

Delayed conference underscores phony character of Iraqi “democracy”

Peter Symonds
2 August 2004

Last week’s decision to postpone Iraq’s national conference has again highlighted the fraudulent character of the UN’s attempts to dress up Washington’s neo-colonial occupation in democratic clothes.

Suggestions were made in the international media that the delay was the result of the continuing violent opposition to the US military presence in Iraq. The real reason, however, lies in the fact that the anti-democratic exercise is broadly regarded as illegitimate by the Iraqi people and resulted in splits and divisions among its organisers and those seeking to participate.

UN special envoy Lakhdar Brahimi originally proposed the national conference of 1,000 delegates in May as a means of drawing in some of the occupation’s opponents and conferring a degree of legitimacy on the American puppet regime in Baghdad. The gathering is to select a national assembly of 100 with limited powers to replace ministers, to pass the budget and, on a two-thirds vote, overturn legislation.

The three-day conference was originally due to start last Thursday and be completed by Saturday—July 31—the deadline adopted as part of UN Security Council resolution 1546 sanctioning the phony handover of sovereignty to the government of Prime Minister Iyad Allawi. Last week, however, UN officials—concerned that the entire process was widely discredited before the conference had even begun—pushed for a delay.

The same pro-US factions that formed the now dissolved Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) had blatantly manipulated the choice of conference delegates to ensure their dominance of national assembly. From the outset, 20 of the 100 assembly posts were set aside for former IGC members.

These political parties include Allawi’s Iraqi National Accord (INA); the Iraqi National Congress (INC); the Shiite-based Dawa Party and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI); the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), all of which have collaborated closely with Washington for more than a decade and pushed for the US invasion.

The factions control the 92-member Preparatory Commission, which is managing the conference, including the agenda and selection of delegates. The chief organiser Fuad Massoum is one of the PUK’s founders. Not only are the commission members automatically part of the conference, but the organisers have ensured that the lion’s share of delegate posts set aside for political parties and tribal, religious, academic and professional groups have gone to their supporters.

The commission has also rigged the only nominally democratic part of the selection process—the choice of more than 500 delegates through a system of “caucuses” in each of the country’s provinces. The caucuses were always meant to be carefully managed affairs, designed to give the impression of popular involvement without providing the Iraqi people with any genuine say. But even these limited forums ran into difficulties.

In at least two cities—Basra in the south and Kirkuk in the north—the caucuses had to be abandoned after bitter disputes erupted. According to a report in the *Christian Science Monitor*, the two “supervisors” shut down the Basra caucus after followers of the rebel Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr accused the Dawa Party and SCIRI of manipulating the process. No attempt was made to reconvene the forum. Instead, the 43 conference delegates for Basra were handpicked in Baghdad last Wednesday.

Sheikh Fatih Kashif al-Ghitta, a Shiite leader in Baghdad bitterly complained to the newspaper that no one had been told about the conference. “These caucuses in the provinces were illegitimate. No one heard about these caucuses,” he said, adding: “The parties will eat the entire cake. The parties got what they wanted—they got control of the Governing Council and the National Conference, and they’re going to control the new parliament.”

By last week only 8 of the country’s 18 provinces had selected their delegates. Concerned that the charade was too obvious, UN officials argued that more time was needed for discussion with other parties. Efforts to entice vocal opponents of the US occupation such as al Sadr to

participate had failed. His supporters and a number of other organisations declared a boycott of the conference. Far from broadening the base for the Allawi regime, the UN calculated, the conference would simply confirm its lack of any significant support.

Initially Massoum and the Preparatory Commission defied the UN pressure, arguing that any delay would compromise the conference's "legitimacy" and, by breaching the July 31 deadline, would be illegal. Having rigged the conference, Massoum did not want his handiwork disrupted. He proposed to begin the gathering on Saturday, rather than Thursday, and push through its agenda in just one day.

The decision was soon reversed however. With scant regard for so-called Iraqi sovereignty, the UN, with Washington's tacit support, stepped in to force a change. Iraqi President Gazi al-Yawar bluntly explained the *realpolitik* of the situation to the Preparatory Commission on Thursday. "It's not the UN's decision. We think it's an Iraqi decision. But if you decide to go ahead, you have to understand that all the bridges between the UN and the Iraqi government will be burned," he reportedly said.

Shortly after the meeting, Massoum announced the conference would be delayed to August 15. The decision was welcomed by UN officials and by US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who quickly scotched suggestions that the delay would affect the timing of national elections due to be held in January. But the preparations for the national conference make clear that national elections will also be a stage-managed affair, subject to arbitrary postponement or cancellation if the outcome appears to be going against US interests.

The timing of the conference was always geared to the Bush administration's needs. As Wamidh Nadhmi, an Iraqi newspaper editor, pointed out in comments to the *New York Times*, the conference was aimed more at "public opinion in America to tell them that authority was passed to the Iraqi people... This argument might help Mr Bush in his election, but the change is very little in Iraq. We do not want to be part of this American solution."

It is absurd to imagine that the national conference will be any more representative if it starts on August 15. UN officials will no doubt use the two weeks to attempt to complete the selection of provincial delegates and to cajole some of the regime's opponents into taking part. What is ruled out, however, is that the Iraqi people, who overwhelmingly oppose the US occupation, will be allowed any real voice in the proceedings.

All of the political manoeuvring in the lead up to the conference is taking place within a narrow stratum of the Iraqi ruling elite in the protection of the heavily fortified Green Zone in Baghdad. Beyond its walls the influence of

the US and the Allawi regime is limited. Pro-occupation politicians and officials face the contempt of ordinary Iraqis and live in constant fear for their lives.

Veteran Middle East journalist Robert Fisk provided a glimpse of the actual situation in Iraq in a recent article entitled "The government rules only in the capital". Describing his journey from Baghdad to Najaf to meet with al Sadr's representatives, he wrote: "For mile after mile south of Baghdad yesterday, the story was the same: empty police posts, abandoned Iraqi army and police checkpoints and a litter of burnt-out American fuel tankers and rocket-smashed police vehicles down the main highway to Hillah and Najaf. It was Afghanistan Mark 2."

In Najaf, Fisk found al Sadr's Mehdi Army in control of the old town centre. "I was not surprised. US forces are under so many daily guerrilla attacks that they cannot move by daylight along Highway 8, or indeed, west of Baghdad through Fallujah and Ramadi. Across Iraq, their helicopters can fly no higher than 100 metres for fear of rocket attack. Save for a solitary A1M1 Abrams tank on a motorway bridge in the Baghdad suburbs, I saw only one other US vehicle on the road yesterday: a solitary Humvee driving along a patrol road in Najaf agreed by the Mehdi Army. Three faraway Apache helicopters were hedge-hopping their way towards the Euphrates...

"So much, then, for the Allawi government, even if the Shia insurrection is a shadow of the Sunni version. But the evidence of my journey yesterday—through the southern Sunni cities which long ago rejected American control, to the holiest Shia city where its own militia controls the shrines and the square miles around them—suggested that Mr Allawi controls a capital without a country."

Whenever it is finally staged, the national conference will be unable to bestow legitimacy on a regime that is already compromised and despised as a political pawn of the US and its illegal occupation of the country.



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