

Iraqi Communist Party joins Washington's puppet administration in Baghdad

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There is no shortage of wretched betrayals in the annals of Stalinism. But the decision of the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) to join the Governing Council hand-picked by the Bush administration to provide a façade for its neo-colonial subjugation of the country is without precedent.

The very fact that Washington invited the ICP to join its puppet administration in Baghdad testifies to the depth of the crisis that the US confronts in Iraq. Three months after the invasion, US troops are subject to daily guerrilla attacks and face growing opposition from a hostile population that lacks basic essentials such as food, clean water and electricity.

Yet as crowds of Iraqis take to the streets to demand an end to the US occupation, the ICP has joined what is widely reviled as a quisling administration. At its first meeting on July 13, ICP leader Hamid Majid Mousa took his seat alongside the squalid assortment of Iraqi exiles, businessmen, clerics, political charlatans and outright criminals, such as convicted embezzler Ahmed Chalabi, that comprise the Governing Council.

The ICP has attempted to justify its decision by arguing that the body constitutes a step towards democracy and the independence of Iraq. In doing so, the Stalinists are simply mouthing the pretexts offered by the gangsters of the White House for their illegal invasion of Iraq. Washington's aims were never to "liberate" the Iraqi people but to occupy the country in order to loot its resources and further its ambitions throughout the Middle East.

By participating in the Governing Council, the ICP has legitimised an illegitimate war and given its stamp of approval for ongoing US rule over Iraq. It now bears full political responsibility for Washington's policies, including the savage repression of any resistance and the plans of US corporations to take over and plunder the country's economy—above all, its vast reserves of oil.

The ICP has absurdly attempted to portray its inclusion in the Governing Council as a triumph—a "concession" wrung from the US occupying forces. Mousa personally met with Washington's proconsul in Baghdad, Paul Bremer III, who is closely aligned to the most militaristic elements of the Bush administration, to press for the party's involvement. "There were also attempts to sideline our party in the political process," Mousa explained in an interview with an Iranian newspaper, "but they failed miserably in the end."

An editorial in the ICP's *Tareeq Al-Shaab* newspaper makes much of the fact that Bremer was forced to "retreat" and appoint a "Governing Council" with limited powers, rather than a consultative "Political Council". But no amount of verbal juggling can hide the fact that the ICP has been co-opted to a colonial-style body set up to contain and suppress opposition to US rule. Bremer retains all the strings of power, including the right of veto over the council's decisions. Moreover, having appointed the body, Washington can sack any or all of its members if they fail to do his bidding or if their services are no longer required.

The ICP's decision required no great soul-searching. For years, the

Stalinists have been nothing more than an adjunct to various Iraqi bourgeois groups patronised by Washington. While it may not have been formally recognised as one of the six organisations eligible for funding under the 1998 Iraq Liberation Act, the ICP had the closest relations with those groups that were—in particular, the two Kurdish militia organisations, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

Prior to the US invasion, the ICP expressed reservations, appealing to the UN and the "international community" to stop the war. But after the fall of Baghdad, it quickly dropped its muted opposition and hailed the US military defeat of the Baathist regime as a victory. Along with the KDP, PUK and other pro-US groups, it criticised aspects of the occupation and called for a national conference to establish a transitional administration with UN involvement. But when Washington ruled out such a gathering and, with the backing of the UN, decided to appoint a council instead, all these organisations rapidly fell into line. Trailing behind in their wake, the ICP followed suit.

The Governing Council is yet to parcel out ministerial posts to its members. Whatever the exact role assigned to Mousa, the ICP is committed, along with other council members, to curbing opposition to the occupation. Asked his attitude recently to a US sell-off of the oil industry, ICP Central Committee member Salam Ali dodged the issue. He did not oppose privatisation as such, but insisted only that the Iraqi people should have "the right to disposal over these resources".

ICP members who participated in a rally on July 14 to commemorate the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958 were not so coy about the party's policies. Faleh Kadhin, an electrical engineer, bluntly told the *New York Times*: "We want a market economy." There should be some kind of social safety net, Kadhin said, but state ownership of industries was clearly out of the question. Other party members agreed. "We are working to empower the private sector," Abu Salah proudly told the newspaper.

There is no doubt that the ICP's treachery will compound the prevailing political confusion in Iraq and enable, in the short term at least, reactionary Islamic fundamentalist trends to capitalise on the growing opposition to the US occupation. For Iraqis seeking an end to US rule and a progressive solution to the country's deep political and economic crisis, it is crucial to critically examine the history of the ICP.

The ICP's direct incorporation into the US occupation of Iraq is not the product of Marxism but of its polar opposite—Stalinism. Despite its false claims to be "socialist" and "communist", the party was never based on the struggle for the political independence of the working class but, from the outset, sought to subordinate Iraqi workers to one or other wing of the national bourgeoisie.

When the ICP was formed in 1934 and affiliated to the Communist International, the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow had already denounced the basic program of Marxism—socialist internationalism—as "Trotskyism" and embraced instead the reactionary nationalist perspective of "Socialism in One Country". Over the next four years, culminating in the notorious

Moscow trials of 1936-38, Stalin and his henchmen framed up and murdered the finest representatives of a whole generation of revolutionary leaders, workers and intellectuals in the Soviet Union and internationally, in a bid to suppress opposition to their policies.

The corollary of “Socialism in One Country” in backward capitalist countries was the so-called two-stage theory, which repudiated any independent political role for the working class. Like the Mensheviks that Lenin and Trotsky had opposed prior to the Russian Revolution, the Stalinists insisted that, in countries with a belated capitalist development, the tasks of the bourgeois revolution—national independence, democratic rights and land reform—would be carried out by the national bourgeoisie. With socialism relegated to the “second stage” in the distant future, the working class could do no more than provide support and assistance to the “progressive” wing of the capitalist class.

In opposition to this perspective, the theory of Permanent Revolution elaborated by Leon Trotsky made clear that in the epoch of imperialism, the bourgeoisie was organically incapable of playing a revolutionary role. The working class in economically backward countries would be obliged to lead the struggle for national independence and democracy, rallying the peasant masses and taking power into its own hands in a struggle against both imperialism and the national bourgeoisie. Once in power, the working class would of necessity move more or less rapidly to the carrying through of socialist tasks, such as the nationalization of finance and basic industry under the democratic control of the working population.

The two-stage theory was to have catastrophic consequences in Iraq in the events that followed the ousting of the monarchy in July 1958 by a section of the military. Unlike previous palace coups, the Free Officers group that led the overthrow was influenced by the growth of anti-colonial sentiment throughout the Middle East and the emergence of nationalist figures such as Nasser in Egypt. The monarchy was widely despised as a tool for British domination over Iraq and had been the target of broad protest movements in the 1940s and 1950s.

But the new government led by Brigadier Abd al-Karim Qasim was no more capable of meeting the aspirations of the masses for democratic rights and decent living standards than its counterparts elsewhere in the Middle East. Such demands necessitate a revolutionary reorganisation of society, which bourgeois leaders like Qasim and Nasser, tied in countless ways to propertied interests, were organically incapable of carrying out. While Qasim appealed at times to popular anti-imperialist sentiment, he reacted ruthlessly to any threat to the profit system.

The events in Iraq after 1958 bear a remarkable resemblance to the tragedy that was to unfold in Indonesia, culminating in the bloody 1965-66 CIA-backed military coup. In both cases, the Stalinist parties shackled the working class to so-called progressive bourgeois leaders, bolstered their anti-imperialist credentials, curbed any independent struggle by the masses and paved the way for the most reactionary elements to reemerge and seize power.

The Qasim junta was heavily dependent on the ICP as the only political party that had substantial popular support. Having survived illegality and repression under the monarchy, the ICP became a strong pole of attraction, rapidly building trade unions and peasant organisations that had hundreds of thousands of members. It was supported by sections of the intelligentsia and the army, and had significant influence in the People’s Resistance—a popular militia numbering over 10,000 members.

Qasim, on the other hand, faced splits even within the ranks of the Free Officers. With the support of the ICP, he opposed a group of officers around rival general Abd al-Salam Arif, who were pressing for Iraq to join Nasser’s United Arab Republic (UAR)—the union of Egypt and Syria formed in 1958. Arif was dismissed and became the focus for opposition by various rightwing nationalist, pan-Arab and Islamicist organisations, including the Baath Party, to Qasim and the ICP.

The ICP ruled out making any bid for power. At its May Day rally in Baghdad in 1959, which attracted some 300,000 people, the party’s central demand was for its representatives to be included in the government. Qasim refused at the time, but just two months later, in a bid to guarantee the ICP’s continuing support, he gave ministerial posts to ICP member Naziha al-Dulaymi and two ICP sympathisers.

The ICP leadership did discuss taking power. But as one academic study explained: “After heated arguments within the Politburo it was agreed that while the party might well succeed in taking power, its original analysis of the essentially bourgeois character of the revolution was correct... Thus the party decided to moderate, or at least not to press, its demands and generally began to pursue an accommodating line towards Qasim. [*Iraq Since 1958*, Marion Farouk-Sluggett and Peter Sluggett, p.69]”

The political processes that unfolded had an inexorable logic. The refusal of the ICP to mobilise the masses for the seizure of power only encouraged reactionary forces to press their demands. Qasim, who had no independent social base of his own, accommodated to these layers by cracking down on the ICP. But even as the government restricted the ICP’s mass organisations, banned its paper and arrested its activists throughout 1960, the party clung even more closely to Qasim. Dulaymi remained in the cabinet, only to be dismissed in November 1960.

Qasim himself, with only sections of the military under his command, was left increasingly isolated and vulnerable. He survived an assassination attempt in October 1959 by a Baath Party gang headed by 23-year-old Saddam Hussein. But in February 1963, a group of rightwing officers, backed by the Baath Party, engineered a military coup. The ICP’s alliance with Qasim left the working class completely defenceless. Crowds gathered outside the Ministry of Defence begging Qasim to give them weapons, but he refused.

What followed was a bloodbath as Baath Party thugs first seized and executed Qasim and his close collaborators, then turned on the ICP. As a number of separate sources testify, the CIA had developed close ties with the Baath Party, supported the coup and, as in the case of Indonesia three years later, supplied lists of ICP leaders for summary execution. The results were horrific.

“Rank and file members and sympathisers were rounded up in their homes, or shot in the streets in the first few days if they went out to join the crowds in the streets in brave but futile attempts to ‘defend the revolution,’ which the party leaflets were actually calling upon them to do. Husayn al-Radi, the first secretary of the party, and many members of the Central Committee were arrested and subsequently murdered. It is impossible to establish exactly how many people were killed, but many thousands were arrested, and sports grounds were turned into makeshift prisons to hold the flood of detainees. People were killed in the streets, tortured to death in prison, or executed after mock ‘trials’. Many of those who escaped with their lives were condemned to long periods in prison under atrocious conditions. [*ibid*, p.86]”

Estimates put the number dead at 3,000. The authors of *Iraq Since 1958* express astonishment that the ICP had made no contingency plans, even though it had been “well aware for some time that a coup was being prepared”. In particular, they declare, it was “almost inexplicable” that the party took no measures to protect its own leaders and members. There is nothing mysterious, however, about this paralysis. Having subordinated themselves unconditionally to Qasim, the ICP leaders were not prepared to take any actions that the Iraqi leader would deem hostile—even if their own necks were at stake.

The ICP learnt nothing from the tragic events of 1963. In fact, the pattern of events dictated by the ICP’s bankrupt two-stage perspective were to be repeated in subsequent decades more than once.

Although the Baathists played a prominent role in the 1963 coup, they could not hold onto power and were quickly pushed aside by Qasim’s rival Arif. The Baath Party had only been formed in the early 1950s, as an

adjunct to the Baath Party in Syria, and its organisation had been set back by the repression that followed the failed attempt on Qasim's life. Even by its own estimates, it had only 850 full members and 15,000 sympathisers in 1963.

It was not until 1968 that the Baath Party seized power, taking advantage of the infighting and unpopularity of the previous military-backed regimes. Conscious of his government's political isolation, Baath leader Hasan al-Bakr turned for support to the ICP, offering it three ministerial positions in the cabinet. The overture was also aimed at cementing a relationship with the Stalinist bureaucracy in Moscow, which was the country's main military supplier and a potential source of aid.

Although the ICP declined the offer, it had no fundamental opposition to the proposal. Under pressure from Moscow, the ICP leadership had already begun to accommodate to "progressive Nasserist elements" in the previous military regimes. As the Baath government increasingly turned to the Soviet Union for support, it was not a huge political leap for the ICP, at Moscow's insistence, to join with the party that had slaughtered its members just years before, and declare it to be progressive.

The impetus was provided by the Baath regime's decision to nationalise the oil industry. The move, aimed at capitalising on higher oil prices in the early 1970s, required close cooperation with the Soviet Union, which provided markets and technical expertise. Moscow, in turn, was keen to exploit the relationship and pressed the ICP to openly support the government. In April 1972, the ICP issued a statement declaring that recent developments had "marked a turning point in the people's struggle" and indicated its willingness to join the Baath-dominated National Progressive Front. In May, two senior ICP leaders were appointed to the Baath cabinet and, two weeks later, the oil industry was nationalised.

The ICP remained in the National Progressive Front for seven years. It bears political responsibility for all of the Baath regime's crimes against the working class as well as its repression of the Kurds and Shiites. The Baath Party used its predominance not only to insist that the ICP uncritically accept its policies but to extend its influence into areas where it had never had support, such as the trade unions. The ICP clung to the Baath Party right to the bitter end, even after the regime launched a fresh wave of repression against the party in April 1978. It only quit the front in 1979.

In light of this wretched history, the ICP's decision to enter Washington's puppet body in Baghdad, while seemingly at odds with its past rhetoric, is entirely explicable. Throughout its existence, the ICP has sought to attach itself to one or other section of the Iraqi bourgeoisie. The ability of these layers to posture as "anti-imperialist" rested on their ability to manoeuvre during the Cold War between Washington and Moscow. But that evaporated with the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Throughout the 1990s, even the most radical of the national liberation movements—from the PLO in the Middle East to the ANC in South Africa—abandoned any opposition to the dictates of the major powers.

Deeply compromised in the eyes of the masses by its support for the Baathist dictatorship, and subject to constant repression, the ICP has over the past two decades been reduced to a pathetic rump. It led a marginal political existence in the 1990s, in the so-called northern no-fly zone—the military exclusion zone declared by Washington in the aftermath of the 1990-91 Gulf War and patrolled by US and British warplanes. With the permission of the Kurdish militia, the ICP set up an office in the Kurdish area and promoted various Kurdish leaders as the latest incarnation of the "progressive bourgeoisie".

The northern no-fly zone was a hotbed of imperialist intrigue. It served as a base of operations for Chalabi's Iraqi National Congress (INC) and the Iraq National Accord (INA), both of which were formed with the backing of the CIA and other Western intelligence agencies. The ICP

maintained relations with all these organisations and held its own discussions with US officials. When these thoroughly venal groups agreed to join the Governing Council in Baghdad, the ICP, true to form, tagged along.

Workers, intellectuals and young people in Iraq and throughout the Middle East seeking to fight the eruption of imperialist war and neo-colonial oppression must draw the necessary political lessons. The collapse of the Soviet Union did not spell the end of socialism but was the sharpest expression of a more universal process: the demise of all national-based parties and programs under the impact of the globalisation of production. Above all, what is required in Iraq and the Middle East is the building of parties based on the program and perspective of the International Committee of the Fourth International, the world Trotskyist party, which alone has defended the principles of socialist internationalism against the betrayals of Stalinism.



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