Fractured new Iraqi regime: a prelude to deepening sectarian violence

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After months of factional infighting and intense pressure from Washington, a new Iraqi cabinet headed by Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki was finally ratified by parliament and sworn into office on Saturday in the heavily-fortified Green Zone in Baghdad.

In what has become an absurd ritual, the US and its allies immediately hailed the government as another triumph for democracy in the Middle East. President Bush declared that it was "a good day for the millions of Iraqis who want to live in freedom" and "a new chapter in our relationship with Iraq". British Prime Minister Tony Blair, who flew to Baghdad on Monday to give his seal of approval to the regime, pronounced it to be "a new beginning".

These comments bear no relation to reality. The vast majority of Iraqis who live in squalour and fear outside the Green Zone had no say in the formation of the government or its policies. Every aspect of the process since the December 15 elections has been managed and supervised by US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad and a small army of US officials stationed at the American embassy in Baghdad. The selection of Maliki as prime minister dragged out until late April because the Bush administration opposed Ibrahim al-Jaafari remaining in the job, even though, as required by the constitution, he was nominated by the largest parliamentary faction—the Shiite-based United Iraqi Alliance (UIA).

As the *New York Times* politely described the process, the Americans played "a muscular role in vetting and negotiating over the new cabinet". The article continued: "An Afghan-born scholar who worked on Iraq policy in Washington prior to the invasion, Mr Khalilzad worked closely with Mr Maliki, the new prime minister, in reviewing candidates for crucial ministries, and shuttling between rival Iraqi parties in an effort to sign them up to the American vision of a national unity government."

In other words, Khalilzad played the same role in Iraq as previously in Afghanistan, where he was instrumental in establishing the US puppet regime headed by President Hamid Karzai. Nominally Iraq is an independent country with a newly elected four-year government. In fact, the US has its hands on all the main levers of power, directly or indirectly. The *New York Times* article pointed out that Washington had identified "sovereign ministries"—interior, defence, oil, electricity, finance, justice, foreign affairs—and in recent months has begun assigning another batch of American advisors to supervise their functioning.

Far from the so-called government of national unity being "a new beginning", it presages a descent into communal war. Such is the mutual suspicion and enmity between the Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish factions that all of the key security posts—interior, defence and national security—remain unfilled. Each grouping fears that its opponents will use the army and police to strengthen its hand in the ongoing sectarian fighting. The previous interior minister Bayan Jabr was widely accused of allowing Shiite-based death squads based in his ministry to seize, torture and murder Sunni rivals and terrorise Sunni suburbs.

As a temporary measure, Maliki will hold the interior ministry, while Sunni Deputy Prime Minister Salam al-Zubaie will hold the defence post and Kurdish Deputy Prime Minister Barham Salih the national security ministry. Even this interim compromise was vehemently opposed by Sunni parties resulting in a walkout by 15 Sunni MPs before the vote was taken to approve the ministers. "This is not the democracy or the freedom that we came for," Sunni leader Saleh Mutlaq declared, warning: "This is going to be a very aggressive government. It is going to be a very tough government. A lot of blood is going to be spilled."

Washington's calculation was that inducing Sunni factions to take part in the election and the government would divide and weaken the largely Sunni-based armed insurgency. But having fanned and fomented communal animosities by basing its occupation on Shiite fundamentalist and Kurdish separatist parties, the US confronts the potential fracturing of its "national unity" regime before the cabinet even begins to operate. Commenting on the walkout, the US-based thinktank Stratfor summed up the situation as follows: "The fundamental issue is this: Will the formation of the government induce the Sunnis to rein in the insurgency? If they can't or won't, then the entire project fails. The only solution will be partition or civil war."

In fact, an incipient civil war is already underway. Blaming all Shiites for the complicity of the UIA in the US occupation, Sunni extremists have slaughtered thousands of innocent Shiite

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civilians. In response, Shiite militias connected to the UIA factions have murdered hundreds of Sunnis in revenge, on suspicion of being connected to the insurgents. Even as the Maliki government was being sworn in, bombings and killings continued unabated outside the Green Zone. In what amounts to sectarian cleansing, tens of thousands of people have been forced to flee their homes in mixed neighbourhoods.

While referring to the need for "national reconciliation", Prime Minister Maliki vowed on Sunday to use "maximum force against the terrorists and killers", as at least 30 people died in bombings in predominantly Shiite neighbourhoods. Far from ending the sectarian bloodshed, his government will inevitably accelerate the violence. All of the Iraqi parties rely on whipping up communal divisions to divert attention from their incapacity to end the social nightmare confronting the majority of the population.

Even if the warring factions that comprise the Maliki government finally fill the security posts, the tensions will again erupt as a review of the constitution begins. In an effort to end the protracted deadlock over the constitution last year, US ambassador Khalilzad brokered a deal to sidestep the unresolved differences until after national elections. The new parliament will now elect a constitution review committee that will reexamine the entire constitution over a four-month period.

As a result, all of the contentious issues will boil over again. The various Sunni parties are deeply hostile to the constitutional clauses that allow the de facto partition of the country into a Kurdish north and a Shiite south—the regions where most of the country's oil is found. Under the present constitution, regional governments will have substantial powers, including crucially the right to revenue from any new oil fields. Sunni leaders fear that they will be left with few levers of power and without a share of the country's resources.

The concerns of these venal elites as they vie for position and privilege under the US-led occupation are completely divorced from the social reality facing millions of Iraqis. Caught in the crossfire of sectarian conflict and subject to brutal and arbitrary repression by the US military and its allies, most Iraqis are struggling to survive amid high levels of unemployment, rising prices and the lack of essential services. Three years after the invasion, electricity supplies have not been restored to the levels under the ousted Baathist regime and many areas lack clean water, sewage and other basic facilities.

Even from the filtered reports of the international press, it is clear that few Iraqis support or trust the Maliki government. Hassan al-Bazzaz, a university academic, told the *Chicago Tribune*: "It's all very well to say security is the No 1 priority, but security is tied to so many issues: the economy, jobs, how you treat people. Security means everything and everything has to be addressed."

Fahdi Abed, a satellite TV technician, pessimistically told the newspaper: "Personally I don't think things will calm down because there are such differences between the politicians and such differences between the people. They hold all these meetings and they talk, but still the problems go on."

In the *Los Angeles Times*, Zekki, a 65-year-old Sunni, declared: "I don't have much faith that this new government will achieve democracy and security. We should not be desperate. We must have hope. But until now we have no sign of hope, not even a glimpse."

Mohammed Ali Hilfi, a 29-year-old Shiite, told the newspaper: "The people we elected gave so many rights away. The politicians won't try to stop the violence, because they don't care about the blood of the Iraqis." He had a list of what he wanted the government to do: electricity, services and security. "My family worries every day about my return back home," he said.

Alaa Mahmood, a young Shiite mother and college student, sheeted home the blame to the US occupiers. "I don't trust the new government. I don't expect anything from them," she said. "They should start the real work and expel the occupiers."

The high praise for the Maliki government from Bush and Blair has nothing to do with any concern for the Iraqi people, their democratic rights or appalling living conditions. Their empty rhetoric is a rather desperate attempt to bolster their political fortunes at home in the US and British, where both confront widespread opposition to the continued occupation of Iraq. Bush has mooted the possibility of a reduction of US troops in Iraq, in part to deflect public hostility in the lead up to the mid-term congressional elections.

At his joint press conference in Baghdad, Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki apparently caught his British counterpart Blair off guard by announcing that Iraqi security forces would take over responsibility in 16 out of the country's 18 provinces by the end of the year. He was quickly put in his place by Blair, however, who declared that there was no timetable for withdrawal and that any handover would depend on prevailing conditions. The exchange served to highlight who really calls the shots in Baghdad.

The aims of the US invasion of Iraq remain the same: to subjugate the Iraqi people and its oil as part of broader plans to establish US strategic and economic domination throughout the resource-rich regions of the Middle East and Central Asia. While it would like to hand over the task of suppressing the insurgency to its Iraqi vassals, the Bush administration has no intention of relinquishing any real control to the Maliki government.

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