

US shuts down anti-occupation Iraqi newspaper

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30 March 2004

Thousands of followers of Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr took to the streets of Baghdad on Sunday to demonstrate against the US shutdown of *Al Hawza*, a weekly journal published under Sadr's editorial influence. A tense standoff ensued outside the newspaper's offices between nervous American troops and crowds of angry Iraqis chanting "Where is democracy now?"

Earlier in the day, US troops sealed *Al Hawza's* doors with chains, acting on the direct orders of Paul Bremer, the head of the US-controlled Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). The publication has been banned for 60 days. If it is published in defiance of the US diktat, the editors and employees could face up to one year's imprisonment and a fine of \$US1000.

The CPA has accused *Al Hawza*, which has a circulation of about 50,000, of violating a US-imposed law "which prohibits newspapers from creating instability through inciting violence against the coalition forces." It alleges two articles in the February 26 edition of the newspaper "incite violence." The first was a column which speculated that the deaths of 53 Shiites in the town of Iskandariyah on February 10 were caused by a missile fired by a US Apache helicopter, not a terrorist car bomb as the US military alleged. The second was an article headlined "Bremer follows in the steps of Saddam," that documented various ways in which the US occupation was trampling on the democratic rights of the Iraqi people.

CPA spokesman Al Elsadr told the *Washington Post*: "The false information in that paper was hurting stability. It was stirring up a lot of hate. It was making people think we were out to get them. If people actually believed that coalition forces were slaughtering civilians it could be real dangerous. That's incitement."

In fact, in accusing the US of replicating the methods of Saddam Hussein, *Al Hawza* was simply reflecting the views and experiences of many Iraqis. The Iraqi people

have no rights under the occupation. Hundreds of civilians have been gunned down during raids, at checkpoints or during demonstrations. Thousands of men have been dragged from their homes by US troops and flung into prison camps. The years of economic sanctions and war have left the country in ruin, with immense social problems that the US is making little attempt to address.

The US authority is so sensitive to the potential for a social explosion that it instinctively responds to criticism and opposition with repression. Journalists, particularly those trying to report objectively on the real state of affairs, work under extremely difficult conditions. Thirteen journalists were killed in Iraq last year—most by American bullets. On two occasions, the US has sought to hinder the operations of Arab television broadcasters *Al Jazeera* and *Al Arabiya*, also accusing them of "inciting violence."

Referring to the shutdown of Sadr's newspaper, freelance Iraqi journalist Omar Jassem told the *Washington Post*: "I guess this is the Bush edition of democracy."

The crackdown against *Al Hawza* has been ordered amidst a rapidly growing crisis for the US. The bulk of the Shiite religious leadership, including the leading cleric Ali al-Sistani, has now rejected the interim constitution announced by the CPA on March 8. A petition campaign is underway at mosques to collect hundreds of thousands of signatures demanding that the constitution be rewritten to include a number of demands of the Shiite clergy. The petition declares: "It [the constitution] is illegal because the administrators who have drafted the law lack legitimacy among ordinary Iraqis."

Among the Shia clerics conducting this campaign, Sadr has been the most vocal critic of the occupation. He has a substantial following among the predominantly Shiite urban poor of Baghdad. Only 31 years old, he has built support by demanding that the American troops get out of

Iraq immediately and condemning the US for the collapse of the country's infrastructure. The estimated 10,000-strong "Medhi" militia loyal to him has de-facto control over parts of the sprawling slums of eastern Baghdad known as "Sadr City"—after his father Mohammed Sadek al-Sadr, who was assassinated on Saddam Hussein's orders in 1999. Sadr also has a sizeable base in the main Shiite holy city of Najaf, where he resides.

Last October, a tense situation developed in both Karbala and Baghdad when the CPA sought to disarm Sadr's militiamen and arrest one of his leading clerics. A number of militiamen and several American troops were killed. At that time the US decided against outlawing Sadr. This week's closure of *Al Hawza* may be the first step toward a direct US confrontation with Sadr's organisation, with the aim of weakening the Shiite opposition to the interim constitution. There is no doubt that the focus of the next issue of the newspaper would have been denunciations of the document and calls for Shiites to support the campaign against it.

Sadr represents a layer of the ruling elite who are seeking to channel the frustrations and grievances of the most impoverished section of the population into reactionary calls for an Islamic state. He views the US overthrow of Saddam Hussein's secular Baathist regime as having created the best possible conditions for the Shiite clergy to come to power and establish a theocracy over Iraq.

The US actions will only boost his credentials among the Iraqi masses. Yesterday in Baghdad, angry but peaceful demonstrations in support of *Al Hawza* continued. Sheikh Mahmud Sudani, a spokesman for Sadr told AFP: "We are determined to pursue our protest until they reopen our paper." The paper's editor told the *Washington Post*: "That chain you see on the door is one of the American symbols of freedom. Do you think this is political freedom?"



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