

Shiite leader bows to US demands as Iraq slides further into civil war

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Shiite leader Ibrahim al-Jaafari has bowed to the campaign against him led by the Bush administration and announced that he is prepared to step aside as the prime ministerial candidate of the largest bloc in the Iraqi parliament. The United Iraqi Alliance (UIA), the coalition of seven Shiite fundamentalist organisations that holds 128 of the 275 seats in parliament, is expected to meet over the next 24 hours to hold another vote on who it will put forward as prime minister. Parliament has been scheduled to convene on Saturday to form a government.

Jaafari's announcement is the result of intense negotiations and backroom machinations this week involving a variety of Iraqi politicians, US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, UN envoy Ashraf Qazi and leading Shiite clerics. Whatever sordid means were used to force Jaafari to effectively step aside, his backdown underscores the basic truth about the so-called "democracy" in US-occupied Iraq: the only governments that are permissible are those acceptable to Washington.

The Iraq election was held on December 15, with the results announced nearly one month later. In an internal UIA vote, Jaafari was narrowly elected as the coalition's candidate for prime minister in February. Almost immediately, a political impasse was created by a campaign to have the decision repudiated.

An unholy alliance between Kurdish nationalist parties, Sunni Arab-based formations and other factions in the parliament issued an ultimatum that they would not accept Jaafari as prime minister and demanded that the Shiite parties name someone else. While the UIA as the largest parliamentary bloc nominates the prime minister, the Kurdish-Sunni alliance, which together hold slightly more than half the seats, is in a position to veto the choice.

As weeks have gone by with no government formed, there is no doubt that the non-Shiite parties have been acting as proxies for the Bush administration. Since the election the White House has demanded that the Shiite fundamentalists agree to a "national unity government", which includes Sunni and Kurd leaders, technocrats and longtime US

collaborators such as former "interim" prime minister Iyad Allawi.

The aim of the US invasion of Iraq has never been democracy but to forge a puppet state that is amenable to its predatory ambitions to open up the Iraqi oil industry to transnational companies and develop long-term American military bases that can be used to project US power throughout the Middle East.

Washington does not consider Jaafari as a viable political leader for such a state. As the head of Da'awa, the oldest Shiite fundamentalist party in Iraq, he has longstanding ties with the Iranian theocracy against which the US is actively preparing for war—a conflict in which Iraqi bases would inevitably be used. Moreover, his main support within the UIA has become the movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr. The Sadrists, reflecting the sentiment of their social base among the Shiite urban poor, regularly call for an end to the US occupation. Sadr's Mahdi Army militia is one of the largest Shiite armed groups and fought battles with American forces in 2004.

A further factor in the US opposition toward Jaafari is that he, along with many other leading Shiite fundamentalists, are hostile to working with former members of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime. Washington has hoped that by incorporating such figures into key government positions it could lead numbers of Sunni Arab fighters to end their ongoing guerilla war against the US occupation.

The US campaign against Jaafari has been relentless. In the last month, Khalilzad delivered the Shiite leader a "personal" message from Bush, bluntly telling him he was "unacceptable" to the White House. When that failed to bring about his capitulation, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw flew into Iraq to cajole other Shiite leaders to turn against him.

On Wednesday, Bush bluntly declared that Iraqi leaders "had to step up and form a unity government". The turning point in Jaafari's fate appears to have been meetings held by UN ambassador Qazi the same day with leading Shiite cleric Ali al-Sistani and later with Moqtada al-Sadr. While the

content of the discussions is unknown, it appears that some form of deal was made in which the two clerics agreed to tell Jaafari that he no longer had their backing.

The length of time it has taken for Shiite leaders to cave in to US demands reflects the extreme communal tensions being generated by the country's incipient civil war. Far from establishing conditions for "national unity", US policies over the past three years have fomented divisions between the country's ethnic and religious communities.

In Baghdad and the oil-rich south, the US occupation encouraged the Shiite clergy and fundamentalist movements to supplant the predominantly Sunni ruling elite and middle classes that held sway under the Baathist regime. In the north, Kurdish nationalists have consolidated a de-facto separate state, complete with its own government and military forces.

The inevitable consequence has been the growth of sectarian hatreds. In predominantly Sunni Arab areas, a ruined and alienated population provides the recruits for insurgent groups fighting a desperate guerilla war against both the US military and Shiite- and Kurdish-dominated government security forces. It also provides the recruiting ground for the Sunni extremists who have carried out horrifying atrocities against Shiite civilians, indiscriminately equating the mass of the population with the pro-occupation government.

At least 65,000 people, overwhelming Shiites, have officially been driven from their homes by death threats on the basis of their religious background. Tent cities have sprung up on the outskirts of Shiite suburbs to house the victims. The actual number of displaced persons is suspected to be far higher as many find families find shelter with relatives or friends. A spokesman for the Ministry of Displacement and Migration told the British *Times* this month: "We hear 1,000 people a day are being intimidated to quit their homes."

Under such conditions, Jaafari and other UIA leaders have been under tremendous pressure to retain control over the next government. Large numbers of Shiites are particularly opposed to the US calls for the security forces to be put under the command of former Baathist officers. The US demands are already being labelled the "second betrayal"—a reference to the events following the 1991 Gulf War. President Bush senior first encouraged a Shiite rebellion and then turned a blind eye as Saddam Hussein's military ruthlessly crushed it.

Since the destruction of a major Shiite mosque in Samarra in February, and revenge attacks on Sunni areas by Shiite militiamen, the scale of the violence has soared. A wave of bombings has targeted Shiite mosques and residential areas, killing and maiming hundreds more people. As many as

1,000 Sunnis have been kidnapped and murdered in the last two months by suspected Shiite death squads. The brothers of two of the most prominent Sunni politicians are among those who have been executed in the past two weeks.

Shiite and Sunni militias are now facing each other across suburbs of Baghdad, posing the danger that the capital is descending into a vicious cycle of reprisals and counter-reprisals similar to what took place in Beirut during the Lebanese civil war.

Fighting this week in the suburb of Adhamiyah provides an indication that this process is well underway. The largely Sunni district lies directly across the Tigris River from Shiite areas. While there are conflicting versions of events, residents told journalists that clashes on Monday and Tuesday involved Sunni militiamen seeking to prevent a combined force of Shiite interior ministry police and militiamen from entering the area and attacking a major Sunni mosque. A local told the *Los Angeles Times*: "The young people of Adhamiyah picked up their personal weapons to defend their neighbourhoods."

Regardless of who ultimately becomes prime minister of Iraq, the struggle between rival Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish elites for power and privilege within an American puppet state is increasingly being fought out in the streets of Iraq's cities and towns.

US imperialism bears full responsibility for this catastrophe. In fact, the communal violence serves its purposes. It cuts across a unified struggle by the Iraqi masses against the occupation and is being cynically used in the US to justify the continued presence of American troops. In direct opposition to all sectarian tendencies, the essential task in Iraq and the broader Middle East is the development of a socialist movement that unites the working class in a common struggle against the neo-colonial rule being imposed in the region by the US and its allies.



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