Who is Iraq's new prime minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari?

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On April 7, Ibrahim al-Jaafari, a leading member of the Islamic fundamentalist Daawa Party and the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), was installed as Iraq's new prime minister to lead the government being formed following the January 30 elections. The 58-year-old is likely to unveil his cabinet in the next two weeks.

Jaafari's government will only hold power until the final stages of the US-dictated reorganisation of the Iraqi state are completed. A new Iraqi constitution is to be drafted by the national assembly by August; a referendum is then to be held to adopt the constitution; and new elections are to be held in January 2006. The primary responsibility of Jaafari's "transitional government" will be to work with the US occupation forces to root out and crush resistance to the transformation of Iraq into an American client state in the Middle East.

The UIA holds a majority of 140 seats in the 275-seat national assembly and had made clear it wanted one of its own as head of government. The selection of Jaafari is the outcome of the protracted negotiations between the UIA and other major assembly faction, the Kurdish coalition, over the division of power, and, at least in outline, the character of a new constitution.

Of the main UIA figures, Jaafari is the most acceptable to both the Kurdish nationalists and the Bush administration. He is one of the closest political confidants of the leading Shiite cleric, Ali al-Sistani, who exerts considerable influence on the UIA. Jaafari is also considered a less radical advocate of Islamic law than the leaders of the other major UIA party, the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). Jaafari is expected to argue for compromise on any reference to Islam in a constitution, in exchange for the Kurds modifying their demands for greater control over Iraq's northern oil fields and the city of Kirkuk.

In US circles, Jaafari is viewed as far less tied to the Iranian regime than the SCIRI leadership. A comment in the British-based *Telegraph* this month by an unnamed White House official summed up Washington's assessment of Jaafari: "He [Jaafari] is our boy, not Iran's."

Reassuring Washington is the fact that Jaafari has been one of the most consistent Shiite advocates of US troops remaining in Iraq. In an interview with Associated Press in February, he declared "security" was the "top" issue that had to be dealt with by the next government and described calls for the withdrawal of American forces as a "mistake".

The most striking feature of Jaafari's statements in recent weeks has been his attempt to portray his ambitions for political power as part of a struggle for "democracy". As he accepted the prime ministership, he told journalists: "This day for me means a new democratic era in Iraq. It is one of the most important moments in the new democratic process in our country."

The obvious points need to be made. The so-called "democratic era" has been ushered in, not by the self-activity of the Iraqi masses, but by the invasion and occupation of Iraq by US imperialism. A guerilla war of resistance continues to rage across entire parts of the country. A significant proportion of the Iraqi population, particularly among the Sunni Muslim communities, refused to vote in the January elections because the poll was held under the presence of 150,000 foreign troops. The UIA, which won a majority under these conditions, has already repudiated the main policy that drew millions of Shiites to the ballot box to vote for it—a timetable for the withdrawal of all US and foreign forces.

The elections, in other words, were an affront to democracy. Even before Jaafari's illegitimate "transitional government" is formed, tens of thousands of Iraqis, many of whom may well have voted for the UIA, have recently demonstrated in Baghdad against the ongoing occupation.

More fundamentally, however, the entire history of both Jaafari and his party, Daawa or the Islamic Call, is bound up with fighting for the narrow interests of the Shiite elites in the southern regions of Iraq.

The formation of Daawa in 1958 was the response of the Shiite clergy to the growth of socialist and secular conceptions among the Iraqi working class. By the late 1950s, the Stalinist Iraqi Communist Party (ICP), despite its counterrevolutionary program, had become a major political force among the Iraqi masses. Large numbers of workers and peasants viewed the Stalinists as the vehicle for social progress. One of the social layers where socialist ideas had taken root was the largely Shiite urban poor in cities such as Baghdad and Basra, among whom the authority of the clergy had diminished considerably.

The economic and social position of the Shiite clergy depends upon the flow of tribute into the mosques from a compliant population and also a degree of theocratic influence over commercial activity. The stated aim of Daawa—to combat "atheism"—flowed from these material interests. Daawa's perspective was to destroy the workers' movement. From its inception, in other words, the party was hostile to the struggles of Iraqis for an end to colonial and semi-feudal oppression.

For all their subsequent denunciation of Baathism, the Shiite clergy and Daawa were among the driving forces for the bloodbath that followed the 1963 military coup in Iraq. In a catastrophe with parallels to Suharto's takeover in Indonesia in 1965-66, military and Baathist death squads murdered, imprisoned or drove into exile thousands of socialist-minded Iraqi workers and intellectuals. Throughout the slaughter, the military and the Baathists had Daawa's support.

In the wake of the 1963 coup, Daawa grew considerably. Despite a ban on all political parties, the military regime repaid Daawa's support for the anti-communist purges by doing did little to hinder the Shiite fundamentalists from developing a network of schools and study groups. This was the organisation that Jaafari, the son of a Shiite mosque caretaker in Karbala, joined in 1966 at the age of 19.

While Daawa's public agitation was primarily directed against communism, its barely concealed goal was enhancing the wealth and position of the Shiite clergy by the establishment of a state based on Islamic law. Among the most prominent Shiite theoreticians in Iraq at the time was Iranian exile Ruhullah Khomeini, who was placed in power in Iran by the 1979 overthrow of the Shah.

These interests come into conflict with those of the Baath Party, which

came to power in a coup in July 1968, after a largely token period of illegality. Representing the interests of the traditional Sunni elite and the military officer caste, the agenda of the Baathists was the nationalisation of the Iraqi oil industry and—with the working class repressed—to crush the threat posed by both the Kurdish nationalist movement in the north and Shiite fundamentalists in the south.

Within months of the Baathist coup, Daawa's activities came under persecution. The regime closed Islamic schools and demanded that Shiite clerics declare their loyalty to the state. After a decade of tensions, the 1979 Iranian Revolution brought the conflict between the Baath Party and Daawa to a head. Daawa's founder, Baqir al-Sadr, declared support for the theocracy being erected in Iran by his colleague Ayatollah Khomeini and issued a religious ruling prohibiting any Shiite from belonging to the Baath Party.

In April 1980, the Baathists, now headed by Saddam Hussein, moved to destroy the fundamentalists as the regime prepared for war against Iran. After an assassination attempt on Iraqi foreign minister Tariq Aziz, al-Sadr was murdered and membership of Daawa made a crime punishable by death. Thousands of Daawa members were arrested and executed in the massive crackdown that followed.

Jaafari, along with other members of the Daawa movement, fled into exile in Iran. In September 1980, the Iraqi military invaded Iran, beginning an horrendous eight-year war.

The war provoked a series of conflicts among the Iraqi fundamentalist exiles. As was the case with Daawa's founding, however, the issues did not concern the democratic aspirations of the Iraqi people. They centred on two related questions: how closely should the Iraqi Shiite movement identify itself with the Iranian regime; and whether the clergy would have a direct political and judicial role in an Iraqi state controlled by the Shiite establishment.

The war demonstrated that there was no mass constituency in Iraq for a Shiite-based religious regime—especially one that was directed from Tehran. However opposed they were to the rule of Saddam Hussein, Iraqi Shiites treated the appeals of the Iranian theocracy and the fundamentalist exiles for a religiously-motivated rebellion with contempt and hostility.

Within Daawa, the failure of the war to ignite a mass Shiite movement against Hussein produced a split. In 1982, an openly pro-Iranian faction broke away to form SCIRI. Numbers of fundamentalist Iraqi Shiites enlisted in SCIRI's armed wing, the Badr Brigade, and actively fought alongside the Iranian military against the Iraqi forces. Another breakaway turned to terrorism against the United States and the various pro-US Middle Eastern regimes.

Jaafari states that he supported neither. In 1989, he left Iran and moved to Britain. He emerged there as the spokesman for a tendency within Daawa that argued against an Iranian state model, largely on the grounds that a political role for the clergy would alienate the Shiite population in Iraq. This position, dubbed "quietism", was shared by leading clerics within Iraq such as al-Sistani.

Jaafari's faction began to consolidate its influence following the 1990-91 US-led Gulf War against Iraq. Calls by the first Bush administration for a rebellion against Hussein's regime were greeted with spontaneous anti-Baathist rebellions by Kurds in the north and by Shiites in the major southern cities, particularly in Baghdad, Basra and the Shiite holy cities of Najaf and Karbala. Shiite clerics along with Daawa and SCIRI attempted to come the head of the uprising.

The Shiites had expected that they would receive US assistance. The Bush administration, however, worried by the seizure of dozens of Iraqi cities by a mass movement it did not control, and particularly alarmed at the influence of pro-Iranian factions such as SCIRI, ordered the US military to stand aside while the remains of the Iraqi armed forces crushed rebellions. Tens of thousands Shiites were slaughtered in the massive purges that followed.

Among millions of Iraqi Shiites, the betrayal of the 1991 uprisings left a legacy of distrust for US imperialism that persists to this day. The response of Jaafari and Daawa was the opposite. They concluded that the only way to realise the ambitions of the Shiite elite was to convince Washington they were not a threat to American strategic and economic interests in the Middle East. From 1992 on, the London-based branch of Daawa led by Jaafari sought out "unofficial contact" with the US and, on several occasions, sent delegates to US-sponsored conferences on the prospects for overthrowing Hussein.

While Daawa's official position right up until the 2003 invasion was for the overthrow of Hussein's regime without "foreign interference", it actively participated in discussions with the US on a post-invasion regime. In January 2003, Jaafari travelled to the US for high-level meetings with the Bush administration over Daawa's role. While the exact nature of the discussions is unclear, Jaafari was among the first prominent exiles to return to Iraq following the fall of the Baathist regime and was immediately taken into high-level talks with the occupation forces.

Jaafari, Daawa, and the Shiite clergy around Sistani, actively supported the US occupation. Again, their decision was against the democratic will of the population. The majority of Iraqis did not greet the invasion forces as "liberators" and were hostile to both the presence of foreign troops and to the pro-US exiles such as Ahmed Chalabi and Iyad Allawi.

A resistance movement emerged on a scale that the US military had not anticipated. The heir of Baqir al-Sadr, cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, had a widespread following among the Shiite urban poor and youth on the basis of anti-Baathism, anti-imperialism, Iraqi nationalism and reactionary demands for Islamic law and morality. The danger confronting the occupation in 2003 was that the guerilla war would be joined by a Shiite uprising in the major cities, particularly Baghdad.

In opposition to al-Sadr, Jaafari and the clerical hierarchy argued that collaboration with the US occupation could deliver far more gains than any struggle against it. In July 2003, when the so-called Iraqi Governing Council was selected and installed by the US administrator of Iraq, Paul Bremer, Jaafari was named as the first "president".

There has been no lack of disputes between the Shiite clergy and fundamentalist parties with the US occupation over the past two years. At the centre of all the differences, however, has been the ambition of the Shiite elite to take advantage of the US invasion to lever themselves into the dominant positions of power within Iraq.

In early 2004, Daawa and Sistani called thousands into the streets to protest against the US opposition to direct elections, which they saw as an attempt by the occupation to deprive the Shiite parties of control of the "transitional government". In March 2004, they refused to sign the US-drafted "interim constitution" until an explicit reference to Islamic law was included. They also temporarily demanded the removal of a clause that enables a vote in three provinces to block the adoption of a constitution. This was seen as giving the three Kurdish provinces the ability to veto a document drafted by a Shiite-dominated assembly.

The underlying indifference of the Shiite establishment toward the sentiments of the population was highlighted from April to September 2004, when Sadr's movement was finally pushed by US repression into taking up arms against the occupation. Neither Daawa, SCIRI nor Sistani gave any practical or political support to the Shiite youth fighting the US military in Baghdad, Karbala or Najaf.

Likewise, Daawa also refused to denounce the US razing of Fallujah in November 2004, fueling Sunni fundamentalist sectarian agitation that the Shiite population was supporting the occupation.

The history of Daawa, and the past two years in particular, have underscored the venality of the Shiite elite represented by Jaafari. At every turn its political manoeuvring has been guided by an ambition for a greater share of Iraq's resources and wealth, at the expense of the needs and aspirations of ordinary Iraqis.

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