

Washington installs new puppet regime in Baghdad

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While US President Bush immediately hailed the new Iraqi interim government installed on Tuesday as being “one step closer to democracy,” the entire process demonstrates the claim to be a sham. The new Iraqi president, vice-presidents and ministers were all chosen behind closed doors by the US consul in Iraq Paul Bremer III, aided and abetted by UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi, in consultation with Washington’s handpicked stooges from the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC).

All the new appointees were selected from a limited circle of political figures, bureaucrats and businessmen who have close relations with Bremer’s Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA). The chief qualification for the job was to continue to support and defend the illegitimate and brutal US-led occupation of Iraq. Needless to say, the overwhelming majority of the Iraqi population had no say whatsoever in determining the new puppet regime, to which “full sovereignty” is due to be handed on June 30.

The setting for the formal installation demonstrated that the interim government is incapable of even presenting itself in public. The ceremony was held in the fortified Green Zone headquarters of the CPA before a carefully selected audience of some 400 Iraqi and foreign guests. Heavily-armed US and Iraqi troops ringed the building, sniffer dogs searched for bombs, US helicopters hovered overhead and snipers were positioned to shoot anyone who attempted to enter the compound.

Despite these extraordinary precautions, the ministers were sworn in amid a series of explosions. A bomb exploded nearby, at the Baghdad headquarters of one of the pro-US Kurdish parties, killing at least three people. At least five mortar rounds landed in the Green Zone itself—one close to the US convention centre, shaking the walls and sending a plume of white smoke into the air.

Far from being simply the work of “Al Qaeda terrorists” and “Baathist remnants” as the Bush administration maintains, the continuing anti-US insurgency clearly enjoys far greater support among the Iraqi people than the interim government. According to the Centre for Research, a polling organisation working for several US contractors, the percentage of Iraqis who view the US as an occupier rather than a liberator doubled from 43 percent to 88 percent between last October and April. Those wanting an immediate US withdrawal increased from 17 percent to 57 percent over the same period.

So discredited and detested were the US-led occupying forces that the Bush administration was forced to call in the UN and its representative, Brahimi, to provide a cloak of international

legitimacy to the selection process, but Washington clearly dictated the outcome. Despite the tawdry character of the exercise, UN Secretary General Kofi Annan immediately gave it his blessing.

By all accounts, the political haggling and posturing over the distribution of positions went down to the wire. The key executive post of prime minister was announced, out of the blue, last Friday: the IGC agreed on Iyad Allawi, an exile with a long association with the US and British intelligence agencies. But the largely ceremonial post of president remained in dispute: Bremer and Brahimi insisted on Adnan Pachachi, a veteran diplomat and former Iraqi foreign minister, while the IGC was pushing for one of its own, Ghazi Ajil al-Yawar.

The dispute held up the remainder of the selection process—a carefully contrived political balancing act aimed at paying off the various rival ethnic and political organisations that backed the US invasion. On Sunday, Bremer threatened to veto Yawar if the IGC put the matter to a vote. The wrangling continued through Monday and into Tuesday morning before Pachachi was finally offered the position, but declined citing the IGC opposition to his appointment. Yawar, a Sunni Muslim, was given the job, while the two vice-presidential posts went to Ibrahim Jafari, a leading figure in the Shiite-based Dawa Islamic Party and Rosh Shawais, president of Kurdistan parliament and a member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KUP).

Much has been made in the media about Yawar’s “objections” to the US occupation. All his criticisms, however, are of a limited and tactical character. Like Allawi, he has been critical of Washington’s decision to disband the army and security organs of the former Baathist regime. But along with the rest of the appointees, he is well aware that the new regime is completely dependent on the US, economically, politically and militarily. Yawar, an engineer, has connections in Saudi Arabia and the US. He studied in both countries and continues to have business interests in Saudi Arabia, where he ran a telecom company.

A deputy premier for national security and 31 ministers have been appointed. All of them, including Mufid Mohammad Jawad al-Jazairi from the Stalinist Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), who retains his post as culture minister, have a proven record of subservience to the US occupation. Key security posts have been allocated to figures who share Allawi’s view that elements of the old Baathist security apparatus, including its notorious Mukhabarat intelligence service, need to be resuscitated to crush any

opposition to the US occupation. Interior Minister Falah Hassan is the son of General Hassan al-Naqib, a former deputy chief of staff under Saddam Hussein.

Of the remaining positions, the most significant is the oil ministry, which the US has ensured remains tightly under its control. The new oil minister is Thamir Ghadhbhan, a British-trained former Iraqi official, who has effectively presided over the oil industry since he was installed last year as the ministry's "chief executive" by the US-led Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance. Ghadhbhan has worked closely with Phillip Carroll, former US chief executive of Royal Dutch/Shell, who oversaw the ministry on behalf of the Bush administration.

Dominance over the country's vast oil reserves remains one of Washington's chief objectives in Iraq. A primary reason for pressing ahead with the June 30 handover is to ensure that a "fully sovereign" regime is in place that can to legitimately sign oil contracts, represent Iraq in the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) and engage in other financial transactions, including privatisation and investment. The interim government is to provide the needed façade for this economic plunder.

Allawi's government will remain completely under the US thumb—both directly and indirectly. A US-British draft resolution to the UN Security Council, aimed at legitimising the charade, ensures that US-led military forces remain in the country, that the Iraqi security forces are under US command and that the economy, particularly the oil industry, stays under US supervision.

In response to criticisms from China, France and Russia, Washington and Britain have made several cosmetic amendments to their proposed resolution but the essentials remain unchanged. The interim government is to prepare for national elections early next year for a "transitional government" which in turn is charged with drawing up a constitution and holding a poll for a "permanent government" by the end of 2005.

Unlike the first draft, the amended version states that the UN mandate for the US military occupation will expire on December 31, 2005. But as Bush's national security adviser Condoleezza Rice noted yesterday, that mandate can always be renewed to enable US forces to remain in Iraq. The second modification is just as insubstantial—the Iraqi transitional government can ask the UN to terminate the mandate. For that to take place, however, a resolution would be required in the UN Security Council, where both Washington and London hold vetoes.

While French President Jacques Chirac has declared that further changes are required, no concerted challenge has been mounted to the resolution. The debate has nothing to do with the basic rights of the Iraqi people. Rather France, China, Russia and other powers are seeking to secure their own interests in the Middle East and a stake in Iraq's economy.

The British-based *Economist* pointed to one of the concerns of France and other countries who had made substantial loans to the ousted Hussein regime. "Another controversial issue, of great concern to Mr Allawi's government," the magazine observed, "is how much of the country's debt will be written off. America is thought to be seeking to write off 80-90 percent of Iraq's national debt, whereas France is said to be suggesting only 50 percent."

Whatever the outcome of the UN Security Council deliberations, the US has already established its effective control over much of the Iraqi administration and economy through the interim constitution and laws enacted by the CPA. After June 30, the CPA will be dismantled but the US will continue to exert its influence through a huge staff of officials stationed at what will be the largest US embassy in the world. In addition, between 110 and 160 US advisers will remain embedded in Iraqi ministries, overseeing and directing their operations. The US intends to fully exploit the period until December 2005 to ensure that economic and administrative measures are put in place to protect its long-term interests.

The absurdity of the Bush administration's claims to be handing over "full sovereignty" was highlighted by the comments of Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security adviser to US President Carter. Brzezinski, who like others in US ruling circles is concerned about the impact of the debacle in Iraq on US interests, declared that the term "full sovereignty" lacked credibility. No country could be fully sovereign while its country was "still being occupied by a foreign army, 140,000 men, subject to our authority," he said. Commenting on how the new government would be viewed in Iraq, he added: "The transfer of nominal sovereignty to a few chosen Iraqis in a still-occupied country will brand any so-called sovereign authority as treasonous."

The complicity of the UN in perpetuating Washington's neocolonial dominance of Iraq further underscores the fact that this den of big power intrigue has nothing to do with protecting the rights and improving the welfare of the majority of humanity. The genuine aspirations of the Iraqi people for democracy and decent living standards will not be met through the UN. The essential precondition is the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of all foreign troops from Iraqi soil.



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