Intrigues continue to stall new Iraqi government

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In a vote last Sunday, Ibrahim al-Jaafari was nominated by the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA)—a coalition of Shiite fundamentalist organisations and the largest faction in the 275-seat Iraqi parliament—to continue as Iraq's prime minister.

Of the 130 Shiite fundamentalist legislators who won seats in the December 15, 2005 elections, 64 backed Jaafari, including the supporters of cleric Moqtada al-Sadr within the UIA and the members of Jaafari's own Da'awa movement. Adel Abdul Mehdi, the candidate for prime minister supported by the Iranian-linked Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), received 63 votes. One abstained and two independents linked to Sadr but who do not belong to the UIA were not given a vote.

Over the past year, Sadrists and SCIRI loyalists have engaged in violent clashes over control of municipal and provincial governments. Nevertheless the tight vote for prime minister was followed by pledges of unity between the various factions. In the final analysis, the Sadrists, SCIRI and Da'awa all represent the interests of the small Shiite business and clerical elite that views the US occupation as the best means of gaining wealth and privilege, at the expense of the predominantly Sunni Arab political establishment that held power throughout Iraq's modern history.

SCIRI has made no secret that it wants the Interior Ministry in the next government. Since taking control of the ministry in early 2005, SCIRI and the current minister Bayan Jabr have inserted thousands of their Badr Brigade militiamen into the interior ministry police and intelligence agencies. Death squads, prisons and torture have been used against their political opponents and to intimidate the Sunni Arab population in general.

As well as keeping a tight grip over the state apparatus of repression, SCIRI leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim has also made clear that he intends to push ahead with plans for a "regional government" in nine southern, predominantly Shiite provinces of Iraq, which would control the revenues from southern oilfields.

The constitution adopted last year gives regional governments, not the government in Baghdad, exclusive power over all new oil and gas developments. As much as 60 percent of Iraq's untapped oil and gas reserves lie in the provinces that SCIRI intends to weld into a region. The Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which consists of Iraq's three northern, mainly Kurdish northern provinces, has already exploited the constitution to enter into contracts with international oil companies.

The Sadrists have their own ambitions. In order to win their support, Jaafari is believed to have agreed to their demands for the health, transport and education ministries, as well as two others. Amatzia Baram, an Iraq analyst for the Woodrow Wilson International Center, told the *Washington Times* that Sadr was seeking greater political influence. "He will get large budgets, he will do what needs to be done, and the people will be beholden to him for services, not the state, and his picture will be in each hospital and each school," Baram commented.

Sadr already has broad support among the urban poor due to his movement's social welfare network and his populist calls for foreign troops to leave Iraq. In 2004, the Sadrist Mahdi Army militia fought battles against US troops in Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf before a ceasefire was struck that allowed the Sadrists to operate as a political organisation. In the long-term, Sadr and his network are seeking to supplant SCIRI as the dominant Shiite tendency.

Apart from the uprising called by Sadr, the Shiite parties have collaborated fully with the Bush administration and the occupation forces. Their dominance over the government, however, faces opposition in US ruling circles.

Firstly, Shiite preeminence has come to be viewed as an obstacle to bringing an end to the mainly Sunni-based armed resistance to the US occupation. Facing growing opposition to the war at home, the Bush administration has been forced to admit that it has no timetable for a substantial withdrawal of American troops.

Washington is currently seeking to split off sections of the armed resistance by incorporating Sunni leaders into the Baghdad government, recruiting more Sunnis into the Iraqi military and watering down the prohibitions that were put in place in 2003 against members of the Baathist Party having a political role.

Over recent weeks, US officials have revealed that talks have been held with representatives of Sunni insurgent groups toward a ceasefire. One of the key demands of the Sunni elite is that their Shiite rivals be stripped of their control over the Iraqi security forces.

The second reason for US opposition to a Shiite-dominated government is Washington's escalating political, and potentially military, confrontation with Iran—a predominantly Shiite country. SCIRI in particular has close ties with the Iranian regime. Moqtada al-Sadr has also issued statements that his Mahdi Army would fight "inside and outside" of Iraq if Tehran came under attack.

How the Iraqi security forces would respond to a US attack on Iran is already the subject of discussion in the US military. The majority of the US-trained Iraqi Army and police are Shiites, many

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of whom make little attempt to conceal their sectarian loyalties to either SCIRI or the Mahdi Army. The police in parts of Baghdad openly wear photos of Sadr on their sleeves. In a feature in the latest *Newsweek* on the US reluctance to provide Iraqi units with sophisticated weapons, an unnamed American officer commented: "We're not teaching them everything we know. We could turn around and be fighting them in a few years."

In essence, the Bush administration is seeking to transform the character of its Iraqi puppet state. After using the Shiite parties to give the occupation a veneer of democracy, it is now demanding a reduction in their influence—despite the fact they won close to half the seats in the parliament.

The US ambassador in Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, spelt out the US agenda bluntly in an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times* on February 12. Headlined "A political blueprint for Iraq", the ambassador declared that the various factions in the Iraqi parliament "need to form a government of national unity", which included representatives of the Sunni-based parties.

In a thinly veiled ultimatum to SCIRI, Khalilzad declared that Defence and Interior ministry officials could not be selected on the basis of "ethnic or sectarian background". Last month, US officials reportedly presented Iraqi politicians with a list of former commanders in Saddam Hussein's military who the Bush administration wants appointed to head the security forces.

Against the Sadrists, Khalilzad insisted that "factional militias" had to be demobilised. Iraqi leaders, he wrote, had to "strike agreements that will win greater Sunni Arab support" and forge "an understanding with those insurgents who are willing to lay down their arms".

The *New York Times* echoed Khalilzad in an editorial on February 14. Denouncing Jaafari as the "wrong man in Iraq" due to the role of Sadr within the Shiite coalition, the *Times* called on the Kurdish, Sunni and other parties to "use their leverage to ease out Mr. Jaafari" or at least "counteract Mr. Sadr's destructive and growing influence".

The constitution's complex method for selecting a government ensures minority parties have a significant say. Before a government is formed, the parliament must elect, by a two thirds majority, a president and two vice-presidents who in turn select the prime minister. His cabinet must be approved by a simple parliamentary majority. The Shiite bloc therefore requires the support of at least 52 other legislators to ensure that whoever is named president will go along with their choice of Jaafari.

Taking their cue from Khalilzad, the Sunni-based parties, who hold 55 seats, have declared that they will not support the UIA forming the government unless the Defence, Interior, Oil and Finance ministries are given to people not connected to the Shiite parties. They are also demanding the removal of the constitutional clauses that give regional governments control over oil and gas resources.

The Kurdish bloc, with 53 seats, has declared that it will not back the UIA unless it gives cabinet positions to the Iraqi List of Iyad Allawi, which won only 25 seats in the December election. The Kurds have also restated their demand that the next government back their ambitions to incorporate the oil-rich city of Kirkuk into the Kurdish autonomous region.

All of these demands present major problems for the Shiite coalition. SCIRI insists on retaining the security apparatus and forming a southern region, while the Sadrists have publicly opposed the Kurdish plans for Kirkuk. As for working with Allawi, the Sadrists view him as a bitter enemy and have stated they will not have any dealings with him.

Allawi was appointed interim prime minister in 2004 by the US-controlled Coalition Provisional Authority. He approved the US attacks on Sadr's militiamen in Karbala and Najaf, and the brutal assault on Fallujah in November 2004. At the same time, he began recruiting former Baathists to the security forces—a policy that was opposed by Shiite parties. Upon winning the January 2005 election, the UIA excluded him from the government.

The impact of the US machinations is an impasse. Allawi's Iraqi List, the Kurdish Alliance and the Sunni formations have a total of 136 seats—enough to block any nominee for president put forward by the UIA. At the same time, the Shiite parties can block any rival candidate. More than two months after the election, there is still no government and no indication as to when one will be formed.

What is certain, however, is that regime that is finally brought into existence will be the outcome of manoeuvres, intrigues and threats by Khalilzad. As he did in Afghanistan in cajoling and bullying various antagonistic factions to support the elevation of Hamid Karzai into the presidency, Khalilzad is functioning as the Bush administration's political fixer in Iraq.

This state of affairs underscores the absurd nature of claims that the US occupation is bringing a democracy into existence. As far as the American ruling class in concerned, democracy in Iraq means the country bowing down to US dictates and forming the government wanted in Washington to carry out US interests.

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