US-British diktat makes mockery of "democracy" in Iraq

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4 April 2006

The unannounced trip by US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw to Iraq over the past two days has again underscored who is calling the shots in Iraq. For all of the Bush administration's empty rhetoric about "democracy" in Iraq, it is the White House rather than the votes of Iraqis that will decide the shape of the next government in Baghdad.

Rice and Straw flew into Baghdad amid mounting frustration in the Bush administration that its demands for "a national unity government" had gone unheeded. More than three months after national elections in December, the various political factions, all of which are beholden to Washington, have failed to agree on a division of the spoils of office—in particular, who will hold the key post of prime minister.

Much has been written in the US and international press about the "political deadlock" in Baghdad. However, the main responsibility rests with the Bush administration and its man on the spot, US ambassador to Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, who has been actively working to re-engineer the Iraqi regime to meet Washington's interests and changing needs.

The previous government headed by Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari rested on a bloc of Shiite fundamentalist parties—the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA)—and Kurdish nationalists or Kurdish Alliance (KA), which together had the necessary two-thirds parliamentary vote to confirm a government. Having adopted an increasingly menacing stance toward neighbouring Iran, the Bush administration is determined not to have a regime in Baghdad dominated by the UIA, which has religious and political links to Tehran.

The call for a "government of national unity" is simply a convenient phrase for undercutting the UIA, which has nearly half of the National Assembly seats, by insisting that it share power with the KA, several Sunni-based parties and the so-called secular grouping headed by former prime minister and longtime US asset Iyad Allawi. By including Sunni parties with links to the anti-occupation insurgency, Washington also hopes to split the armed resistance.

The Bush administration has taken particular exception to Prime Minister Jaafari because his base of support includes the movement headed by Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which fought bitter battles with the US military in 2004. Washington is concerned not so much with Sadr, who has increasingly adapted himself to the US occupation, but with his restive supporters among urban Shiite poor in Baghdad and other cities. The Sadrists have also bitterly opposed the formation of any government that includes Allawi, who gave the green light for the US attacks on their militia in 2004.

Under the Iraqi constitution drawn up with US assistance and approval, Jaafari has the strongest claim to be the next prime minister. As the largest faction, the UIA has the right to hold the post and, in February, voted narrowly to make Jaafari its candidate. The decision was never accepted in Washington, however, and Khalilzad has been working behind the scenes ever since to block it.

Khalilzad's plan was straightforward: split the KA from the UIA by playing on Kurdish fears that a Shiite-dominated government would prevent their ambitions to include the oil-rich Kirkuk region in an autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq. By achieving this first step, Khalilzad created a standoff—neither the UIA nor their Kurdish and Sunni rivals has the necessary two thirds of the assembly vote to confirm the next government.

The second step—to force the UIA to ditch Jaafari as its candidate—proved more difficult. Up to last week, the Shiite parties, fearful of a debilitating split in their alliance, stood their ground. Now with the direct intervention first of President Bush, and then of Rice and Straw, their opposition appears to be crumbling.

At a press conference last Wednesday, Bush, in his vulgar and ignorant fashion, bluntly told the Iraqi factions that no more delays would be tolerated. "It's about time you get a unity government going. In other words, Americans understand newcomers to the political arena, but pretty soon it's time to shut her down and get governing," he declared.

Behind closed doors, the message to "get governing" was even cruder. Reuters reported last Tuesday that Bush had

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instructed Khalilzad to tell UIA leader Abdul Aziz al-Hakim that Jaafari had to go. Senior Shiite politicians said Hakim had been informed that the US president "doesn't want, doesn't support, doesn't accept" the retention of Jaafari as prime minister.

Bush's intervention triggered a rupture in the UIA ranks. At Friday prayers, leading Shiite cleric Ayatollah Mohammed Yacoubi issued a bitter denunciation of Khalilzad, accusing him of offering support to the "political front of the terrorists"—that is, the Sunni parties. Appealing to Washington, he declared: "It should replace its ambassador to Iraq, if it wants to protect itself from further failures."

On Saturday, UIA figures revealed that the alliance was deeply divided between Jaafari's backers and Hakim's Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI). UIA parliamentarian Qassim Daoud publicly called on Jaafari to go. On Sunday, as Rice and Straw arrived in Baghdad, senior SCIRI parliamentarian Jalal al-Deen al-Saghir repeated the appeal: "I call on Jaafari to step down. The candidate [for prime minister] ought to secure a national consensus from other lists and also international acceptance."

While Rice and Straw are slick operators, no amount of verbal sophistry could disguise the purpose of their visit: to finish off Jaafari and lay down the law to the Iraqi factions. While publicly denying that any preference for Iraqi prime minister, Rice gave Jaafari what the media described as a "frosty" reception and pointedly noted that he had failed to form government.

By contrast, Rice and Straw gave a gushing welcome to Vice President Adel Abdul Mahdi and were full of praise for leading Shiite cleric Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, regarded as the UIA's spiritual guide. Mahdi was SCIRI's candidate for prime minister in the UIA ballot in February, losing by one vote to Jaafari. He is a trained economist, who is known for championing pro-market reforms and privatisation.

At the concluding press conference yesterday, Rice insisted that the "political vacuum" had to be ended. "International partners, particularly the United States and Great Britain... have a right to expect that this process will keep moving forward," she declared. She also insisted on the reining in militias, saying "you have to have the state with a monopoly on power".

What was said in private to the Iraqi leaders is perhaps best indicated by an editorial in the *New York Times* on Sunday which gave its full support to the Bush administration's strong-arm tactics. Entitled "The Endgame in Iraq", the editorial sanctimoniously declared:

"Iraq is becoming a country that America should be ashamed to support, let alone occupy. The nation as a whole is sliding closer to open civil war. In its capital, thugs kidnap and torture civilians with impunity, then murder them for their religious beliefs. The rights of women are evaporating. The head of the government is the ally of a radical anti-American cleric who leads a powerful private militia that is behind much of the sectarian terror.

"The Bush administration will not acknowledge the desperate situation. But it is, at least, pushing in the right direction, trying to mobilise all possible leverage in a frantic effort to persuade the leading Shiite parties to embrace more inclusive policies and support a broad based government. One vital goal is to persuade the Shiites to abort their disastrous nomination of Prime Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari."

Of course, while bewailing the disaster in Iraq, the *New York Times* is covering up the crimes of the real gangsters—the Bush administration. If the country is sliding into civil war, Washington is directly responsible for creating the situation by supporting communal and sectarian parties and organisations—each of which has its own private militia and no compunction about using them against their opponents. Some of the most notorious death squads operate out of the Interior Ministry, were trained by US personnel and answer to SCIRI—the party to which Washington appears to be now leaning.

Far from ending the unfolding civil war, the Bush administration's efforts to impose a "government of national unity" will simply recast the conflict. The US turn against Jaafari and Sadr, taken together with Rice's call for the disarming of militia, could signal the beginning of a military offensive directed against the Sadrist Mahdi Army in particular. The clearest warning came just over a week ago.

On March 26, US and Iraqi troops attacked a mosque in northeast Baghdad, a stronghold of the Mahdi Army, and massacred up to 40 worshippers. Members of Jaafari's Dawa party were apparently among the dead. Neither he nor his interior minister was informed of the raid. The attack could prove to be the opening shot of a campaign by the US to move against Jaafari, Sadr and his Madhi Army, not simply with verbal threats but with military means.

Whatever government emerges out of the trip by Rice and Straw to Baghdad, one thing is certain: it will have nothing whatsoever to do with the democratic aspirations of the Iraqi people.

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