Iraqi prime minister raises martial law option

Peter Symonds
23 June 2004

Without intending it, the new Iraqi prime minister, Iyad Allawi, has effectively punctured Washington's rhetoric about building democracy in the country. At his first press conference on Sunday, he broached plans to impose martial law following the formal handover of "sovereignty" to his government on June 30.

Denouncing anti-US militants as "enemies of God and the people," Allawi made clear he would forcefully suppress any opposition. "We will do all we can to strike against enemy forces aiming at harming our country, and we will not stand by with our hands tied," Allawi said. "The Iraqi people are determined to establish a democratic government that provides freedom and equal rights for all its citizens."

When Allawi refers to "freedom" and "equal rights," he is speaking for a tiny, and for the most part privileged, social layer that continues to support the US occupation. Even according to the US Coalition Provisional Authority's (CPA) own poll in May, only 2 percent of Iraqis now regard US troops as "liberators" and just 11 percent support the CPA. The rest of the population, who oppose the illegal US-led invasion of their country, will be regarded as "enemies" and treated accordingly.

Allawi told the press conference that a committee of cabinet members had been appointed to consider imposing a state of emergency. While he provided no details, two ministers told the *New York Times* that the cabinet committee was discussing a number of measures including a curfew, a ban on public demonstrations, checkpoints to control public movement and changes to search and seizure laws.

Allawi also announced a consolidation of the country's security forces and the establishment of a national directorate for internal security. "I have directed that the immediate priority is to establish an effective Iraqi command and control system to integrate all these forces, while I will have ultimate responsibility for national security," he declared.

The Iraqi army, which had previously been assigned to counter foreign threats, will be significantly expanded and used for "internal security". It will take control of more than 37,500 troops from the existing Iraqi Civil Defence Corps, to be renamed the National Guard. Along with three brigades of troops being trained in urban combat and "counter-insurgency," the army would have more than 60,000 soldiers to suppress the armed resistance to the US-led occupation.

Both the US and Allawi are aware that the decision to use the army for internal repression could generate more opposition. The military has a long and bloody record of crushing challenges to the former Baathist regime. But Allawi is adamant that the new army will include officers and men from Saddam Hussein's military and will be used to fight insurgents for the "foreseeable future". "[I]n these difficult times," he said, "substantial elements of the army will have to assist in the struggle against internal threats to national security."

Other members of the new Iraqi regime have played down plans to impose a state of emergency. Interior Minister Falah al-Naqib said he hoped that such measures would only be in limited areas and for a limited duration—no more than two to three weeks at a time. "We don't want to use force very much," he said, but then added: "If we have to use it with certain terrorists like Al Qaeda or anyone else, then we will not hesitate to use it."

In reality, the US military has imposed a virtual state of emergency for more than a year. US and allied troops have maintained roadblocks, battered down doors and searched houses, arbitrarily detained thousands of Iraqis without trial and restricted the media and political protests. The Iraqi people have enjoyed no democratic rights whatsoever, and that will not change after June 30.

© World Socialist Web Site

US Deputy Defence Secretary Paul Wolfowitz, who was in Iraq for talks with US and Iraqi officials last week, made clear to the media that the June 30 handover was more about image than substance. “If Americans are in danger, if there’s a really bad person we’ve got to go after, it’s the same old rules. But we would like to see that something has changed. In the first few weeks, a lot of the challenge is how to create some optics when the underlying substance hasn’t changed that much,” he said.

The new security measures announced by Allawi were decided not in Baghdad, but in Washington and London. His comments were only made after extensive discussions with Wolfowitz and Sir Kevin Tebbitt, permanent undersecretary of the British Ministry of Defence. Allawi, who has longstanding connections to the CIA and Britain’s MI6, will be ruthless in suppressing any opposition.

As well as mooting the imposition of martial law, Allawi has announced that he intends to bring back the death penalty. In response to last week’s suicide bombing outside an Iraqi army recruiting centre in Baghdad, his defence minister, Hazem al-Shalan, declared that insurgents would be shown no mercy. “We will cut off the hands of those people. We will slit their throats if it is necessary to do so,” he declared.

The character of the new regime was further underscored by the prime minister’s response to the US air attack on an alleged Al Qaeda safe house in Fallujah on Saturday. At least 22 people died in the bombing, including women and children. Local officials angrily declared that foreign fighters did not use the house. Allawi, however, defended the raid. “We know that a house which had been used by terrorists has been hit. We welcome this hit on terrorists anywhere in Iraq,” he said.

Allawi claims to speak in the name of “the Iraqi people” and “democracy” and brands the anti-US resistance as “terrorists”. In fact, he heads a beleaguered administration that enjoys virtually no popular support and depends on US tanks and soldiers to survive from one day to the next.

An article entitled “Death Stalks an Experiment in Democracy” in yesterday’s *Washington Post* outlined the isolated nature of the entire administrative structure setup by Washington in Iraq. Allawi and his ministers have to work in the CPA’s Green Zone—a fortress in the middle of Baghdad, complete with its own outdoor cafes, shuttle buses and 24-hour electricity supply. Outside the Green Zone, Iraqi officials carry guns and employ security details.

“Local council members who once welcomed constituents into their homes now keep armed guards at the front gate. Leaders of the national government travel in armoured vehicles and work inside Baghdad’s fortified Green Zone, an area off-limits to ordinary Iraqis. Many foreign contractors hired by the US government to promote democracy have either relocated to Kuwait or hunkered down in protected compounds,” the article stated.

“Despite those precautions, more than 100 Iraqi government officials have been killed during the occupation, including two members of the [Iraqi] Governing Council. Over the past two weeks, the deputy foreign minister and a senior official in the Education Ministry have been assassinated. On Sunday, masked gunmen shot and killed the council chairman of Baghdad’s Rusafa district and his deputy as they sat in a café.”

A senior Iraqi official summed up the mood among the new elite in recent comments to the British-based *Telegraph* newspaper. He applauded Allawi’s plans for martial law, declaring that it was necessary that he showed he was capable of ordering the killing of Iraqis. “We should have killed [rebel Shiite cleric Moqtada al] Sadr last year,” he opined. “That would have solved the problem.”

It is no accident therefore that the first and only policy announced by Allawi so far is on “security,” the strengthening of the country’s armed forces and preparations to impose a state of emergency after June 30—all under the bogus claim to be “building democracy”.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site