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By Ashfak Bokhari

Fallujah, Ramadi and Samarra, which have, since the 2003 invasion become the centres of insurgency, violence, ransom-kidnaps and terrorism, many citizens could not resist the feel of casting a vote in a free atmosphere — a departure from Saddam's poll culture they are enamoured with.

Hence, President George Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair lost no time in declaring the incredible event as "a triumph of democracy over terror". Bush, in a four-minute televised statement, was too euphoric in his tone. "The people of Iraq have spoken to the world and the world is hearing voice of freedom from the centre of the Middle East," he said. And Blair was no less behind in his praise of the Iraqi vote, saying "the force of freedom was felt throughout Iraq".

But it is difficult to miss the irony of the resemblance of this event to the one that took place 38 years ago when a similar democracy project was launched in South Vietnam by the Americans. The purpose of holding the election there was also to claim legitimacy for the US-installed Saigon government and the hateful occupation. The turnout there was much higher, 83 per cent, and American officials were equally "surprised and heartened" by the success of their project which came about despite Vietcong threat to disrupt the voting. President Lyndon Johnson was

a defining year for the future of Iraq and the US-Arab relations.

At the heart of this process is America's willingness to draw lessons from its past adventures, think of a world which is violent-free, shelve its Bush doctrine and the long-term plan of 'democratizing' the Middle East aimed at grabbing Arab oil and other resources, and finally decide to withdraw from Iraq, transfer 'real power' to the elected deputies and, above all, give this devastated land — where the Tigris and Euphrates gave rise to the first civilizations — a measure of

investments in pre-invasion Iraq were quite heavy and were hence key opponents of US invasion, are now all praise of the January 30 vote. It seems now all is well and the differences over Iraq can be resolved.

While celebrating the assumption that democracy has finally been delivered to the Iraqis as promised, the Pentagon hawks are likely to ignore the hard fact that the higher turnout at the hustings in Shia and Kurd areas came about for no love for western democracy, but for absolutely different reasons. The principal reason is that the current Shia leadership



Illustration by Riaz Ali Khan

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**A**MERICA'S 'Iraq democracy' project, designed to claim legitimacy of its two-year old brutal occupation and planned plunder of the oil-rich Arab state, scored a temporary success as the scheduled January 30

elections took place in a rather peaceful ambience, and the scale of violence was much less by current Iraqi standards. Nor was the claim of 60 per cent turnout disputed by the media or any participating group. The kind of enthusiasm voters displayed in southern part of the country was a surprise for many in the outside world, but it had its own reasons.

Even in the so-called Sunni triangle where a boycott of the vote was decreed by the clergy leadership and was mostly observed, the turnout was not very disappointing. In cities like

equally euphoric and had echoed emotions similar to Bush's, by issuing a statement in which he said, "The people of South Vietnam have expressed their choice and deserve our support." But one can hardly overlook the denouement of the democracy experiment in South Vietnam. The 'successful' holding of polls there in September 1967 was followed by the Tet Offensive on January 30, 1968 which marked the beginning of the end of the American occupation. The January 30 poll, too, marks the beginning of a critical process that will make 2005

stability, revive its political institutions and restore to its citizens their lost dignity.

This is apparently a tall order for the "neocon warriors" who are not known to be democracy-friendly. The purpose of organizing the polls, though done reluctantly, was never to make Iraq a democracy. It was to give a "democratic" cover to the occupation and the governance structure put in place there and, more so, to create favourable conditions for the angry European allies to join in the "plunder" of Iraq's natural resources. That's why presidents of France and Russia, whose oil

was not ready this time to repeat the mistake their elders committed 80 years ago when Britain occupied Iraq after defeating the Turkish army.

Shias had then revolted against the occupation forces. So Britain turned to the Sunni community for help to rule Iraq. The result was that the Sunnis had since then kept their grip on power even after the British withdrew despite being a minority community. On their part, the Americans facing stiff Sunni resistance and a determined boycott of polls, had little nerves to risk provoking a revolt by

# Rescreen?

And the price they will demand is, to begin with, a sizable share in political and administrative power in running affairs of Iraq as long as Americans stay on their soil, a time-table for complete pullout of all American troops and personnel, and making the National Assembly totally sovereign with complete authority to appoint a prime minister and his cabinet.

The initial poll results show that Sistani's United Iraqi Alliance is poised to score a major victory and become the majority group in parliament. In fact, there was no doubt about such a possibility from the outset. Shias form 60 per cent of the population and Sistani had infused a remarkable discipline in the ranks of the

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the Shias, the majority group.

The most influential Shia leader, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, has shown great statesmanship and far-sightedness during the post-invasion period and has been very pragmatic and articulate in his response to numerous crises and challenges; be it American brutalities, Sunni-provoked violence or the rules relating to the holding of

ensured a heavy turnout simply because it was the first and a rare occasion that they were being treated as respectable citizens and voters and, therefore, could relish casting their vote in a coercion-free atmosphere and could also think of having a share in power in the foreseeable future. They had a horrible past, lived in misery during Saddam Hussein's rule and even suffered chemical gas attacks which killed thousands of them. Hence, they could hardly squander this

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the polls. And, had Russia organized a similar poll in, say, Ukraine or Poland in a more efficient manner after having invaded them, the White House would have contemptuously ridiculed the exercise. The security measures were so draconian that most of the cities looked like ghost towns.

The ballot paper was so complicated that even Jalal Talabani, the Kurdish leader, needed a briefing on how to use one. Because of the fear of target killings and kidnapping, most candidates refused to appear in public and even put their names in the ballot paper. The United Iraqi Alliance of Shia community could afford to identify only 37 of its 225 candidates on the ballot. Iraqis voted not for a party but for a list. The lists contained, between them, over 7,000 candidates, most of them not named. The system creates likelihood of over-representation for groups which turn out in high numbers. This may happen in Kurd areas.

Now that the polls are over, the crucial question is: Will Americans be willing to hand over or share, in a significant manner, power with the Shia leadership? In fact, it is a Catch-22 situation for President Bush and his team of hardliners: If they deny Shias their well-deserved slice of power, they will be inviting an unthinkable disaster for themselves by compelling Shias, along with Sunnis and Kurds, to launch their "Tet Offensive" whose only logical conclusion will be a humiliated withdrawal of Americans from Iraq.

If Washington opts to go by what democracy demands — transfer of power to the elected candidates — it will be facing two Irans, instead of one. This is how the hawks in Washington would view the danger. Donald Rumsfeld is on record for having stated that the US will



polls and even the presence of US troops on Iraqi soil. He tolerates the occupation which most of his followers hate, is not ready to confront occupation forces which gives an impression of him being cooperative with them, favours elections and knows how to mobilize his community to fully participate in it. He stood for the principle that Iraq's constitution must be written by elected representatives, not by US nominees and that the transitional government must be an elected one.

Kurds were seen equally enthusiastic towards the January 30 poll exercise and

strategic need.

So, both Shia and Kurd voters did not go to the polling stations for the pleasure of risking their lives at the hands of sharpshooters in the streets. They were told by their area political instructors that this ritual was essential as time has come when they are going to enjoy power for the first time. But their enthusiastic appearance at the hustings is seen by some commentators as a double-edged weapon. The two communities' cooperation to make America's 'Iraq democracy' project a success is not without a price.

to ensure that there was no rigging and that the voting was smooth, giving no excuse to US forces to deny them the fruits of their victory.

One must give credit to Sistani for showing great patience to let this crucial phase pass calmly. Otherwise, the kind of procedures and rules under which the polls took place are simply mind-boggling, falling much short of known accepted electoral standards. Had these procedures been adopted for polls in, say, Zimbabwe or Syria, President Bush would have been the first to denounce

ed that the US will block any transfer of power to Shia leaders if they happened to win a future election.

The Kurds, in the north, also expect their pound of flesh when it comes to power-sharing. If denied, their next strategy will be to start fight for an independent state. And Sunnis, too, cannot be totally kept away from tasting power of which they have been addicted to. Holding of elections was an easier part of the 'democracy project', making it a reality is too dangerous. Then, it is in total contrast with the original objective of the invasion: plunder of natural resources. ■