

US plans for a new Iraqi regime in disarray

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26 January 2004

In his State of the Union address last week, President George W. Bush insisted that the resistance to the US-led occupation of Iraq “will fail, and the Iraqi people will live in freedom... Month by month, Iraqis are assuming more responsibility for their own security and their own future.”

The reality is that events in Iraq are rapidly lurching out of control for the Bush administration and its discredited Iraqi Governing Council (IGC). The past several days have seen a deepening of the insurgent attacks on US troops and Iraqi collaborators, accompanied by renewed calls by rival Shiite mullahs for the rejection of the US plan to instal an unelected government on July 1.

Last Friday, after a week of demonstrations by tens of thousands of Shiite Muslims in Baghdad, Basra, Najaf and Karbala against the US plan, the most senior Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, hinted at a possible compromise deal with Washington. He called for a halt to the mass protests, appealing for the US and UN to be given time to clarify their positions on the procedures to choose a government.

Bush had just asked the UN secretary-general Kofi Annan to intervene to find ways of overcoming the opposition to the US scheme for an interim government, which members of the IGC would help handpick through regional caucuses. Sistani’s spokesman said he was prepared to drop his demand for direct elections if UN and Iraqi experts determined they were not feasible.

However, Sistani was immediately outflanked by a younger Shiite cleric, Moqtada Sadr, who branded the UN—which has sanctioned the illegal US occupation—as “dishonest” and “subservient to America”. Sadr told worshippers in Najaf: “I refuse the participation of the United Nations in supervising elections, because it is not honest and it follows America.”

Earlier in the week, Sadr mobilised thousands of supporters in Najaf and nearby Karbala, as well as Baghdad, to protest the US plan. His primary base of support is among sections of the urban Shiite poor, particularly in the capital. His followers also denounced proposals for a federated structure, with autonomy for northern Kurdish areas and for the Sunni Muslim region of central Iraq, and demanded an

“Islamic constitution”.

As a result, Sistani has been forced to pull back from his entreaty to Washington, announcing that he deemed the US proposal unacceptable in “its totality and its details”. His representative, Sheikh Abu Mustafa, declared: “It doesn’t matter whether the UN is here or not. Seyer Sistani has made up his mind that he wants elections... The whole area [southern Iraq] is ready to rise up in protest should Sistani signal his displeasure.”

These developments present deep-going problems, not just for Bush but also UN authorities, who were forced to pull out of Iraq last year when the UN headquarters was bombed. Despite being anxious to help Washington, the UN leadership has proceeded extremely cautiously in response to Bush’s plea for assistance. It has sent only a two-man delegation to Iraq, charged with seeking to open channels of communication between the US and the Shiite clerics. Annan has asked for a security assessment before announcing the dispatch of a mission to judge the viability of direct elections.

The situation is all the more volatile because Sistani and Sadr are themselves vying for position, seeking to corral rising social discontent among Shiites. The mounting unrest was evidenced by recent mass protests across southern Iraq demanding jobs, food and an end to official corruption, which is rife among US-backed former exiles and ex-Baath Party functionaries alike.

IGC leaders have further complicated Washington’s attempts to find a way out of the impasse by calling for the plan to be abandoned and for them to retain power. They include the Pentagon-backed Ahmed Chalabi, the convicted bank embezzler and leader of the Iraqi National Congress, who warned last Friday that the planned selection of a government by regional caucuses was a “sure-fire way to have instability”.

After initially falling in behind the US plan when it was unveiled last November 15, Chalabi and fellow IGC leaders, notably Ibrahim Jafari of the Dawa Islamic Party and Adnan Pachachi, the current chairman of the council, are proposing that the Bush administration simply expand the IGC from 25 members to 125 and proclaim it as an interim legislature.

Such a plan, however, would only further fuel unrest and opposition. The November 15 plan was adopted precisely because the IGC, basically a cabal of Washington's flunkies, was so reviled and politically isolated that the Bush administration had to abandon its earlier scheme to retain the council as an interim government while a constitution was drafted.

For several pressing reasons, the White House has decided that it cannot afford to wait beyond July 1 to instal a government with a fig leaf of legitimacy. In order to secure Bush's reelection, it must concoct a timely political "success story" in Iraq.

At the same time, under the cynical guise of permitting the Iraqi people to determine "their own future," it needs a so-called sovereign regime that can lawfully invite the US military to remain in Iraq for an indefinite period. And under international law, only a nominally independent government can privatise Iraq's state-run industries and hand US companies long-term contracts for the control of the country's oil.

If the conflict over the process of forming a government were simply over the practicalities of whether elections could be organised in time to meet the July 1 deadline, as both Bush and Annan pretend, it would not be difficult to sort out a compromise, perhaps involving some delay. But the disputes involve competing sets of ethnic and sectarian elites who are each seeking to further their own narrow interests while at the same time shoring up their political base of support.

Behind the façade of official optimism and bravado, there are signs of alarm in Washington. Just days after Bush's State of the Union address, CIA officials starkly contradicted his upbeat assessment. Briefing journalists anonymously, they declared that violence could erupt if the demands for direct elections were spurned. They also warned of the mounting danger of civil war in Iraq, with Shiite, Kurdish and Sunni leaders jostling for spheres of control.

An unnamed senior administration official was quoted as saying that Bush, his top national security aides and the US administrator in Iraq, Paul Bremer, discussed these concerns at meetings last week. Another "senior official" said concerns over a possible civil war were not confined to the CIA but were "broadly held within the government".

A major factor in this gathering political crisis is the widening insurgency against the US-led forces. Recent days have seen a new wave of attacks, the most concentrated since the capture of Saddam Hussein last month. Apart from US and Coalition troops, those targetted have been political accomplices of the occupation.

A bomb planted in a meeting hall of the Iraqi Communist Party exploded after a party gathering last Thursday, killing

two men in an apparent attack on supporters of the US-backed regime. The Stalinist party welcomed the US invasion and was rewarded with one representative on the IGC.

The bombing was part of a spate of assaults that killed 11 people last Wednesday and Thursday in central Iraq, including four women who were shot as they headed to jobs at a US military base. Two Iraqi policemen were killed and three others were wounded when gunmen fired on a police checkpoint between Fallujah and Ramadi, west of Baghdad.

Two US soldiers died in a rocket and mortar barrage on a forward military base near Baqouba, 60 kilometres northeast of Baghdad. The security chief of Spanish troops in Iraq was also shot and critically wounded during an "anti-terrorist" operation near Diwaniyah, south of Baghdad.

Two days later, at least eight American soldiers and seven Iraqis were killed last Saturday in a series of attacks across Iraq. Drive-by shootings in Baghdad and the northern city of Mosul killed an Iraqi traffic policeman and a police officer. Another policeman perished in a bomb blast near northern Kirkuk. Four people were killed and more than 30 wounded, including two US soldiers, when a bomb device exploded as a US military convoy passed by a government building in Samarra, 125 kilometres north of Baghdad.

Two US pilots were killed when their helicopter came down near the northern city of Kayyarah. Three US soldiers were killed and six wounded when a car bomb exploded at a military checkpoint in the western town of Khaldiyyah, while two US soldiers perished when their convoy was attacked by home-made bomb north of Fallujah.

Another soldier in the central town of Beiji, just north of Tikrit, after being wounded when a rocket-propelled grenade struck his armoured vehicle. These deaths took to 513 the number of US service members who have died in combat since Washington launched the Iraq war on March 20.

As he did in his State of the Union speech, Bush and his administration, supported by the mass media, invariably refer to the insurgents as "terrorists" who are seeking to prevent "freedom" in Iraq. It is evident, however, the attacks—in all likelihood organised by a diversity of groups—reflect far broader hostility and anger among Iraqis who oppose the US occupation of the country, its contempt for basic democratic rights and its failure to solve even the elementary social needs of the majority of the population.



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