

Washington's "democracy" in Iraq hangs 13 political prisoners

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The execution Thursday of 13 Iraqi political prisoners, including a woman, was a calculated act of state terror against the resistance to the US occupation. The executions, all by hanging, were ordered by interim Prime Minister Ibrahim Jafari to underscore his determination to hold onto power amid a political stalemate between rival factions in Baghdad.

The death sentences were carried out less than a week after rival Kurdish, Sunni and secular political parties issued a public demand that the ruling Shiite United Iraqi Alliance withdraw Jafari as its candidate for prime minister and name a substitute. A Jafari adviser who witnessed the executions, Bassam Ridha, declared, "The prime minister is not soft." Ridha suggested that deposed president Saddam Hussein could soon take his place on the gallows.

The executions were videotaped, which underscores the aim of using them as a means of state intimidation. The 13 prisoners were all condemned to death for their alleged role in armed actions against the US occupation forces or their Iraqi allies. They were the first to be executed for participation in such acts—previous executions under Jafari have been limited to charges of rape and murder not linked to politics.

There are hundreds of prisoners already on death row in Baghdad, so a wave of judicially sanctioned killings could soon supplement the mass murder being carried out by the death squads of the US-established regime.

Mass murder is not too strong a term to describe conditions in this tortured country. On March 9, the *Washington Post* published a front-page examination of the explosion of death squad killings since the February 22 bombing of a Shiite mosque in Samarra—a provocation for which no armed group, including Al Qaeda in Iraq, has taken responsibility.

The *Post* had come under heavy criticism from the

Bush administration, the Jafari regime, and much of the rest of the US media for a February 28 report that some 1,300 people were murdered the week after the Samarra bombing, the vast majority of them Sunni men kidnapped and executed by Shiite death squads.

Both the Jafari government and US military authorities in Iraq claimed the death toll was far lower—fewer than 400—and questioning of the *Post* figure became the starting point for a series of diatribes against alleged media "exaggeration" of the carnage in Iraq, delivered by Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and other Bush administration spokesmen.

According to the detailed and convincing account by *Post* Baghdad correspondent Ellen Knickmayer, the figure of 1,300 deaths was supplied by a worker at the Baghdad morgue who was defying orders of Shiite leaders to downplay the post-Samarra killings.

A Health Ministry official told the *Post* that a representative of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq "ordered that government hospitals and morgues catalogue deaths caused by bombings or clashes with insurgents, but not by execution-style shootings." The bombings are frequently the work of Sunni-led terrorist groups like Al Qaeda in Iraq, but the kidnappings and executions are believed to be largely the work of the Mahdi Army, loyal to the Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, and the militias of other Shiite parties in the interim government.

The United Nations human rights department in Baghdad confirmed that at the main city morgue, "the current acting director is under pressure by the Interior Ministry in order not to reveal such information and to minimize the number of casualties."

Iraqi Prime Minister Jafari claimed that the death toll in Shiite-Sunni violence the week after Samarra was 379, and General George W. Casey, the top US

commander in Iraq, claimed the report of 1,300 deaths was inaccurate. But sources at three different agencies in Baghdad put the death toll at more than 1,000, the *Post* said. One official said that a figure of over 1,000 was being widely circulated within the government before Jafari denied it and the lower figure was issued.

The official estimate is highly implausible given the scale of the violence during that week. “Morgue authorities now say that only 250 bodies were received between Feb. 22 and 28,” Knickmayer explained. “That breaks down to about 35 bodies a day, scarcely more than the daily average of roughly 30 corpses reported since the middle of last year. And it is unclear how, or whether, the government includes execution-style militia killings in the tally.”

Knickmayer described one visit to the morgue when she counted the bodies of 84 males, ranging in ages from about 12 to more than 60, all victims of violent death. Another *Post* reporter visited on another day and was told there were more than 200 unclaimed bodies. During a third visit, on March 5, a *Post* reporter saw five bodies of men with their hands bound, shot in the back of the head. The deaths had not been mentioned in news reports.

The *Post* report represents another volley in the ongoing political conflict in Washington over the deepening debacle in Iraq. It came two days after Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld denounced media reports from Iraq as exaggerated and inaccurate. At a March 7 press conference at the Pentagon, Rumsfeld said, “From what I’ve seen thus far, much of the reporting in the US and abroad has exaggerated the situation, according to General Casey. The number of attacks on mosques, as he pointed out, had been exaggerated. The number of Iraqi deaths had been exaggerated.”

The same day, the *Los Angeles Times* carried a remarkable interview with the US ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, in which he struck a far gloomier note. He described the overthrow of Saddam Hussein as “opening Pandora’s box” and admitted that “the potential is there now for sectarian violence to become a full-blown civil war.”

By March 9, at a hearing before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Rumsfeld had dropped his denials that civil war was a possibility, instead declaring, as he testified alongside Secretary of State

Condoleezza Rice and General John Abizaid, that dealing with such civil strife was the job of the Iraqi police and army, not American and other foreign troops in Iraq.

General Abizaid, who heads the US Central Command, covering the entire Middle East and Central Asia, said the situation in Iraq was “changing in its nature from insurgency toward sectarian violence.” After the hearing, Abizaid told the press, “The sectarian violence is a greater concern for us security-wise right now than the insurgency.”

In the latest incident of the intensifying sectarian conflict, Shiite gunmen wearing Iraqi police uniforms raided the offices of a Sunni-owned security firm in Baghdad, arresting more than 30 employees and taking them away in unmarked vehicles. The company, Al Rawafed, is owned by the family of Sheik Ghazi al-Yawar, the Sunni tribal leader who was the first president of the interim government and now serves as one of two vice presidents. The fate the men is still unknown, but such kidnappings have nearly always ended in mass executions.

At the same time, the Iraqi Defense Ministry announced an investigation into the murder of its most prominent Sunni officer, Maj. Gen. Mubdar Hatim Hazya Dulaimi, who was shot to death by a sniper Monday. The commander of the Army’s 6th Division, which patrols much of Baghdad, Dulaimi was killed by a single bullet as he opened his car door returning from a field visit. The gunman clearly had knowledge of General Dulaimi’s schedule, suggesting that the officer was the target of a sectarian assassination plot.



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