

Shiite factions clash as opposition mounts to the draft Iraqi constitution

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The Bush administration has continued to maintain the lies that the adoption of a constitution will be a step toward democracy and stability in Iraq. The arm-twisting by US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and backroom horse-trading over the draft constitution, all carried out behind the backs of the Iraqi people, has exposed the first lie. The extensive clashes between rival Shiite factions across southern Iraq in the past two days, provoked in large measure by the draft constitution, have undermined the second.

As many as 3,000 militiamen of the Mahdi Army, which fought major battles against the US military in April and August 2004, took up defensive positions around the residence of their leader Moqtada al-Sadr in the city of Najaf yesterday. Thousands more have mobilised in the working class suburb of Sadr City in Baghdad, where Sadr has support among the Shiite urban poor, and in cities and towns across southern Iraq.

The trigger for the return to arms was the burning down of Sadrist offices in Najaf on Wednesday by a mob loyal to the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), one of the main Shiite factions in the pro-occupation Iraqi government. Over the following hours, Sadrist militiamen fought running gun battles with SCIRI loyalists and local police, many of whom are members of SCIRI's Iranian-trained Badr Brigade militia.

Najaf, the site of the holiest shrine of the Shiite faith, the Shrine of Ali Mosque, is just one of numerous areas where a power struggle for political influence has been taking place since the March 2003 invasion between the Sadrists and the pro-occupation Shiite factions. The current fighting rapidly spread to Basra, Amarah, Nasiriyah, Hillah, Samawah, Diwaniyah, Baqubah and Baghdad, where the Mahdi Army attacked three SCIRI offices and an office of the other Shiite fundamentalist party in the government, the Da'awa movement led by Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari.

In the parliament, 21 legislators linked to the Sadrists, including the transport minister, walked out of the government. A Sadrist leader in Baghdad declared: "We condemn the shameful attack on our office in Najaf and know it is the work of the Badr organisation, which came back to Iraq on American tanks." Another declared there would be "a general call to arms" if SCIRI did not apologise.

The interior minister Bayan Bakar Solagh, a senior SCIRI member, imposed a curfew on Najaf and hundreds of police commandos were rushed to the city from Baghdad to stand between the Sadrists and the SCIRI loyalists. Jaafari abandoned

meetings on the constitution to make a televised condemnation of the attack on the Sadrists and appeal for calm. The head of the Badr organisation, Hadi al-Amry, also issued a statement denouncing the attack and denying responsibility.

Sadr, who appears to have had little direct control over the eruption of anger, made his own call for calm yesterday, appealing for his supporters to "return to their homes". Nevertheless, heavy fighting broke again in Baqubah. For the first time since the negotiation of a ceasefire with the Sadrists in Najaf last August, US helicopters and troops were deployed against the Mahdi Army.

Urgent meetings have reportedly taken place between government representatives and Sadr to try to prevent an escalation in tensions. The volatility, however, is such that another outbreak of violence could occur at any time. The US-led invasion of Iraq, and the neo-colonial manner in which Washington has proceeded to establish an American puppet state, has unleashed social forces that the Bush administration does not understand and cannot control.

The invasion of Iraq was an illegal and predatory war. It was carried out to realise the long-held ambitions of the US ruling elite for direct control over the second largest oil reserves in the world and permanent military bases in the Middle East from which US imperialism can dominate the entire region. The conquest was justified with lies that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction and carried out in open defiance of international law.

Since then the White House has sought to portray the opposition to the occupation as reflecting only the bitterness of the Sunni elite that held the main levers of power and privilege under the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. This is not the case. However deep their hatred of the Baathists, the vast majority of the Iraqi people did not greet the US invasion force as "liberators".

Organisations like SCIRI and Da'awa and the leading Shiite cleric Ali al-Sistani were compelled to promote the illusion that Shiite control over the government in Baghdad would bring about both the withdrawal of all foreign troops and improvements in the living standards of the masses.

These were the main promises in the platform of the Shiite United Iraqi Alliance, which, under conditions of a boycott of the election this January by most Sunnis, won a majority of seats in the parliament. Just over six months after the vote, however, Jaafari's government has repudiated any demand for a timetable for a US withdrawal, while the social conditions facing millions of people have deteriorated sharply.

Far from ushering in a new era of democratic rights, SCIRI and Da'awa are using the control they have established over the interior ministry and various provincial police forces to carry out a reign of terror against their political opponents. The Kurdish nationalist parties that form the other bloc in the government are carrying out a similar agenda in the north of Iraq. In a detailed account published on August 21, the *Washington Post* reported assassinations, arbitrary detentions and widespread intimidation, all taking place with the connivance of the US-led occupation forces.

A human rights official in northern Iraq stated bluntly: "I don't see any difference between Saddam and the way the Kurds are running things here."

As a consequence, the hatred felt toward the occupation and opposition to the factions participating in the government have grown. In July, the Sadrist movement collected one million signatures in just three weeks on a petition demanding the immediate withdrawal of all foreign troops. This month, Sadr supporters in Samawah led a demonstration of several thousand demanding the resignation of the provincial governor and the immediate provision of jobs, electricity and water. The SCIRI-controlled local police gunned down two demonstrators, provoking a battle with Mahdi Army militiamen in the area.

Confronted with growing opposition to the US-led occupation both in Iraq and at home in the US, the Bush administration has resorted to the old principle of the British Empire—divide and rule. Over the past month, ambassador Khalilzad has backed the demands of the Shiite fundamentalist and Kurdish parties for a sectarian constitution that entrenches their power at the expense of their rivals and the Iraqi people as a whole.

If the constitution were endorsed in a referendum on October 15—which seems increasingly unlikely—it would facilitate the establishment of the oil-rich areas of the north and south of Iraq as Kurdish and Shiite-dominated federal regions, with considerable powers over the distribution of both current and future oil revenues.

In exchange for the federal system, the *quid pro quo* offered by the Kurdish and Shiite parties is that they will assist the US military suppress the armed resistance and legitimise the network of "enduring" US military bases being constructed in Iraq. General Peter Schoomaker confirmed this week that the Pentagon has already drawn up the troop rotations to ensure a 100,000-strong force is available each year for deployment until 2009. Moreover, the draft constitution explicitly sanctions the other main US objective in Iraq—the sell-off of the oil industry to US corporate interests and the free market restructuring of the economy.

The federalist constitution is a direct threat to the resource-poor provinces of Iraq where the majority of Sunni Muslims live, alongside millions of Iraqis of other ethnic and religious groups. It raises the obvious danger of a formal break-up of the country and the reduction of the central and western region to a poverty-stricken mini-state.

In the south, SCIRI has declared its intention to seek the formation of a region consisting of as many as nine provinces, centred on Basra and the southern oilfields. Such an autonomous state would take in half of Iraq's territory and half its population,

and deprive the central Iraqi government of control over more than 50 percent of the country's known oil and gas reserves.

In the north, federalism directly threatens large numbers of Arabs and Turkomen with the prospect of being incorporated into a region ruled by Kurdish parties that have already been accused of carrying out ethnic cleansing around the city of Kirkuk.

A virtual Kurdish statelet consisting of Iraq's three northern provinces already exists. The constitution effectively creates the conditions for the Kurdish bourgeoisie to take the oil-rich province of Al Tamim as well. It sets a deadline of 2007 for tens of thousands of Arabs who were settled in Kirkuk under the previous regime to be forced out, and Kurds who were forced out by Hussein moved back in. Once the Kurdish population is a majority in the province, a referendum to "join" the Kurdish region would undoubtedly be called.

The backlash of opposition against the occupation and the parties responsible for drafting the constitution is gathering momentum. Yesterday, a range of Sunni and Shiite organisations, ethnic Turkomen political parties, secular organisations such as the Iraqi Communist Party and women's associations issued statements opposing various aspects of the constitution.

Sadr declared the document "not acceptable". Hadi al-Khalisi, the head of another Baghdad-based Shiite movement, condemned media reports that suggested Shiite Iraqis supported the division of the country. He told Al Jazeera on Thursday: "Presenting the case in this way is a foreign plot to divide the nation. Let us put it in other words: Followers of the occupation and the government of the occupation want the constitution, and Iraqi nationalists including Shia and Sunni do not want it."

Against this backdrop, the parliament failed to meet a third deadline to ratify a constitution. The speaker of parliament declared last night that the draft constitution may not be voted on in parliament at all but simply put to a referendum on October 15.



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