

Iraqi puppet parliament adjourns in disarray

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Two months after the January 30 elections in Iraq, the Bush administration is no closer to establishing a pro-occupation regime in Baghdad. The formation of a government has been postponed again, after the second sitting of the new Iraqi National Assembly on March 29 broke up in disarray.

The cause of Tuesday's crisis was the unexpected refusal of Sunni Muslim tribal leader Ghazi al-Yawar, installed by the US as Iraq's interim president last year, to accept the post of parliamentary speaker. After a delay of an hour-and-a-half, during which frantic attempts were made to change Yawar's mind, the assembly session opened with the farcical announcement that the naming of the speaker was being delayed "indefinitely".

The appointment of a speaker is necessary before a vote can even take place on a president and two vice-presidents, who are delegated under the US-imposed interim Iraqi constitution with naming a prime minister and a cabinet.

After a further 22 minutes of pandemonium, journalists were ordered to leave. The national broadcast of the proceedings was hastily taken off the air and replaced by music. The assembly adjourned and has now been set to reconvene on Sunday.

Yawar's refusal to serve as the parliament's speaker has disrupted the delicate negotiations that have been underway for weeks between US officials and the Shiite Muslim and Kurdish nationalist parties that won a majority of the 275 seats in National Assembly elections in January. The Shiite-based United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) holds 140 seats, while the Kurdistan Alliance (KA) has 76.

As of this week, a tentative agreement had reportedly been reached to name Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani as president, replacing Yawar, and to install Ibrahim al-Jaffari, a leader of the Shiite fundamentalist Da'wa Party, as prime minister, replacing the interim prime minister Iyad Allawi. Yawar was to become speaker so that a Sunni Muslim remained among the main figures in the American-backed regime.

Yawar has not given any explanation for his rejection of the deal. Underlying his stance, however, is the fact that the overwhelming majority of Sunnis, who make up approximately 20 percent of the population, oppose the US presence in Iraq and boycotted the election. At present, Sunni groups appear to be the most active components of the armed resistance to the US occupation.

The main Sunni religious organisation—the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS)—led the call for an election boycott on the grounds that no genuine expression of the peoples' will could take place under conditions of a guerilla war and martial law in the main Sunni cities and towns. Just months before the vote, the US military had reduced the city of Fallujah to rubble in an effort to crush the resistance, killing thousands of people and turning over 250,000 into refugees in their own country.

Yawar opposed the boycott call and headed a slate of Sunni candidates in the election. His party suffered a debacle, receiving less than 2 percent of the vote and winning just five seats. Despite the lack of popular support for open collaborators with the US invasion, however, Washington is hoping that incorporating Sunni figures into the new regime will help dissipate support for the insurgency.

The regularity of attacks on US and allied forces has declined compared with late last year, but 40 to 60 still take place each day. This week, the US military was forced to impose curfews on Ramadi to stem guerilla activity and has fought battles with resistance fighters in Mosul. In March, 32 American troops have been killed and over 300 wounded.

On March 30, General Lance Smith, the deputy commander of the US Central Command, stated bluntly that the plans to scale back American troop numbers in Iraq depended on Sunni leaders backing the new government. He told journalists: "Certainly in al-Anbar [the province including Ramadi and Fallujah] most of the Sunni leaders in some form or another were at least passively supporting the insurgency. We've got to grab those guys and bring them into the government if we're

going to be successful.”

Yawar, with the backing of a number of Sunni-based organisations, is attempting to exploit this situation to secure a more influential role, either immediately or in the future. Yawar presents himself as someone with sufficient authority to negotiate with insurgent groups and bring them into an arrangement with the occupation. A *Los Angeles Times* report, citing a member of the Iraqi Constitutional Monarchy Movement close to Yawar, indicated that he wants the presidency as the price for acting as a Sunni figurehead for the Bush administration. Other sources have claimed he is seeking at least one of the two vice-presidential posts.

The aspirations of Sunni figures like Yawar are being helped by the mounting impatience in the US with the inability of Shiite religious parties and the Kurdish bloc to agree on the composition of a government.

One of the core demands of the Kurdish nationalists is for control over the lucrative northern Iraqi oil fields and the city of Kirkuk. Da’wa and the other main component of the Shiite UIA, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), are resolutely opposed to Kurdish ambitions for a de-facto partition of Iraq and the transfer of oil wealth to the Kurdish regional government in the north. The Shiite establishment was sidelined under the Baathist regime and is seeking to use the US occupation to gain state power and a greater share of Iraq’s oil revenues.

The conflicting interests are such that any government formed between the Shia and Kurdish factions could quickly break apart. Underscoring the venal considerations at stake, the UIA and KA have been unable to agree, despite two months of horse-trading, on who will hold the crucial oil ministry in a new government.

A new conflict is now emerging over the nomination of the parliamentary speaker. Interim prime minister Allawi’s Iraqi List coalition, which received just 14 percent of the vote, is negotiating with the Kurds for one of its members, Adnan al-Janabi, to fill the post. This is being opposed by the Shiite parties, ostensibly due to Janabi’s family ties to Saddam Hussein’s inner circle. Instead, the UIA is pushing a Sunni who belongs to its ranks, Fawaz al-Jarba. It is possible no agreement will have been reached by Sunday, further delaying the formation of a government and the drafting of a new constitution.

The sordid dealings are serving to heighten the disgust felt by ordinary Iraqis for the National Assembly and to underscore the illegitimacy of the entire US-dictated

political process.

The Shiite parties have already abandoned their main election pledge—a deadline for the withdrawal of all US troops from Iraq. In an interview on March 2, Da’wa leader Jaffari said that any withdrawal now depended “on the security situation in Iraq”. Attempting to rationalise an indefinite US occupation, Jaffari stated: “We cannot protect ourselves and we cannot ask them [the US military] to leave since even with their presence we are still having problems and a challenge with the terrorists. If they leave the situation could really get worse, so we will ask them at the right time to leave the country”.

Neither the US occupation forces nor the local elite have any perspective to solve the catastrophic conditions that exist for ordinary Iraqis because of the invasion. Every aspect of the country’s infrastructure, from electricity, water and sanitation, to transport, education and health, is in a state of collapse. Unemployment remains at over 50 percent in most parts of Iraq.

This week, Jean Ziegler of the United Nations Human Rights Commission reported that acute malnutrition among Iraqi children had nearly doubled since the US invasion two years ago, from 4 percent to 7.7 percent. Overall, he reported, at least 25 percent of Iraqi children do not get enough to eat as “a result of the war led by coalition forces”.

Incapable of addressing the aspirations of ordinary Iraqis for decent living standards and an end to the US occupation, each of the competing factions of the Iraqi ruling class—Shiite, Sunni and Kurd—is responding to this disastrous state of affairs by stirring up divisive sectarian and ethnic sentiments. Contained in the impasse over the formation of a new government are the seeds of a descent into communal conflict and civil war.



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