

Bush wants a bloodbath in Baghdad

Bill Van Auken
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Increasingly desperate over the deteriorating situation in Iraq, the Bush administration is demanding that the US-installed government in Baghdad support a savage intensification of repression or give way to a dictatorial regime that will.

This is the significance of a series of reports—based largely on comments made by unnamed US officials—that have appeared in the press in recent days.

On Wednesday, the *New York Times* published a front-page lead that had all the earmarks of a story planted with the aim of preparing US public opinion for a coup in Baghdad.

“Senior Iraqi and American officials are beginning to question whether Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki has the political muscle and decisiveness to hold Iraq together as it hovers on the edge of a full civil war,” the *Times* declared.

Citing US disquiet over Maliki’s alleged failure “to take aggressive steps to end the country’s sectarian violence,” the article quoted comments made by President Bush during his meeting Tuesday with Iraqi President Jalal Talabani. The US would stand with the Iraqi people, Bush declared, “so long as the government continues to make the tough choices necessary for peace to prevail.”

Bush made a similar remark in his speech to the United Nations General Assembly on Tuesday: “We will not yield the future of your country to terrorists and extremists. In return, your leaders must rise to the challenges your country is facing, and make difficult choices to bring security and prosperity.”

Citing various sources, the *Times* article casts Maliki as a weak and indecisive leader. While stating that US policy remains that of propping up his four-month-old government, the *Times* reports that among top US officials “there is a sense that he is not about to change his operating style.”

In particular, the *Times* piece takes Maliki to task for demanding that the US-backed security crackdown in Baghdad avoid a direct confrontation with the Mahdi Army, loyal to Shia cleric Moktada al-Sadr, and other militia formations tied to parties that make up the Iraqi prime minister’s shaky political base.

The article favorably contrasts the attitude of senior Iraqi

military officers to Maliki’s reticence, citing what it claims is “Iraqi generals’ apparent willingness to attack the militia.”

It goes on to quote Brig. Gen. Dana Pittard, who directs training of Iraqi police and army units, as saying that Iraqi commanders are “ready to take on the militias, but have not gotten approval from the government.”

“There’s this obvious question that the army guys are asking, about ‘When are we going to get rid of the militias?’” Pittard told the *Times*. “If you talk to the leaders of the Iraqi Army, they’ll say, ‘We need to be given an order to disarm the militias.’”

The article was accompanied by a second piece on an initial report from the Iraq Study Group. The bipartisan panel—whose members include Bush family advisor and former Secretary of State James Baker and former leading Democratic congressman Lee Hamilton—was formed by Congress to examine US policy in Iraq and propose changes in strategy. Its message, the newspaper said, was that Maliki “must take immediate action to improve security ... if he wants to retain United States support.”

The *New York Times* article comes just four days after a similar report appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* under the headline “US frustrated by pace of change in Iraq.”

The *Los Angeles Times* report cited similar expressions of frustrations within the American ruling establishment with the Maliki government, adding that some “have voiced a private view in recent weeks that Iraq might be better off under a traditional Middle Eastern strongman.”

Taking the two reports together—the *New York Times* portrayal of Iraqi commanders chomping at the bit to launch an offensive against the militias and the *Los Angeles Times* report of senior US officials suggesting that what Iraq needs is a “strongman”—the picture that emerges is that of a Bush administration that is preparing to cast aside its pretense of building a “democracy in the heart of the Middle East” in favor of a US-controlled military dictatorship.

Tensions between the Bush administration and Maliki have escalated in recent months, particularly after the Iraqi prime minister condemned the Israeli war against Lebanon and later when he traveled to Iran for a meeting with

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, whom Washington has sought to turn into an international pariah.

More fundamentally, however, the pretense of democracy has become a luxury that US imperialism can no longer afford, given the sharp rise in attacks on American occupation troops as well as the country's slide toward open civil war. During the months of July and August alone, at least 6,599 Iraqis were killed in the violence, 800 more than in the previous two months, according to a United Nations report.

While the White House heatedly denied that Washington is preparing to dispense with Maliki, the press reports suggest that senior government officials are preparing public opinion for just such an eventuality.

The *Times*' claims that Iraqi military officers are straining to be unleashed against the Shia militias, but are held back by Maliki, are less than credible. The fledgling Iraqi military is itself largely divided along sectarian lines, with predominantly Shia units hardly likely to be demanding such action. In other confrontations where they have taken fire from the militias, the government troops have tended to melt away. Moreover, these units possess little firepower, largely because the US does not trust them with heavy weapons.

The *Times* report recalls nothing so much as the kind of articles the paper was running in the early 1960s in the run-up to the coup against South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, who at the time was reportedly seeking negotiations with the government of Ho Chi Minh in the north. The *Times*, a vocal supporter of the war, carried regular dispatches from its correspondents denouncing the failures and corruption of the government. In November 1963, senior army officers, backed by the CIA, staged a coup in which Diem and his closest supporters were slaughtered.

What Washington wants in Iraq—just as it wanted in Vietnam—is a regime that will unconditionally back an all-out US assault aimed at drowning the resistance in blood. Such a campaign would mean launching a Fallujah-style siege against the crowded Shia slums of Baghdad's Sadr City along with the ruthless suppression of resistance in the predominantly Sunni areas.

The growing impatience with the Maliki government is not just a matter of the escalating Iraqi resistance and the mounting US casualties—now approaching 2,700—which have produced a corresponding growth of antiwar sentiment in the US itself.

Just as decisive is the increasing exasperation within the major US oil companies, banks and corporations, which had anticipated windfall profits following the US military conquest of one of the most oil-rich countries of the world.

The *Los Angeles Times* report made this clear: "In addition

to action to stem sectarian violence, US officials want the Maliki government to move on a new investment law to bolster the economy as well as legislation to restructure the state oil company and set new rules for investing in Iraq's petroleum industry."

Deals for the exploitation of Iraqi oil worth tens of billions of dollars could be struck within the next several months. The Maliki government has indicated that it has no intention of favoring US energy conglomerates over their rivals in Europe and even China.

Meanwhile, the government has failed to draft either a foreign investment law or a hydrocarbon law, governing the extent to which foreign oil companies will be allowed to exploit and control the country's petroleum reserves. At the same time, the fractious debate over regional autonomy has left an open question as to whether such deals will be struck with the central government in Baghdad or Kurdish and Shia entities in the north and south.

Under an agreement reached between the Iraqi government and the International Monetary Fund earlier this year, an end-of-the-year deadline was set for passing a law governing the exploitation of the country's oil wealth, presumably throwing open the door for foreign companies to assert predominant control. Clearly, the US multinationals have a considerable interest in seeing these matters resolved in their favor. Should Maliki appear to be an impediment to their aims, a "strongman" may well be found to replace him, and the Iraqi prime minister himself may face the same fate as Diem.

Whatever regime Washington imposes, however—with or without the pretense of democracy—will continue to confront the overwhelming hostility of the masses of Iraqis. And an escalation of the bloodbath that has been inflicted upon the Iraqi people will only deepen the hostility to the war among broad layers of American working people.



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