scores of imprisoned people were killed on that day. The report describes those who are detained in this and other prisons in Haiti: "The vast majority were likely arrested illegally without a warrant and detained on vague charges with no evidence in their file and no change of judicial review of the detention."

The Justice and Peace Commission of the Catholic Church in Haiti estimates that 700 political prisoners are held in Haiti's prisons. These include the former prime minister, Yvon Neptune, and other elected officials. Father Gerard Jean-Juste was arrested on October 13 and spent six weeks in prison.

Media covers up Canada's criminal role

Ottawa's criminal role in Haiti gets the kid-glove treatment from virtually all capitalist media sources in this country. There are few news reports about events there, including the frequent protests by Haitians calling for the return of the constitutional government.

For example, CBC Radio One ran a story on Haiti on its flagship newsmagazine program, "The Current," on December 20. Program host Anna Maria Tremonti summed up the violent rightist offensive that preceded the February 29 coup by saying that Haiti's capital city had, "collapsed into chaos as anti- and pro-Aristide supporters clashed in the streets of Port-au-Prince." In late February, she continued, Haitian President Jean-Bertrand Aristide "finally left Haiti."

She then introduced CBC Radio's main correspondent in Haiti, Stephen Puddicombe, who was just back from another visit to the country. "What is causing this latest round of violence in Haiti?" Tremonti asked.

"Things were running pretty smoothly after Aristide left the country and finally ended up in South Africa," replied Puddicombe, referring to the time when rightist murders swept the land. "United Nations troops were brought in. Canadian troops, to a large extent, started it off, and had a lot to do with things working out." But he lamented that it's all come apart since then.

Serious flooding in the western part of Haiti in May, astronomically high joblessness, the flood in September in the country's third largest city, Gonaives, and the fierce repression have all contributed to a rise of protest and resistance.

International protests against the coup and occupation in Haiti are planned for February 28. Strong actions are needed in Canada on that day to protest the crimes of the Canadian government in Haiti.

A vital source of regular news from Haiti and the diaspora can be found at the website of the Haiti Action Committee

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U.S.-ordered Iraq Vote Aims to Deepen Divisions, Spur Civil War

By Fred Feldman

The fraudulent national election that the occupying powers have announced for January 30 in Iraq presents a serious political challenge to the patriotic forces resisting the occupation.

The aim of the election is to establish a puppet government with sufficient credibility to win international recognition and a degree of legitimacy, however grudging, in Iraq. The imperialist occupiers also hope that such a government can create an effective armed force to battle the patriotic resistance. This has completely eluded them to date.

The U.S. and its allies have failed to impose their will on Iraq. They have brought only destruction, death, and chaos to Iraq, plunging the society into a crisis so profound that the proposed vote has little credibility. The New York Times and other supporters of the occupation call for postponement of the vote, but the administration have insisted that the elections be held on the date set.

The occupiers are using the vote as a tool to set Iraq's two main religious communities against each other. They hope to consolidate their domination of Iraq through fostering a civil war, which—were it to take place—would be a truly horrific capstone to the destruction, ruin, and death they have already brought to the country.

The strategy was summed up by a January 12 report in the London 'Financial Times,' based on interviews with top U.S. officials, including Colin Powell: "U.S. leverage rests upon awareness among the Shia that their government is unlikely to survive a civil war without continued U.S. military support."

The colonial 'election'

The election is illegitimate. It is conducted under conditions of imperialist violence and manipulation that make impossible a democratic expression of the Iraqi people's will. Unless a government that issues from such an election were to turn sharply and completely against the occupation, it will inevitably represent the rule of the occupying powers.

The Shia bourgeois leadership is nonetheless committed to it, in the expectation that it will win the vote. Rather than striving for a common front with the Sunni Arab population against the occupying powers, it is collaborating with the thugs and killers of the puppet Iraqi Interim Government. Top leaders of the Shia coalition Abdul Aziz el-Hakim and Ahmad Chalabi have made statements insisting on the "necessity" for U.S. troops to stay in Iraq for the coming period. El-Hakim's close ties to the most authoritative Shia leader, Ayatollah Sistani, indicate some support for this stand among the Shia elite.

Prime Minister Iyad Allawi deliberately stoked the sectarian fires by sending Shia national guardsmen to join the U.S. assault that laid waste to the city of Fallujah in November. That

horrific war crime killed many hundreds and has turned hundreds of thousands more into refugees in their own country.

The Shia election platform does call on the occupiers to announce a timetable for withdrawal. An important Sunni organization, the Association of Muslim Scholars, has offered to drop its boycott if such a timetable is announced before the election. Moqtada al-Sadr, the Shia leader in Baghdad who leads the impoverished Sadr City, has expressed sympathy for the boycotters and his “Sunni brothers,” while supporting some candidates in the election.

The present disarray between Iraq’s two Arab communities, the majority Shia and the minority Sunni, is in sharp contrast to the highpoint of unity between the two groups in mid-2004. In April 2004, a popular uprising of Sunnis and Shias took place when the U.S. launched simultaneous assaults on the largely-Sunni city of Fallujah and the predominantly-Shia city of Najaf. The U.S. generals had no alternative but to call a retreat. (See *Socialist Voice* # 4)

Divide and rule

Since then, U.S. strategy has been one of divide and rule. Efforts to disarm Shia militias were allowed to lapse, and these militias were permitted de facto control of significant Shia communities. The more militant current led by Moqtada al-Sadr was permitted to reemerge into legality. The bourgeois Shia leaderships were encouraged in the belief that the proposed vote would secure them a dominant role in the Iraqi state. Meanwhile, the U.S. launched ferocious assaults on the predominantly Sunni population in Fallujah, Samarra, and elsewhere. (See *Socialist Voice* #20)

(The Kurds, previously a subject nationality within Iraq, have now established de facto independence under a pro-occupation government. There are few “coalition” troops in the Kurdish region. See *Socialist Voice* #14)

Despite the lack of unity in the Arab population, the occupiers’ recent assaults have run into strong opposition. A military “victory” in Samarra in October was quickly followed by a renewed loss of control to the resistance forces there. The November assault on Fallujah met determined and heroic resistance, which continues to the present. The scale of resistance and destruction in Fallujah has turned Washington’s “victory” there into a major political setback.

Nevertheless, some of the actions of the Sunni-led armed resistance have played into the divide-and-rule strategy. The reported call of resistance leader al-Zarqawi to “slaughter, slaughter, slaughter” members of the “Iraqi military” set up by the occupation takes no account of the fact that the recruits are mostly Shia and the attackers mostly Sunni. As well, the pre-election offensive of the armed resistance is taking a heavy toll among Shia working people.

The recent killing of a top aide to the Ayatollah Sistani, who continues to have wide popular support among the Shia, is another example. The Ansar al-Islam, a Sunni Muslim resistance group, reportedly took responsibility for the killing. But another Sunni group opposed to the occupation, the Association of Muslim Scholars, denounced the action.

The Sunni-based resistance is correct to attack the U.S.-manipulated vote as a fraud. But some resistance currents have gone further, criticizing the notion of democratic rule per se. On

December 30, the Ansar al-Sunnah Army and two other Islamic insurgent groups were reported by MSNBC News to have issued a statement which placed an attack on democracy and majority rule at the center of their anti-election propaganda. "Democracy is a Greek word meaning the rule of the people, which means that the people do what they see fit," the statement said. "This concept is considered apostasy and defies the belief in one God—Muslims' doctrine."

Such opposition, in principle, to elections and majority rule makes the resistance appear to the Shia people as directed not only against the occupiers, but against them as well. The pro-war U.S. capitalist media is portraying the occupiers as leading the Shia in a democratic struggle that will deal a death blow to "Sunni domination." A campaign of fear and racist contempt against Sunni Muslims is under way, part of the general anti-Muslim and anti-Islam propaganda campaigns which are an organic part of the "war on terror."

When British imperialism set up the Iraq state in 1920, it gave the minority Sunni bourgeoisie a privileged position that they retained until the fall of Saddam Hussein. The Hussein regime carried out its most murderous assaults against the Shia and Kurdish populations, keeping their bourgeois layers far from the seat of power. That traditional domination is now in shreds, and the approach of the colonial election has given rise to fears among sectors of the Sunni elite of "Shia domination" in the future Iraq.

Sectarian violence between Iraqis helps the U.S. government to cover up a fundamental fact of the reality of Iraq today, namely: the occupation is responsible for all the violence in Iraq today. What's more, division has left the resistance vulnerable to being blamed for bombings and assassinations that may be carried out by occupation forces.

These elections are about tightening the imperialist chains around Iraq, not about liberating the Shia or anyone else. The vote cannot and will not create anything progressive.

The puppet army: a political task

Certainly, the resistance must act with determination to obstruct the consolidation of an Iraqi puppet army in the hands of the occupiers, and the puppet troops are a legitimate military target. But the task of rendering this army unusable is fundamentally political. The Iraqi "volunteer" soldiers are in fact economic conscripts, driven to enlist by the economic disaster inflicted on Iraq by the occupation, which has driven unemployment rates to 70%.

These troops have been unwilling and unable to combat the resistance. Their ranks are permeated with resistance supporters. U.S. officials have shown signs of writing off the army as an effective instrument of their rule. They are hoping instead that after the elections, Shia militias can be formed for this purpose.

Military action against the puppet army must go hand in hand with a political campaign to win over its soldiers. (For the story of how such a political approach contributed to the disintegration of the U.S. army in Vietnam, see Chapter 23 of Fred Halstead's epic history of the U.S. antiwar movement, *Out Now*, published by Pathfinder Press.)

The tactical problem posed by the Iraqi puppet forces is only a special case of the overriding challenge facing the resistance: The Shia community must be won over, not dismissed or punished as “collaborators.”

The divisions fostered by the January 30 election among the Iraqi population, the vast majority of whom oppose the occupation, weaken the patriotic resistance—as do indiscriminate attacks on civilians, or unprovoked attacks on police and army volunteers of dubious military potential. In this context, the Shia are more likely to blame the armed resistance for terrorist attacks on Shia (and Christian) places of worship, some of which bear hallmarks of an occupation-instigated provocation.

The patriotic resistance faces the enormous challenge of uniting to the greatest extent possible an Iraqi people divided by social classes with conflicting interests around a fundamental interest of Iraq as a nation: ending occupation and U.S. political domination. Differences in religious beliefs and regional concerns provide fuel to the occupiers’ divide and rule strategy.

Unconditional support to the resistance

Throughout all the imperialist wars against oppressed peoples during the last century and more, Marxist revolutionists’ support of resistance by the oppressed has always been unconditional. This support is offered regardless of the leadership that this struggle may throw forward.

Debates over whether bourgeois nationalism, Islamic currents, Baathism, and so on are “exhausted” or on the rise in Iraq or elsewhere are simply not the point in this context. When fighters rise against imperialist domination and oppression, under whatever banner, working-class fighters around the world belong on their side.

Ending the occupation and achieving Iraqi independence is the necessary precondition to the victory of democracy and majority rule in Iraq. And progress by the resistance, in all its different facets, will lead to further progress in forging the leadership needed for victory. Moreover, the Iraqi resistance provides strong moral support to the embattled Palestinians; it lessens imperialist pressure on Syria, Iran, North Korea, Cuba, and Venezuela; and it undermines imperialism’s project to lock the entire Third World into a jail of heightened “neoliberal” oppression.

The record of a year and a half of occupation shows that imperialism has nothing to offer Iraq: neither democracy, nor peace, nor economic recovery. Indeed, far from committing resources to the reconstruction of Iraq, the U.S. and its allies are engaged in the large-scale plundering of the country. The country’s oil wealth is being robbed by Kuwait (to end up in U.S. banks) and diverted to pay for “reconstruction projects” that focus on export of capital rather than construction. The national treasury is drained, and nationalized economic patrimony sold off at fire-sale prices to benefit the great imperialist corporations. Medical care, education, employment, and social security in all forms are left in ruins.

Imperialist rule will only deepen Iraq’s suffering. The struggle for independence, by contrast, offers the Iraqi masses an opportunity to enter politics, gain confidence and experience, and force open the road to social progress in their country.

Imperialism's inability to rebuild Iraq—the high value it places on plunder and the low value on organizing productive labor on an expanding scale—shows the depth of the illness affecting its world organism. Chaos in Iraq, as in the Congo, the Ivory Coast, Sudan, etc., is fundamentally a result not of “failed states” but of the accelerated decline of the world system, and the weakening of its political and economic heart in the imperialist countries. The “failed fingers” and “failed toes” testify to a developing breakdown in the entire circulatory system.

As for Iraq, the imperialists offer no alternative to chaos. They profit by it, use it as a weapon to demoralize and demobilize people, and have no way to overcome it. Their record in Iraq is a symptom of imperialism's spreading worldwide disorder.

On the road to ending the occupation

It remains highly unlikely that the U.S. can win acceptance of continued occupation from the Shia elite because this would destroy these leaders' authority among wide sectors of the Shia population. The unfolding divide-and-rule scenario is likely, in the end, to merely deepen the hostility of the Iraqi masses and lay the basis for new advances toward unity of Sunni and Shia against the criminal occupation.

Working people, youth, and other opponents of this war outside Iraq can play an indispensable role in this process through continued efforts to mobilize and broaden support for immediate withdrawal of all occupation troops.