

Iraqi regime prepares for martial law

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After just 10 days in office, the US-appointed Iraqi regime of interim prime minister Ayad Allawi has, on Washington's instructions, decreed sweeping measures providing for martial law to be imposed over the entire country or any part of it. Under the provisions, signed into law by Allawi yesterday, he can impose curfews, cordon off towns and cities, conduct search operations and detain individuals with weapons on them, which in Iraq is nearly every male citizen.

The adoption of the emergency powers underlines the fact that, in the name of "liberation" and "democracy," the Bush administration has installed a tyrant who will have powers similar to those once wielded by Saddam Hussein. In Allawi's case, however, he will be acting as a direct proxy for Washington itself, attempting to crush the growing resistance to its subjugation of the country.

Once martial law is declared, Allawi will have the authority to appoint military leaders as governors in specific provinces, and to freeze the assets of anybody suspected of crimes that "undermine national security," as well as those accused of providing shelter, funding, and assistance to insurgents. Other powers include to cordon off entire towns and cities, restrict communications and limit travel in and out of areas. Special courts can be created for people charged with major crimes—ranging from murder to destroying government property.

Above and beyond these specific provisions, Article 6 of the Law for Defence of National Safety hands virtually absolute power to Allawi: "The Armed Forces, Emergency Forces, Special Forces, Civil Defense Forces, Internal Security Forces, and the Security, Intelligence and Military Intelligence Services in the area where a state of emergency is declared, shall report directly to the Prime Minister, during the period of the declared state of emergency, and in coordination with the commanders of such forces and services, the Prime Minister may task any of them with tasks appropriate in nature and jurisdiction and the requirements of the emergency circumstances."

In order to activate his powers, Allawi will simply require the assent of the presidential council, which

consists of Iraqi President Ghazi al-Yawer and two vice-presidents—all US appointees. Decrees will last for 60 days, and can be readily renewed.

While adopted in the name of combatting "terrorists and law breakers," Article 1 of the emergency law specifically refers to eradicating opposition to "the establishment of a broad-based government in Iraq". In other words, martial law can be declared to suppress any political opposition to the continuing US military presence and its puppet government.

The new laws had been expected for days. Last week, US President George Bush said American forces, numbering about 138,000 in Iraq, would help Allawi enforce martial law if it were declared. It seems that the decree was twice postponed because of differences within Allawi's ministry over proposals to extend amnesties to selected militia groups.

Conscious of the comparisons that will be made to the repressive powers exercised by Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi regime and its advisers claimed that the emergency powers would be constrained by human rights protections. Human Rights Minister Bakhityar Amin foreshadowed a special body to monitor all areas where martial law was declared and investigate any allegations of human rights violations. But Amin's conception of human rights was revealed when he compared the law to the US Patriot Act, under which the Bush administration has rounded up thousands of US residents, including American citizens, without charge or trial.

One of the reasons for Washington's purported transfer of sovereignty to Allawi and his unelected cabinet on June 28 was to put an Iraqi face on an escalation of military operations aimed at crushing the popular resistance. For this task, Allawi has recruited former leading Baathist military, police and intelligence officers.

In the Bush administration's eyes, Allawi's prime qualification for the post was his track record of thuggish service, first to Saddam Hussein in the 1970s, then as an agent of British and American intelligence. During the 1990s, his organisation, the Iraqi National Accord,

worked with the CIA, organising car bombings in Baghdad in a bid to destabilise and overthrow Saddam's regime.

Some indication of the political calculations behind Allawi's appointment was provided in a recent interview on Australian television by Daniel Pipes, a leading neo-conservative supporter of the invasion of Iraq. Pipes, director of the US-based Middle East Forum and a member of a special Pentagon taskforce on terrorism and technology, told the ABC "Lateline" program on June 28 that the Bush administration had gone "too far in looking to create a democratic new Iraq".

Democracy was not possible for the foreseeable future in Iraq, Pipes opined. "What is possible is an Iraq that is ruled by someone with a strong arm for some years who will over time move towards democracy. With luck, this will be the first step towards that but I'm not confident of it... What I'm calling for is what I deem a democratically minded strongman, someone who helps make the transition."

Having failed to crush the Iraqi resistance, despite a 16-month bloodbath, the White House and the Pentagon have heeded the advice from such quarters and installed a "strongman" to rule the country with an iron fist.

Before unveiling the martial law provisions, Allawi gave a chilling demonstration of his readiness to take whatever measures are deemed necessary by Washington. On Monday, he claimed direct responsibility for a US air strike that killed at least 12 civilians, including women and children, in Fallujah, a key centre of popular resistance.

US bombs hit a family home in the latest in a series of aerial attacks on the city, 30 kilometres west of Baghdad, which remains outside American military control. Witnesses said rescue workers could do little but pick up body parts after the US military dropped two tons of bombs—four 500-pound bombs and two 1,000-pound bombs. Dr Daa Jumaili of Fallujah Hospital said 10 bodies had arrived there, most of them dismembered.

Video from Associated Press Television News showed that the explosion flung bricks blocks away, and blood was splashed on a nearby wall. Men gathered at the 30-foot-deep pit where the house had been and pulled out clothes, including a young child's shirt, from the rubble. "They talk about terrorists, but these are just families," said an angry man at the scene. Another asked: "Is this acceptable to the Iraqi government? Where are human rights?"

The US military said its use of six guided weapons

underscored the resolve of coalition and Iraqi forces to "destroy terrorist networks". Allawi immediately declared that his government not only supported the air raid, it had supplied the intelligence for targetting the house. He claimed the residence was used by supporters of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the Jordanian Islamic extremist who has become a convenient scapegoat for justifying US atrocities.

"After consultations between Iraqi government officials and Multinational Forces, Iraqi security forces provided clear and compelling intelligence to conduct a precision strike this evening on a known Zarqawi safe house in southeastern Fallujah," Allawi said in a statement. "The people of Iraq will not tolerate terrorist groups or those who collaborate with any other foreign fighters such as the Zarqawi network to continue their wicked ways."

This was the fifth time in two weeks that US bombs have flattened homes in Fallujah, each time with the claim that the strikes were precision-guided hits on so-called Zarqawi "safe houses". Dozens of people have died in the previous attacks. On every occasion, local residents have testified that those killed were civilians. Leaders of the Fallujah resistance, as well as members of the US-armed and financed Fallujah Brigade militia, have rejected the US accusation that Zarqawi and his dubious organisation are in the city.

Fallujah, home to 300,000 people, became a symbol of the national resistance to the US occupiers in April, when US forces killed more than 1,000 people during their siege of the city. For four days, from April 5 to 9, Fallujah's defenders defied a full-scale assault by US marines, eventually forcing them to retreat.

Whether or not Zarqawi's supporters were active anywhere in the vicinity of the bombed house, the raid and Allawi's statement were designed to threaten and intimidate all opponents of the occupying forces. The strike is a blunt indication of what is to come under Allawi's martial law.



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