

Moqtada al-Sadr refuses to call for a no vote on Iraqi constitution

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After weeks of condemning the US-vetted draft constitution, Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr has refused to call on his hundreds of thousands of supporters to vote no in this Saturday's referendum in Iraq. Instead, as he did in the lead-up to the elections in January, Sadr has taken an abstentionist position. In a statement issued to the media on the weekend, one of Sadr's leading spokesmen declared that the cleric's advice to his followers was that "everyone should consult his sheik or reference".

Sadr's stance is a direct service to both the Bush administration and the wing of the Shiite establishment that has openly collaborated with the US occupation of Iraq since the 2003 invasion. The refusal of the Sadrists to provide any direction puts considerable pressure on Shiites to take as their "reference" the country's leading cleric, Ali al-Sistani, who issued an edict calling for a yes vote on October 15. The Shiite fundamentalist organisations that dominate the Iraqi government—the Da'awa Party of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari and the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI)—were the key players in drawing up the draft document and are aggressively pushing for its adoption.

Sadr's decision does not rule out the possibility that the constitution could be rejected. A no vote by two-thirds of voters in just three of Iraq's 18 provinces is all that is required. The votes of Sunni Arabs and ethnic Turkomen, among whom there is considerable opposition to the constitution, may reach the necessary margin in four central and western Iraqi provinces—Anbar, Ninawa, Diyala and Salah al Din. The prominent Baghdad-based Shiite cleric Jawad al-Khalesi, whose statements against the US occupation have often paralleled those of the Sadrists, is explicitly calling for a no vote.

If Sadr had openly opposed the referendum weeks ago, the balance of forces today could have been different. Sunni organisations made clear they wanted a united front with the Sadrists against the constitution as soon it was endorsed by the Iraqi president. Over 100,000 Shiite supporters of Sadr took part in demonstrations in August against the document, denouncing it as a recipe for the sectarian division and indefinite colonial domination of the Iraqi people. There is little doubt a concerted campaign involving the Sadrists would have galvanised opposition across the predominantly Shiite south.

The guiding principle of the draft constitution, which US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad played a major role in negotiating, is divide-and-rule. It will enable the establishment of federal

regions in the oil-rich north and south of the country under the control of the Kurdish nationalist and Shiite fundamentalist parties. This de-facto partition will deliver greater political power to these factions, including a dominant share of oil revenues and the right to maintain their own regional "security forces". In exchange, they have agreed to constitutional clauses stipulating the free market restructuring of the economy, the oil industry in particular. US-based corporations will be the main beneficiary.

The Sunni elites, who predominantly live in the central and western provinces and enjoyed a relatively privileged position under the former Baathist regime, are being sidelined. With the US-led military forces using mass repression against the numerous Sunni insurgent groups, and organisations like Al Qaeda carrying out attacks on Shiite civilians, the fighting in Iraq is increasingly taking on the character of a sectarian civil war.

In this context, Sadr's position on the referendum is a clear retreat from appeals in the aftermath of the US invasion for the unity of all Iraqis against the occupation. After calling for national armed resistance to the US forces on two occasions in 2004, the Sadrist leadership is adopting a similar policy to that pursued by Da'awa and SCIRI—exploiting the occupation to leverage greater privilege for a layer of the Shiite elite. Sadr loyalists are already members of the government and the movement intends to run a large slate of candidates in the elections due to be held by December 15 if the constitution is ratified.

The Sadrists may even contest the ballot in an alliance with the Iraqi National Congress of Ahmed Chalabi, the CIA-financed exile and con-man whose lies about "weapons of mass destruction" were used to justify the invasion. Sadr has also held recent talks with Jaafari and SCIRI leaders, and it is expected his supporters will continue to participate alongside them in the next government.

The gradual coming together of the Sadrists with the other Shiite fundamentalist parties is not accidental. They all share the same origins and a similar perspective. They are off-shoots of the original Da'awa, or Islamic Call, formed in 1958 amid the overthrow of the Iraqi monarchy to seek a greater political role for the Shiite religious establishment. One of its principal founders was Baqir al-Sadr, the uncle of Moqtada.

The Shiite clerics of Iraq have been marginalised by a secular state, dominated by the long-established Sunni ruling elite. From the very formation of Iraq following World War I out of three provinces of the Turkish Ottoman Empire, the British colonial authority worked to split Shiite tribal landowners and businessmen

away from the clergy with economic concessions and secular political rights.

In his book *The Shi'is of Iraq*, author Yitzhak Nakash noted: “While seeking to undermine the power of the mujtahids [the religious establishment], the state offered political and economic incentives to the big shaykhs [tribal landowners], who were for the most part Shi’is, turning them into a player in national politics.” The policy was continued by the Sunni-based monarchy that was installed by the British after 1932.

The focus of Da’awa agitation after the monarchy’s overthrow was to combat the influence of socialist and pan-Arab nationalist ideas among Iraqi Shiites, which undermined their allegiance to the clergy. Baqir al-Sadr authored works denouncing Marxism and advocating the establishment of a Shiite-dominated Islamic state in Iraq. In 1963, Da’awa supported the massacre of thousands of members of the Stalinist Communist Party by the military and Baath Party death squads.

Da’awa’s attempts to extend the influence of the Shiite clergy, however, brought it into conflict with the nationalist and secular Baathists, who, backed by key factions of the traditional Sunni establishment, took power in 1968. In 1980, Saddam Hussein ordered the full-scale suppression of the Iraqi fundamentalists following the coming to power of the Shiite theocracy in Iran. Baqir al-Sadr was murdered and thousands of Da’awa members executed or forced to flee into exile.

The divergence between Da’awa and what became the Sadrist movement emerged over the following two decades. Moqtada al-Sadr’s father, Sadeq, remained in Iraq after 1980 and built up a large following in the densely-populated working class districts of Baghdad.

Fundamentalism took root primarily due to the discrediting of the Communist Party, which once had broad support among the Iraqi working class of all backgrounds—Sunni, Shiite and Kurdish. Following the repression of the 1960s, the CP opportunistically backed the Baath regime in the 1970s—only to once more face a state purge. The Sadrists exploited disaffection with the Stalinists and won support among opponents to the Baath dictatorship with vague promises that an Islamic state would deliver justice and improved living standards.

In the 1990s, the Sadrists also used anti-imperialist slogans and appeals to Iraqi nationalism to capitalise on hostility to the US-led Gulf War, Washington’s betrayal of the Shiite uprising in 1991 and the subsequent UN economic sanctions.

As a movement, the Sadrists operated largely independently of both the official Shiite clerical hierarchy and the clandestine Da’awa and SCIRI cells that continued to function in parts of southern Iraq. In 1999, fearful of his growing influence, the Baathists assassinated Sadeq al-Sadr and his two eldest sons. Moqtada al-Sadr, then only in his mid-20s and with no established religious credentials, became the titular head of the network of charities, schools and clerical supporters developed by his father.

The 2003 US invasion enabled Da’awa and SCIRI to re-enter Iraq, along with SCIRI’s 10,000-strong Iranian-trained Badr Brigade militia, and assume prominence across much of southern Iraq. Their decision to cooperate with the occupation was endorsed by Sistani. Sections of the Sadrist movement, however, viewed the

exile Shiite parties with suspicion due to their years in Iran and opposed their collaboration with the US invaders. They also considered them as a threat to the authority they had established in key Shiite areas of the country. The Sadrists renamed the main Shiite district of Baghdad “Sadr City” and formed their own militia—the Mahdi Army—to protect their position.

Throughout 2003, the Sadrists directly appealed to the resentment toward the occupation among the Iraqi people in order to extend their influence within the Shiite population at the expense of Da’awa and SCIRI. Ultimately, it brought the movement into open conflict with the US military.

Sadr’s call for an uprising in April 2004 was primarily the outcome of the US decision to illegalise the Sadrists and arrest its main leadership. In response, the Sadrists attempted to seize control of the main Shiite shrines in Karbala and Najaf and use them as a bargaining chip in negotiations toward a ceasefire. The Mahdi Army suffered thousands of casualties and both cities suffered serious damage during US offensives. The fighting was ended in September, however, by a truce arranged with Sistani. The agreement removed the ban on the Sadrist movement and permitted it to operate openly, provided it laid down its arms.

Since the ceasefire, Sadr has deferred to Sistani’s control over the Shiite shrines. Moreover, Sadr has instructed his supporters to avoid armed clashes with either the US military or government forces. Where conflict has occurred, the Sadrist leadership has rapidly brought it to an end so as to not disrupt its relations with the US-created state.

Further conflicts between the Sadrists and the occupation are of course entirely possible, as are splits and ruptures within its ranks. The movement is comprised of heterogeneous elements—from sections of the Iraqi elite, to fundamentalist clerics, to thousands of workers and unemployed in the major cities—who have divergent grievances and aspirations.

The Sadrists exemplify, however, the incapacity of any layer of the bourgeoisie or petty-bourgeoisie in Iraq, even the seemingly most radical, to conduct any consistent struggle against imperialism. Their opposition to both the Baath regime and the US occupation reflected the social interests of a stratum of the Shiite elite that was marginalised. Having secured a place within the framework of the occupation, Sadr and the upper echelons of his movement are increasingly antagonistic toward the opposition of their working class supporters to the nightmarish conditions the US invasion has produced.

Hence, their refusal to call for a vote against the constitution.



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