

Iraq's national assembly shows its subservience to Washington

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21 March 2005

For all the rhetoric about “democracy”, the first session of Iraq's National Assembly last Wednesday could not hide the body's subservience to the US occupiers, its impotency and its deep-seated factional differences.

Even under the British Raj, the leaders of the Indian Congress last century used the limited representative forums to challenge their colonial masters. At last week's assembly, there was not a hint of opposition or protest as the representatives of various parties, all of which supported the US invasion, took their seats.

In Washington, President George Bush described the session as a “bright moment” in the constitutional process. In Baghdad, Washington's political stooges parroted the same line.

US-installed interim prime minister Ayad Allawi, who is due to step down, proclaimed the country to be “at the gate of a new reign of freedom, dignity and democracy”. Dawa Party leader Ibrahim al-Jaafari, who is likely to become the next prime minister, declared: “This day marks a new birth for all Iraqis.”

But the circumstances of the gathering speak otherwise. The session had to be held in the convention centre in the heavily fortified Green Zone—headquarters for the US occupation. Police set up checkpoints and a security cordon throughout central Baghdad, banning the presence of vehicles. Delegates had to walk to the hall and submit to body searches. US Apache helicopter gunships hovered overhead. Despite the heavy security, several mortar rounds landed in the Green Zone as the assembly was due to convene.

The next government will be just as dependent militarily, politically and economically on the US as the Allawi regime. It will be bound by all the edicts and regulations issued by former US occupation chief, Paul Bremer, including the Transitional Administrative Law (TAL), which establishes the framework for elections and a new constitution. All significant decisions about Iraq's future will not be made in Baghdad, but in Washington.

The Bush administration only agreed to elections following mass demonstrations by the Shiite supporters of Ayatollah Ali Sistani, who was demanding a popular vote. The poll on January 30 took place under a state of siege. The overwhelming majority of Sunni voters, who make up about 20 percent of the population, boycotted the election. Overall, only 57 percent of

registered voters cast a ballot.

The United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), based among Shiites, who comprise about 60 percent of the population, won a narrow majority of seats. Even though its major constituents—the Dawa Party and Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—backed the Iraq invasion, the UIA had to appeal to anti-US sentiment by promising to end the occupation.

The narrow base of support for the US presence was underscored by the small vote for Washington's preferred candidate—the incumbent Allawi. Despite an aggressive campaign against the UIA's Islamist program and Iranian links, his Iraqi List was only able to secure 14 percent of votes—that is, about 7 percent of the population. The party of current president Ghazi al-Yawar mustered less than 2 percent of the vote.

The Kurdish Alliance (KA), comprising the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, won 26 percent of the vote by fostering the illusion that regional autonomy would put an end to the persecution and poverty of the Kurds.

None of these parties have any solution to the social disaster caused by the US invasion. Two years after the invasion the majority of Iraqis lack jobs and, in many cases, the basic necessities of life. The country's infrastructure—electricity, water and sanitation—as well as essential services such as education and health are in a state of collapse.

The competing factions of the Iraqi ruling elite are each stirring up sectarian and ethnic differences, firstly, to deflect popular anger and hostility over living standards and the occupation and, secondly, to augment their own privileged position.

Dominant sections of the Shiite political and religious establishment regard the UIA and the demand for an Islamic state as the means to secure their state control for the first time. However, they have come into sharp conflict with the KA, which wants to strengthen the powers of an autonomous Kurdish region that would include the northern city of Kirkuk and neighbouring oil-rich region.

The most striking aspect of last Wednesday's National Assembly was its failure to take the first step toward establishing a new government—the appointment of a new

president and two vice-presidents. After seven weeks of backroom haggling, the UIA and KA failed to finalise any agreement. The televised session, which lasted a mere 95 minutes, consisted of banal speeches following a formal swearing-in. The parties could not even agree on the appointment of a permanent assembly speaker.

The protracted negotiations are necessitated by the requirement in the Transitional Administrative Law of a two-thirds majority for the appointment of the president and vice-presidents, who in turn select the prime minister. The prime minister and cabinet then require the approval of a simple majority in the assembly before taking office. This complex indirect mechanism was one of several safeguards insisted on by Kurdish and Sunni politicians to give them an effective veto over a potential Shiite majority in the assembly. As a result, the UIA needs the support of the KA, or a combination of smaller parties, in order to form government.

While the Bush administration and the international media have sought to play down the difficulties, negotiations between the UIA and KA have bogged down on basic issues. Kurdish politicians have stopped short of demanding full independence, but are seeking to maintain the substantial de facto autonomy they enjoyed when US and allied warplanes protected the northern “no-fly zone” from the Iraqi military under Saddam Hussein.

As well as seeking the incorporation of Kirkuk into the northern Kurdish region, the Kurdistan Alliance is demanding substantial local powers, including policing and finance, and the right to maintain the Kurdish militia as a virtual standing army. To ensure a strong voice in the government, the KA is seeking the presidency and key ministerial posts such as foreign affairs.

The UIA has sought to delay any decision on Kurdish issues until after the national assembly has drawn up a new constitution, to be ratified by a referendum, in preparation for national elections next January. Shiite politicians, who opposed the guarantees for Kurdish and other minorities in the Transitional Administrative Law, are hoping that fresh national elections under a new constitution will put them in a strong position. Even if a compromise enables a government to be formed, the same disputes will emerge again in the writing of a constitution.

These issues are explosive ones, not just for Iraq, but the broader region as a whole. The sharp disagreements between the UIA and KA contain the seeds for bitter sectarian and ethnic conflicts and possible descent into civil war. Any substantial concessions to Kurdish autonomy has political ramifications for Iraq’s neighbours—Iran, Turkey and Syria—which all have significant Kurdish minorities. Turkey has already threatened military action if Kirkuk and its oilfields are integrated into the autonomous Kurdish region.

The lengthy delay in forming a new government is fuelling further alienation and hostility. In comments to the press,

ordinary Iraqis expressed deep scepticism that the next government would address any of their concerns.

Haithm Ali, a blacksmith, told the *New York Times*: “I don’t expect any government to be formed. And they won’t find any solutions to the situation we find ourselves in... The president and the cabinet won’t do anything for this neighbourhood [pointing to sewage-flooded streets]. They are only looking out for their own interests.”

Bassem Abdul Ahad, a spare parts merchant, exclaimed to the *Washington Post*: “Why can’t we have electricity 24 hours a day like other civilised countries? Why can’t we feel secure in our own homes? If those people put aside their personal interests, then we are in good shape. But if they remain centred on their personal concerns, then I feel pessimistic about this whole thing.”

In an interview in the *Los Angeles Times*, Awad Abid Zubaida, 35, scathingly referred to those who backed the US invasion. “You know, we’ve never had any real government and now this is not a real government either; these are all the people who came riding on American tanks. They did nothing before and they will do nothing in the future. We don’t really know who is in charge or whether a government will be formed,” he said.

Currently Allawi remains in power as the caretaker prime minister and he has not ruled out putting together a ruling coalition that includes the KA and breakaway UIA factions. The longer the negotiations between the UIA and KA drag on, the greater the room for Allawi to manoeuvre and exploit divisions in the UIA. He certainly has backing from the Bush administration for his political scheming.

To date, no deal has been reached between the KA and UIA. A new session of the national assembly has been mooted for Thursday, but there is no guarantee, even if it is convened, that it will be any more successful than the one held last week.



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