

Iraqi interim regime implements further police state measures

Peter Symonds
10 August 2004

The US-installed interim Iraqi government is abandoning any pretence of democracy and openly implementing police state measures in a bid to crush widespread armed resistance to the occupation of the country.

Prime Minister Ayad Allawi signalled a further toughening of his regime's stance during a visit on Sunday to Najaf, where US and Iraqi forces are battling the Madhi Army militia of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. Following a meeting with US Marine commanders, he declared: "All Mahdi Army fighters should abandon their weapons and leave the city... There will be absolutely no negotiations and no truce."

Allawi's visit has set the stage for a bloody showdown in the city centre. Al Sadr has responded by insisting he will remain in Najaf and continue to fight "until the last drop of my blood has been spilled." According to the British-based *Independent*, local officials have now given the green light for US military operations "in and around" the Imam Ali shrine and other places regarded as holy by Shiites.

Such an offensive can only intensify opposition to the US occupation and the Allawi regime. Lacking any significant social base, Allawi's only response is repression. On the same day that the prime minister was being ferried into Najaf by a US Black Hawk helicopter, his government announced the reintroduction of the death penalty for a wide range of crimes.

The purpose of the move is to intimidate and terrorise a population already deeply hostile to the US presence in Iraq. In announcing the measure, Minister of State Adnan al-Janabi declared that the death penalty was needed to deal with "the security situation in Iraq". Obviously nervous about public reaction to the decision, Janabi said: "This is not an open door to execute anyone and everyone, or people that the government dislikes. This is not Saddam's law."

But despite official denials, the decree is sweeping in its scope. Capital offences will include "endangering national security", "crimes affecting transportation", such as ambushes and hijackings, and attacks on the country's infrastructure. The death penalty will also be meted out for kidnapping, murder, drug trafficking, rape and any activity related to biological or chemical warfare—a clause that appears to be directly aimed at Saddam Hussein and his former officials.

A *New York Times* article reported: "Privately, aides to Dr Allawi said they believed that the penalty could now be applied to any insurgent act committed since the United States-led invasion. If this proves to be the case, the first executions could come quite quickly, an objective that Dr Allawi seems likely to approve. Courts in Baghdad and other cities have been sitting for months to hear cases against people accused of involvement in bombings, ambushes and kidnapping, but have been limited to imposing lengthy jail terms."

At the same time, Allawi has moved to crackdown on the media. On Saturday his government ordered the closure of Al Jazeera's Baghdad bureau, accusing the popular Qatar-based TV station of failing to show "the reality of Iraqi political life" and acting as "the voice of terrorist groups". "We will not allow Al Jazeera or anyone else to disturb the security in the country," Interior Minister Falah al-Naqib declared.

While the ban lasts for a month, Naqib made clear that Al Jazeera would have to toe the government's line if it were to operate again in Iraq. The closure, he said, would give the network a chance "to readjust its policy agenda". The real purpose of the ban is to stifle any criticism of the continuing US occupation, or its Iraqi collaborators, by Al Jazeera or any other media.

Al Jazeera described the decision as unjustified and "contrary to the pledges made by the Iraqi government to start a new era of free speech and openness". A

spokesman Jihan Ballout said that the network had been given no official reason for the ban. The closure has been condemned by international journalist organisations, including the Paris-based Reporters without Borders, which demanded “an immediate explanation” adding that it was “extremely concerned about persistent episodes of censorship in Iraq”.

When asked about the decision, US State Department spokesman Adam Ereli claimed: “This was an Iraqi decision. We had nothing to do with it.” He nevertheless defended the ban and sympathised with the Baghdad regime, saying there was “a difficult situation” in Iraq. These transparent comments, however, simply underscore the relationship between Allawi and his US backers, who have been extremely critical of Al Jazeera over the last year and a half. The new “strongman” Allawi provides a convenient Iraqi face for repressive policies devised in Washington to prop up the besieged US occupation.

The introduction of the death penalty and the Al Jazeera ban are an indication of what is to come. Just 10 days after being installed in office, Allawi decreed a series of measures providing for martial law to be imposed over all or part of the country. Under the provisions of a state of emergency, all the security forces would have to report directly to the prime minister. He would have dictatorial powers to impose curfews, cordon off cities and towns, freeze assets, conduct arbitrary search operations and detain any armed individuals.

To date, Allawi has not yet resorted to these measures. Last week, however, the country’s interim president, Sheikh Ghazi al-Yawar, hinted that the current fighting in Najaf may provide the pretext for imposing martial law. “It is the time to use the new national safety law,” he said. On Monday, the government imposed a daily curfew from 4 p.m. to 8 a.m. on Sadr City—Baghdad’s sprawling working class slum which is home to two million people, mainly Shiite, and has been a centre of anti-occupation resistance.

Allawi took another step over the weekend to consolidate his grip on power. Arrest warrants were issued against one of his chief political rivals—Ahmed Chalabi—on charges of counterfeiting. Like Allawi, Chalabi, who is head of the Iraqi National Congress (INC), is a long-time stooge of Washington. Until a few months ago, he was being touted, by top Pentagon officials in particular, as a possible prime minister.

With the popular uprising threatening the US occupation, however, Chalabi fell out of favour. He had advocated a rigorous policy of de-Baathification to clear

the way for his own loyalists. Confronting growing armed resistance, Washington turned to Allawi, a former Baath Party member, who has close ties to dissident elements of Saddam Hussein’s military and intelligence apparatus, and a track record of ruthlessness.

Salem Chalabi, the INC leader’s nephew and head of the special tribunal set up to try Hussein and other Baath Party leaders, has also been targeted. He has been charged with involvement in the murder of a senior Iraqi finance official who was investigating the family’s affairs. Both Chalabi and his nephew have denied the charges. While the specific circumstances are as yet unclear, there is no doubt that the two, like Allawi, have been involved in various illicit practices to secure their economic and political positions. Ahmed Chalabi was convicted in 1991 of embezzlement in Jordan and sentenced in absentia to 22 years in jail.

The motive behind the arrest warrants has nothing to do with bringing the Chalabis to justice. Rather, it is a convenient means for eliminating them from contention and strengthening Allawi’s grip on power. Significantly, no official investigation has taken place into, or charges laid over, allegations published in the *Sydney Morning Herald* last month that the prime minister personally carried out the extra-judicial execution of six suspected insurgents in mid-June at the Al-Amariyah security centre in Baghdad.

Taken together, the Allawi administration’s actions over the last few days confirm that Washington is setting out to construct a police state regime in Baghdad that is not fundamentally different to Saddam Hussein’s. In this case, however, Allawi is completely dependent on US patronage—economically, politically and militarily.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact