

Is the US planning a coup in Iraq?

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22 August 2006

On August 16, an extraordinary article appeared in the *New York Times* providing details of a top-level private meeting on US strategy in Iraq at the Pentagon last week. President Bush, who was present along with his war cabinet and selected “outside experts”, voiced his open dissatisfaction that the new Iraqi government—and the Iraqi people—had not shown greater support for US policies.

“More generally, the participants said, the president expressed frustration that the Iraqis had not come to appreciate the sacrifices the United States had made in Iraq, and was puzzled as to how a recent anti-American rally in support of Hezbollah in Baghdad could draw such a large crowd,” the newspaper reported. The angry protest on August 4 against the US-backed Israeli war in Lebanon drew more than 100,000 people from the capital and other Iraqi cities.

The *New York Times* article, which had all the hallmarks of a planted story, did not of course speak openly of a coup against Maliki. Nevertheless it constituted an unmistakable threat to the Baghdad regime that its days were numbered if it did not toe the US line. Prior to his trip to Washington last month, Maliki publicly condemned the Israeli invasion of Lebanon. While his comments were just a pale reflection of popular sentiment in Iraq and throughout the Middle East, they soured the Bush administration’s plans to use the visit as a much-needed boost prior to mid-term US elections.

The *New York Times* followed up the report with a further article on August 17 on the latest Defence Department indices of the catastrophe in Iraq: the number of roadside bombs aimed mainly against American forces reached an all-time high of 2,625 in July as compared to 1,454 in January. “The insurgency has gotten worse by almost all measures, with insurgent attacks at historically high levels. The insurgency has more public support and is demonstrably more capable

in numbers of people active and in its ability to direct violence than at any point in time,” a senior Defence Department official told the newspaper.

Buried at the conclusion of the article, however, was the astonishing admission by one of the participants in the Pentagon meeting that Bush administration officials were already beginning to plan for a post-Maliki era. “Senior administration officials have acknowledged to me that they are considering alternatives other than democracy,” an unnamed military affairs expert told the *New York Times*. “Everybody in the administration is being quite circumspect, but you can sense their own concern that this is drifting away from democracy.”

The Bush administration’s attempts to dress up its illegal occupation of Iraq as “democratic” have always been a fraud. Ever since the 2003 invasion, US officials have had a direct hand in drawing up constitutional arrangements, steering elections and forming cabinets. Maliki was only installed as prime minister in May after a protracted White House campaign to force his predecessor Ibrahim al-Jaafari to stand aside. To speak of “considering alternatives other than democracy” can only have one meaning—that the Bush administration is contemplating plans to ditch the constitution, remove Maliki and insert a regime more directly amenable to Washington’s orders.

This would not be the first time that US imperialism has ousted one of its own puppets. In 1963, as American strategy in Vietnam was floundering, the Kennedy administration gave the green light to army plotters to overthrow South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. While loyal to Washington, Diem’s autocratic methods had provoked popular opposition and undermined US efforts to strengthen the South Vietnamese army in its war against the National Liberation Front.

On November 1, 1963, rebel army units mutinied and marched on the presidential palace in Saigon. Diem,

who had escaped, rang the US ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, who assured the Vietnamese president that the US had no hand in the coup and expressed concern for his safety. A few hours later, the reassured Diem surrendered, only to be shot dead along with his notorious brother Ngo Dinh Nhu, and replaced by a military junta.

The Bush administration has plenty of reasons to get rid of Maliki. In launching its invasion of Iraq, Washington never wanted an independent or democratic government in Baghdad. Its aims were to transform the country into a pliable client state that would function as a base of operations to further its designs throughout the region, particularly against Iran. But the White House has become increasingly dissatisfied with the political results of its military adventure. Because of its own disastrous miscalculations it has been forced to rely on a coalition government dominated by Shiite parties with longstanding connections to Tehran.

Inside Iraq, the Bush administration's calculations that Maliki's "government of national unity" would quell anti-American resistance and halt the descent into civil war have already proven worthless. Far from scaling back, the Pentagon has had to maintain troop levels and dispatch thousands of extra soldiers to Baghdad in a desperate effort to reconquer the capital. With Congressional elections looming, the defeat of the pro-war senator Joseph Lieberman in the Democratic Party primary on August 8 raised fears in the White House that widespread antiwar sentiment would decimate the Republican Party at the polls amid US debacles in Iraq, Afghanistan and the Middle East as a whole.

The removal of Maliki and the imposition of a subservient military regime would, at least in the short term, solve a few of the Bush administration's political problems by removing any objections in Baghdad to a ruthless crackdown in the country and to US plans for new provocations against Iran and Syria.

Significantly, the *New York Times'* accounts of discussions in the White House and Pentagon have been paralleled in Baghdad by persistent rumours of a coup. On July 29, the *Washington Post* reported the remarks of prominent Shiite politician Hadi al-Amiri, who warned that "some tongues" were talking about toppling the Maliki coalition and replacing it with a

"national salvation government". It would mean, he said, "cancelling the constitution, cancelling the results of the elections and going back to square one... and we will not accept that."

Having pursued a policy of reckless militarism in the Middle East for the past five years, the Bush administration is more than capable of toppling an Iraqi regime that no longer suits its immediate purposes. However, far from stabilising the American occupation, a coup in Baghdad would no more extricate the White House from its political crisis than the ousting of Diem did in 1963. As in Vietnam, the US is sinking deeper and deeper into a political and military quagmire in Iraq.



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