

US machinations in Iraq delay formation of government

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More than six weeks after the December 15 election, and two weeks after the results were announced, there is still no new government in Iraq and one may not be formed for months. The election has produced a parliament divided along sectarian and ethnic lines and with no faction having a majority.

The parties most clearly identified with the US occupation suffered a debacle. The Iraqi National Congress of Ahmed Chalabi, who helped the Bush administration to fabricate many of its claims that the Hussein regime was assembling “weapons of mass destruction,” did not win a single seat. In the lead-up to the election, Chalabi was touted in sections of the US media as a potential prime minister.

The Iraqi National List led by longtime CIA asset Iyad Allawi—who was installed by the Bush administration as Iraq’s interim prime minister in 2004—won only 25 of the 275 seats despite a massive advertising campaign and barely concealed US backing.

The Shiite fundamentalist United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), which dominates the existing transitional government of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari, won 128 seats. The UIA seats were won primarily in Baghdad and the southern provinces where the majority of the population is Shiite.

The largest faction within the UIA is the Iranian-aligned Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), with Jaafari’s Da’awa movement gaining a smaller number of seats. SCIRI is calling for al-Jaafari to be replaced with one of its most prominent leaders, current vice-president Adel Abdul Mahdi. SCIRI has also insisted that it be given the main security ministries—defence and interior.

The large UIA vote in Baghdad was mainly due to the participation of supporters of the cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. The Sadrist movement took up arms against the US military in 2004 but subsequently joined the Shiite establishment in collaborating with the occupation in exchange for political posts and privileges. It has generally kept its mass base of support among Shiite workers and urban poor, however, by populist rhetoric against the US presence in the country and its denunciations of the tremendous poverty and deprivation confronting most Iraqis.

During the campaign, the Sadrists threatened to issue a call for armed resistance unless Washington agreed to a deadline for the withdrawal of all US troops. The Sadrist tendency is believed to hold at least 30 of the UIA seats and is demanding five ministries in the next cabinet. Another grouping that contested the election

apart from the UIA but is aligned with Sadr won a further two seats for the Shiite fundamentalists, giving them 130 seats—eight short of a simple majority.

The Kurdish nationalist parties won 53 seats in Iraq’s northern provinces, which they rule as an autonomous state and are seeking to expand to include Iraq’s main northern oil-producing region. No party based on support for maintaining the Iraqi nation-state won a single seat in the Kurdish areas. The Kurdish Islamic Union capitalised on growing discontent with the main Kurdish parties to win five seats.

In the central and western provinces of Iraq, where the bulk of the country’s Sunni Muslim population live and where the main armed resistance to the occupation is taking place, 44 seats were won by the Iraqi Accordance Front, an alliance sponsored by the main umbrella organisation of Sunni clerics, the Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS). The Iraqi Front for National Dialogue (IFND), which is largely a front for supporters of the former Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein and sections of the resistance movement, won 11 seats.

Turnout was high across the Sunni areas, in contrast to the elections in January 2005. Responding to calls by the AMS and the resistance for a boycott, less than 10 percent of Sunnis voted in that poll. This time, concerned at the domination of the Shiite and Kurdish blocs, the Sunni elite called for participation.

The obvious combination of parties to form a new government is the present coalition between the UIA and the Kurdish nationalists. The constitution drafted under US occupation requires a two-thirds majority in the parliament to nominate the president and two vice-presidents, who are responsible for naming the prime minister and his cabinet. With the support of several smaller parties, the UIA and the Kurdish parties have the requisite numbers to form a government that would marginalise the Sunni formations and Allawi’s supporters—as they did following the transitional election in January 2005.

Little progress has been made, however. Demonstrating the Bush administration’s contempt toward democracy in Iraq, the impasse is primarily the product of US demands that individuals preferred in Washington be installed into key cabinet posts and that the Shiite parties accept a form of grand coalition, which would include leading Sunni politicians.

US concerns centre on two potential consequences of another Shiite fundamentalist-Kurdish coalition. Firstly, it would harden the conviction among Sunnis that the US occupation is directed

against them. For all intentional purposes, a civil war is already raging in Iraq. The US-equipped and largely Shiite and Kurdish army and police force are fighting alongside American troops against a largely Sunni guerilla movement. US casualties are consistently averaging two dead and a dozen wounded per day. Washington hopes that placing elements of the Sunni elite in the government will split and weaken the insurgency.

The second concern in Washington is the religious and political links between the Iraqi Shiite formations and the Iranian fundamentalist regime, which is the target of growing US provocations and implicit threats of military attack.

According to Sadrist spokesman Sahib Amiri, cited in the *Washington Post* on January 24, Moqtada al-Sadr pledged to the Iranian regime that “if any Islamic state, especially the Islamic Republic of Iran, is attacked, the Mahdi Army [the Sadrist militia] would fight inside and outside Iraq”. Moreover, there are real concerns in US circles that Sadrist and SCIRI supporters would take up arms, with or without a call by their political leaders.

Joseph Cirinione, an Iraq expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, told the *Washington Post*: “If there was an attack on Iran, even a limited military strike, this would provoke anger through the Muslim world. It would certainly jeopardise the already fragile position of the United States in Iraq. Whether that would mean an uprising, direct military clashes or simply demands that the United States leave Iraq, we don’t know. But it won’t be good.”

The Bush administration has depended heavily on Shiite parties to prop up the occupation. From the time of the March 2003 invasion, the Shiite fundamentalists have collaborated with the US military to suppress the guerilla war being fought in the predominantly Sunni Muslim areas of the country. In doing so these groups have sought to enhance the position of the Shiite religious and business establishment, at the expense of the largely Sunni ruling elite that held power under the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein.

The Shiites parties have also worked to suppress opposition among the majority Shiite population over the military occupation and the catastrophic living standards in Iraq. From April to September 2004, leading Shiite clerics such as Ali al-Sistani as well as SCIRI and Da’awa refused to support the Sadrist movement when it took up arms against the occupying forces.

In the wake of the fighting against the Sadrists across southern Iraq, the US shifted its policy in early 2005 from seeking to create a state based on figures such as Allawi, to encouraging the Shiite fundamentalists to take the key government positions.

Jaafari was named as prime minister while the interior ministry was given to Bayan Jabr, the former head of SCIRI’s Iranian-trained armed wing, the Badr Brigade. There is overwhelming evidence that, under his direction, a US-initiated dirty war of death squads and torture has been dramatically stepped up against the Sunni population, in order to terrorise opponents of the occupation into submission.

Throughout last year, both SCIRI and the Sadrists flooded the Iraqi security forces with members of their militias. Entire battalions of the new Iraqi Army are made up of SCIRI loyalists. Thousands of the police in the Baghdad suburb of Sadr City,

Basra, Amarra and other cities are thought to be members of the Mahdi Army.

The US ambassador in Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, is now working behind the scenes to try to have the Shiite formations stripped of their control over the security ministries. According to the *Los Angeles Times* on January 21, US officials “have offered Iraqi leaders a list of more than a dozen former Iraqi military officers they would like to be considered for the defence and interior posts”—in other words, former members of the Sunni-dominated military officer caste that carried out the mass repression of Shiites under the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Citing an unnamed US official, the newspaper commented that the perception among Shiites was that Khalilzad was conducting a “campaign to deprive them of the fruits of victory”. The official told the *Los Angeles Times*: “We want them [the Shiite parties] to end up unhappy, but not so unhappy that they’ll go out and start breaking things up. That makes it a very tough thing to do.”

Intensifying the discontent within the Shiite parties, *Newsweek* revealed this week that American officials in Iraq were holding discussions with some Sunni insurgents—without the knowledge or agreement of the current UIA-headed government. The journal noted that both the US and the former Sunni elite “share a common fear of undue Iranian pressure in Iraq”. Yesterday, the Sunni Iraqi Accordance Front issued a list of 10 demands threatening a “campaign of civil disobedience” against the Shiite-dominated government if Jabr was not removed as interior minister, the militias disbanded, thousands of mainly Sunni detainees released and the dirty war being carried out in the Sunni regions ended.

With no let-up in the general level of resistance activity, growing sectarian tensions and mounting animosity toward the US forces among the Shiite factions, there is every indication that 2006 will be no less bloody than the first three years of the US occupation.



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