Insurgency forces speedup of Iraqi "handover"

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Confronting the threat of massive attacks by the Iraqi resistance, the Bush administration pushed ahead by 48 hours a ceremony it billed as the formal "transfer of sovereignty" to an unelected interim government dominated by former Iraqi exiles and agents of Washington.

Both the Bush administration and officials in the new US puppet regime tried to put a brave face on the hasty ceremony, claiming that it was the Iraqis' decision to move up the schedule. "It's a sign of confidence," President George W. Bush said, after the so-called handover was announced at the NATO summit in Istanbul, Turkey. "It's a sign that we're ready to go."

This improbable claim was belied by the furtive nature of the ceremony itself. Held behind the walls of Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone, the headquarters of the US occupation authority, the ceremony was preceded by no public announcement and attended by only a handful of Iraqis. Television networks were prohibited from broadcasting it live, and reporters' cell phones were confiscated at the door.

For the Bush administration, the event was a debacle. The attempt by the White House to deceive the American people into thinking that some fundamental shift was taking place leading to the end of the US colonial adventure in Iraqi was undercut by the clandestine character of the "handover."

US officials were forced to conclude that the sharply deteriorating security situation outweighed Bush's need for a "good news" story from Iraq. In the days before the ceremony, over 100 people had been killed and hundreds more wounded—including several US occupation troops—in attacks staged throughout the country. Even more spectacular strikes were expected to take place on June 30, the date that had been set for formally dissolving the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and activating the interim government.

Washington's occupation chief in Iraq, Paul Bremer, boarded a C-130 transport plane and flew out of the country within two hours of the Green Zone ceremony. His planned departure was also kept secret.

Just a day earlier, an Australian transport plane took ground fire shortly after takeoff, fatally wounding an American passenger and forcing pilots to abort the flight. Thus, after 13 months as the all-powerful US proconsul in Baghdad, Bremer's exit had all the dignity of a rat fleeing a sinking ship.

The Iraqi people learned of their new-found "sovereignty" only after it was announced at the NATO summit meeting in Turkey. There were no reports from Iraq of public celebrations. On the contrary, most reporters in the country indicated that the population's mood was one of skepticism and hostility. For millions of Iraqis, it is self-evident that no regime resting on the armed power of an occupation army of nearly 140,000 US troops is either sovereign or independent.

The interim government enjoys no popular legitimacy. The US-installed prime minister, Ayad Allawi, has no base of support outside of Washington and London and is widely seen—with ample justification—as a US agent. A former Baathist who broke with the Saddam Hussein regime in the 1970s, he became an "asset" first of British intelligence, and then of the US Central Intelligence Agency. According to CIA officials interviewed by the *New York Times*, his organization, the Iraqi National Accord, worked with the agency in the 1990s, organizing car bombings in Baghdad in a bid to destabilize Iraq.

Placing Allawi at the head of what is essentially a powerless puppet regime appears to serve two purposes for Washington. It will put an Iraqi face on an escalation of counterinsurgency operations aimed at crushing popular resistance to the US occupation. At the same time, as an ex-Baathist, Allawi is expected to reach out to remnants of the Saddam Hussein regime in an attempt to reconstruct its secret police apparatus.

This project was signaled in an opinion piece by Allawi published in the *Washington Post* June 27, in which he announced that his regime was intent on "building counterterrorism and intelligence capabilities," and added that "the honor of decent Iraqi ex-officials including military and police should be restored."

The *New York Times* Monday reported that Bush administration officials had confidence in Allawi "because they regard him as a battle-hardened, politically adept and perhaps even ruthless politician who understands the meaning of force in Iraq's rough terrain."

There is little to distinguish this appraisal from those made by the Reagan and Bush Sr. administrations of Saddam Hussein in the years before the ousted leader seized Kuwait's oil fields and fell afoul of US interests.

At his press conference in Turkey Monday, George W. Bush described Allawi and his cohorts as "gutsy" and "as we say in Texas, stand-up guys." For an administration based on criminality, the attraction of Allawi is entirely understandable.

An article by Seymour Hersh published in the *New Yorker* last week quoted an unnamed US "cabinet-level Middle East diplomat" as saying that Allawi, a former agent of Baghdad's intelligence agency, the Mukhabarat, participated in a "hit team" that hunted down and assassinated Baathist dissenters in Europe in the 1970s.

Thus the puppet regime that Bush proclaims a bulwark of democracy and anti-terrorism is headed by a former Iraqi secret police thug, who went on to organize terrorist attacks at the behest of the CIA.

Bush and other officials declared Monday that US troops will

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remain in Iraq as long as it takes to impose "stability." Under a United Nations resolution passed earlier this month, the puppet regime has the formal authority to order a withdrawal of occupation forces. But there is no danger that an entity headed by an American agent and totally dependent on the US military for protection from a hostile population will even contemplate such a decision.

At the same time, Washington has firmly installed a colonial-style regime that is to exercise real power behind the façade of the interim government. Officials of the officially disbanded CPA will carry out the same functions as before, while assuming new titles at a US embassy in Baghdad—the largest ever established by any country anywhere in the world. John Negroponte, the former US representative at the United Nations, who played a key role in organizing the US covert war against Nicaragua in the 1980s, will oversee the operation as the American ambassador and new proconsul.

US controllers have been assigned to every Iraqi ministry, where they will make all substantive decisions. In addition, before quitting his post, US occupation chief Bremer "appointed at least two dozen Iraqis to government jobs with multi-year terms in an attempt to promote his concepts of government long after the planned handover of political authority," the *Washington Post* reported Sunday.

The newspaper reported that an edict issued by Bremer mandates that whomever Allawi selects as his national security adviser and national intelligence chief will have five-year terms. The obvious intent is that no matter what the results of any eventual election, the CIA and US military will retain control of Iraq's apparatus of state repression.

Handpicked Iraqis, for the most part drawn from the exile groups closest to Washington, have likewise been installed as inspectors-general in every Iraqi ministry, also for five years. This is designed to give Washington a lever to control these agencies, no matter who is elected.

In another edict issued on the eve of his departure, Bremer imposed a new election law governing the vote for a 275-member national assembly that supposedly is to be held early next year. It declares that no party participating in the election can be associated with a militia. Given that virtually every existing party in Iraq has some form of armed organization, the regulation is widely seen as a pretext for banning whatever party Washington opposes.

Earlier this month, Bremer also issued an order that severely limits the freedom of the press, essentially outlawing any published opinion opposed to the occupation and its native stooges. It "prohibits Iraqi media organizations from broadcasting or publishing material that would seriously undermine security and civil order in Iraq." The order provides for the immediate shutdown and seizure of any newspaper or broadcast outlet found in violation and the jailing of its owners for up to one year.

As the *Post* points out, the constitution dictated by US occupation authorities makes it virtually impossible for the so-called interim government to overturn any of the 97 edicts issued by Bremer, defined by the CPA as "binding instructions or directives to the Iraqi people." Reversing any of these orders requires the support of the president, both vice-presidents, the prime minister and the majority of Allawi's cabinet. Given the subservience of these figures to Washington, such a rebellion is exceedingly unlikely.

In addition to barring the new government from altering any of the laws imposed by the occupation authorities, the interim constitution precludes its passing new laws.

Finally, Washington has taken a series of actions designed to render the interim government totally dependent on the US for its funding, and to leave Iraqi oil resources securely in American hands. In a June 18 order, Bremer established a "Program Review Board" empowered to "identify, integrate and prioritize funding requirements for relief and recovery activities in Iraq, and develop funding plans that propose allocations of resources available to meet these requirements."

The board, which Washington controls, essentially seized control of Iraq's finances and diverted them to enrich US-based corporations like Halliburton. It recently ordered $2.5 billion that had accumulated in the UN-sanctioned Development Fund for Iraq—based on oil revenues—diverted to pay for reconstruction contracts, the costs of which had already been more than covered by US Congressional appropriations.

Iraq Revenue Watch, an outgrowth of billionaire George Soros's Open Society Institute, issued a recent report warning that the actions of the board "will have serious consequences for the ability of the interim government and the subsequent elected government—which are meant to exercise autonomy—to choose how to spend their money."

Describing the occupation authority's use of the funds as a "last-minute spending spree," the report asked: "Why are such large amounts of discretionary cash being committed to programs prior to establishing mechanisms for implementing them? And why are these spending obligations being introduced at the last minute rather than allowing the in-coming government to make such decisions?"

To ask these questions is to answer them. Washington is seeking to guarantee the interim government's complete subservience by denying it any possibility of obtaining an independent source of funding. At the same time, it is overseeing the looting of Iraqi wealth and resources and the diversion of billions into the pockets of the Bush administration's big business cronies.

The principal resources available to Iraq remain the $24 billion that the US Congress has approved for Iraqi reconstruction over the past two years, a vast source of profits for US-based companies. According to some estimates, the costs run up by these firms are at least 10 times what it would take for Iraqis themselves to do the same work.

Meanwhile, two new reports have raised serious questions about Washington's handling of some $20 billion in Iraq's oil revenues generated since the US occupation began last year.

The humanitarian relief organization Christian Aid and the British Liberal-Democratic Party both charge that the US occupation authority failed to account for how it spent some $20 billion in Iraqi oil revenues, raising suspicions of outright US theft.

The Liberal Democrats cited an apparent $3.7 billion discrepancy between the amount Iraq earned from oil exports and the sum that the occupation authority paid into the development fund. Christian Aid pointed out that, while there have been four separate audits connected with the use of reconstruction funds appropriated by the US Congress, no audit was carried out on the use Iraqi oil revenues until last April. Its completion is not expected until July, more than a month after the CPA, which spent the money, will have been formally dissolved.

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