

New puppet government takes shape in Iraq

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There was probably a sigh of relief in the US embassy in Baghdad and in the White House when Iraq's National Assembly finally elected a speaker on Sunday, setting the stage for Wednesday's installation of a new president. Haggling between the main winners of the January 30 election over the division of the political spoils has dragged on for weeks. Just last week the assembly's second attempt to choose a speaker ended in a debacle with politicians exchanging bitter public recriminations before the TV cameras were finally turned off.

By contrast, assembly members were on their best behaviour for Wednesday's formal proceedings. Jalal Talabani, a major figure in the Kurdistan Alliance (KA), was chosen as president. The KA, which is dominated by Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and rival Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), took just over 25 percent of the vote in January. Adel Abdul Mahdi, a leading figure in the Shiite-dominated United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) that won nearly 50 percent of the vote, and outgoing president Ghazi Yawar were installed as vice presidents.

Yawar, a Sunni, whose party won less than two percent of the vote after Sunnis overwhelmingly heeded calls for a boycott, was the immediate cause of last week's fiasco. He turned down the post of assembly speaker at the last minute and demanded a higher political price, upsetting the precarious balance that had been negotiated between the major parties. The UIA and KA, and presumably behind the scenes top US officials, had been attempting to find a Sunni politician to provide a façade of unity.

In the end, it was a process of elimination. Of the handful of Sunni assembly members, most have associations with the ousted Baathist regime and were vetoed by the UIA. Most of the remainder were UIA members and thus were unacceptable to the KA. When Yawar refused the job, it left only Hachim Hassani—an American-trained economist who spent two decades in the US before returning to Iraq after the invasion. His party—the Iraqi Islamic Party—expelled him last year when he refused resign his position as industry minister to protest against the US military's destruction of the city of Fallujah.

The assembly session of Wednesday was replete with empty rhetoric about the beginnings of a new, united democratic Iraq. "This is a new Iraq—an Iraq that elects a Kurd to be president and a former Arab president as his deputy. What more could the world want from us?" the speaker Hassani declared. The US embassy was obviously delighted with its handiwork. An American official told the *Los Angeles Times*: "We thought it was a very good day, and [Iraqis] should be very pleased."

But tensions were not far below the surface. Following the carefully scripted presidential election, a sharp exchange broke out

after Shiite deputies accused the outgoing administration of interim prime minister Ayad Allawi of accelerating the installation of former Baathist military officers and officials in top posts. Several called for Allawi to be censured and for all appointments made after the January 30 election to be invalidated.

Allawi, who was not at the assembly session, was defended by his deputy, Barham Saleh, a Kurd, who declared: "We should not treat the government as a defendant here." Then, as reported in the *Wall Street Journal*, he "blamed the US, which effectively controls Iraq's security institutions." This astonishing admission not only demonstrates the puppet character of the new government, but the absurdity of US denunciations of the former dictatorship. Having ousted Saddam Hussein, the US is now increasingly relying on Baathist officers and officials to carry on the work of the old regime—the ruthless suppression of any opposition.

Formally, the presidential commission, comprising the president and two vice-presidents, had two weeks to choose a prime minister and a cabinet for the assembly to approve. In fact, most of the arrangements had already been put in place as part of the complex negotiations between the UIA and KA over the filling of political posts. Kurdish leaders have been determined to exploit to the hilt their effective veto over the initial presidential choices, which require a two-thirds, rather than a simple majority.

Yesterday, leading UIA figure and head of the fundamentalist Dawa Party, Ibrahim al Jafari, was named prime minister. All the top cabinet posts—foreign affairs, defence, interior, finance and oil—have already been shared out between the competing ethnic and religious factions, but are yet to be announced. Control of the key oil ministry and its potentially lucrative benefits has been a bitter point of contention between Kurdish and Shiite leaders.

There is no guarantee that this laboriously constructed political house of cards will last for long. Its chief task is to formulate a new constitution by August, which, after approval by referendum, paves the way for fresh national elections early next year. But the drafting of a constitution will only raise in a sharper form all of the conflicting political interests that have held up the process of selecting a government.

None of the rival ethnic and religious factions has any solid base of support. All the major parties supported the illegal US-led invasion of Iraq and, in some cases, were on the US payroll for more than a decade. Incapable of meeting the genuine democratic aspirations of the Iraqi people or solving the country's horrific social crisis, these groups have deliberately stirred up sectarian and ethnic divisions as a means of shoring up support. The UIA and KA have each promoted the illusion that the US occupation presented an opportunity for the Shiites and Kurds, respectively, to

end historic subordination to the Sunni minority.

The UIA and KA do not represent the interests of working people but competing factions of a thoroughly venal Iraqi bourgeoisie. The newly installed president Jalal Talabani is a case in point. Under the banner of “Kurdish independence”, he has manoeuvred and conspired for decades with Iraq’s neighbours, with the imperialist powers including the US, and even with the Baathist regime, in an effort to carve out a dominant role for the PUK in north of Iraq.

The US-British imposition of a “no-fly zone” on northern Iraq following 1990-91 Gulf War enabled the PUK and KPD to establish an unprecedented measure of autonomy. When the two rivals were not fighting each other over territory and the profitable business of oil smuggling, they were scheming with foreign intelligence agencies, including the CIA and Mossad. The two parties fully backed the US invasion calculating that Washington’s backing was essential for securing Kurdish autonomy or even independence.

The issue has been at the centre of the latest political wrangling between the UIA and KA. The Shiite establishment calculates that it can exploit the country’s Shiite majority to assume political dominance throughout the country and is hostile to any concessions to Kurdish autonomy. The KA has sought to maximise the powers of the Kurdish regional government, including control over the Kurdish peshmerga militia.

A major bone of contention has been control over the northern city of Kirkuk and nearby oilfields, which are estimated to contain 6 percent of the world’s oil reserves. The KA is insisting that the region be incorporated into the autonomous Kurdish region. Bitter disputes have already broken out on the Kirkuk provincial council between the Kurdish majority and Arab, Turkmen and Assyrian minorities, who are challenging the legitimacy of the recent election.

Far from settling these disputes, the installation of a new government in Baghdad has simply set the stage for the next round of conflict. At the insistence of Kurdish parties, the so-called Transitional Administrative Law, drawn up by former US proconsul Paul Bremer, provides the KA with an effective veto over the government and the constitution. As president, Talabani can overrule any legislation passed in the national assembly, which then requires a two-thirds majority to pass it into law. The draft constitution can be rejected if a two-thirds majority in just three provinces vote against the enabling referendum.

The UIA and KA only agreed on the composition of a new government when it became evident that the protracted dispute was rapidly undermining what little credibility the parties had as a result of the election. The Shiite parties in particular had promoted the election as a means of ending the US occupation and improving living standards. Two months on, no government had been formed, let alone addressed the needs and aspirations of Iraqis.

Late last week the Shiite religious establishment in Najaf and Karbala began to sound the alarm bells and to threaten mass protests if there was any further delay in forming a government. Ali Rubaii, spokesman for Ayatollah Ishaq Fayadh, told the *Washington Post*: “If there was a choice for protests, the protests

wouldn’t be typical. They would be protests in the millions. In other countries, thousands of protesters can overthrow a government.”

Mohammed Hussein Hakim, a spokesman for Ayatollah Mohammed Saeed Hakim, warned: “The street [ordinary Iraqis] is uncomfortable. The people have paid a price for the sake of democracy. It is not possible to leave their sacrifices behind.” A senior ayatollah in Karbala, Mohammed Taqi Mudarassi, also underscored the highly volatile situation: “The political crisis will continue, and the result will perhaps be that Shiites will use the weapon of millions protesting. The street only needs a match.”

These comments only underscore the irresolvable problems that confront the new government which will not be able to live up to the illusions and hopes that were cultivated among ordinary Iraqis during the elections campaign. The continuing armed resistance against US forces and their Iraqi accomplices is just one indication of the fact that many Iraqis regard any government formed under US occupation as an illegitimate puppet regime.

In an article entitled “The Gates of Hell are open in Iraq” in the British-based *Guardian* on April 1, Jawad al-Halisi, secretary general of the Iraqi National Foundation Congress, wrote: “The US-British occupation of Iraq is poisoning all political processes in my country and across the Middle East. The elections held under the control of the occupying forces in January were neither free nor fair. Instead of being a step towards solving Iraq’s problems, they have been used to prolong foreign rule over the Iraqi people. Only when the occupiers withdraw from the country can Iraq take the first secure steps towards peace and stability.”

These sentiments are certainly broadly felt inside Iraq itself and point to deepening opposition to the US occupation and its Iraqi collaborators.



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