

Bush under fire at press conference

Deepening crisis of US occupation regime in Iraq

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President Bush's press conference Wednesday was dominated by the worsening position of the US occupation regime in Iraq and its impact on US politics only two weeks before the midterm congressional elections. Bush faced sharper questioning than usual from the normally docile press corps, as well as public criticism from within his own party.

Only hours before he went before the press in the White House, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki publicly denied Bush administration claims that he had agreed to "benchmarks" for the performance of the Iraqi police and military and denounced a US military raid into the Shia bastion of Sadr City in eastern Baghdad.

The press conference was the second in two weeks, unusual for an administration which has been generally unwilling to expose Bush in an unscripted setting. It was clearly dictated by political concerns, with opinion polls showing that the Republican Party will likely lose control of the House of Representatives and could lose the Senate as well.

There is growing panic in Republican circles over plunging poll numbers, largely reflecting the mounting public opposition to the war in Iraq. In the past week, conservative Republican Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison of Texas announced her support for a plan to partition Iraq along ethnic-religious lines, while Republican Congresswoman Anne Northup, who is trailing in the polls in her Louisville, Kentucky district, called for the resignation of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.

Bush devoted the first 16 minutes of the press conference to a statement defending the administration's record in Iraq, while conceding that there was growing public dissatisfaction with the war, although he implied that this was solely in response to the high death toll among US troops, not to any questioning of the goals of the war.

"I know the American people understand the stakes in Iraq," he said. "They want to win. They will support the war

as long as they see a path to victory."

In reality, a nearly two-thirds majority of Americans, according to recent public opinion polls, believe that Bush's original decision to invade and occupy Iraq was a mistake, and an even larger majority, nearly 80 percent, believe that Bush's arguments to justify the invasion were lies.

Bush broke little new ground in the opening statement, except for an explicit endorsement of the Baker/Hamilton commission, a bipartisan panel established with congressional sanction to review long-term US strategy for Iraq. The commission is chaired by former Secretary of State James Baker, a longtime Bush family adviser, and former Democratic Congressman Lee Hamilton, who also co-chaired the 9/11 Commission whitewash of the Bush administration.

The Baker/Hamilton commission is being positioned by both the Bush administration and congressional Democrats, with the backing of the corporate-controlled media, to serve as a vehicle for tactical shifts in US policy in Iraq. It is reportedly considering both an enclave strategy, in which most US troops withdraw to Kuwait and to heavily fortified bases near the Iraqi oilfields, and a more aggressive diplomatic effort, including direct approaches to Syria and Iran.

After Bush's opening remarks there were several overtly hostile questions. One reporter asked Bush, after pointing out that his talk of "benchmarks" sounded very similar to the comments of Democrats whom the White House had denounced, "Why should the American people conclude that this is nothing from you other than semantic, rhetoric games and all politics two weeks before an election?"

Other questions expressed skepticism about how the occupation is being run and when and under what circumstances some initial withdrawal of US troops might take place, but there was no challenge to the legitimacy of the war and the goal which the US ruling elite, Democrats and Republicans alike, has set: long-term domination of the

energy resources of the Middle East and Central Asia.

Not a single question from the press corps went beyond the criticisms made by the leadership of the congressional Democrats, who charge Bush, Rumsfeld, and others with incompetence and lack of foresight in carrying out the invasion and occupation. There was no hint of a more fundamental critique of the war, from the standpoint of exposing the predatory aims—the seizure of strategic positions and oil-rich territory—which are the real motives for the American aggression.

In his typical fashion, Bush meandered through the press conference, contradicting himself repeatedly. At one point he justified continued US occupation, imploring his audience to consider “what the scenario could look like 20 or 30 years from now if we leave before the job is done.” Barely a minute later, in response to a question about the US maintaining permanent bases in Iraq, he said that it was too difficult, under the pressure of the ongoing crisis, “to be thinking about what the world’s going to look like five or 10 years from now.”

Equally absurd was Bush’s warning to Iran that Iraq is “a sovereign government” and that Tehran should not “interfere in the internal affairs” of the neighboring country. This declaration came the day after the announcement by US officials of a new policy on the part of the Iraqi government—the establishment of performance “benchmarks” for the police and military—at a press conference in Baghdad attended only by the US ambassador, Zalmay Khalilzad, and the commanding general, George Casey, with no representative of the Iraqi government.

The blatant colonialist attitude demonstrated in this announcement, followed by the early-morning raid on Sadr City, which included US fighter-bomber strikes against the Shia neighborhood, was too much even for Maliki. He went on national television in Iraq to denounce the Sadr City raid and declare that no outside force—meaning the US and its allies—had the right to dictate benchmarks to a sovereign regime in Baghdad.

“I affirm that this government represents the will of the people, and no one has the right to impose a timetable on it,” Maliki said. He said the previous day’s announcement by Khalilzad and Casey was “the result of elections taking place right now that do not involve us,” referring to the US midterm election. He said he would discuss the raid with US authorities and ensure “that it will not be repeated.”

It was perhaps in response to this outburst that Bush made the most substantive comment of his press conference, redefining the meaning of “victory” in Iraq. He dropped the pretense that a democratic Iraq is the goal of US policy, instead declaring that victory would be “a government that can sustain itself, govern itself, and defend itself.” By that

definition, of course, a government headed by Saddam Hussein would represent victory.

The implication for the Iraqi people is ominous. It follows several months of press speculation, based on leaks from US military and government sources in both Baghdad and Washington, that the Bush administration is preparing a military coup for the period following the US election, unless the Maliki government breaks with Shia radicals like Moqtada al-Sadr and backs a violent crackdown against the Mahdi Army and other Shia militias. Such a coup would install an Iraqi army general as a US front man to preside over a bloodbath against anti-occupation forces, both Sunni and Shia.

As Maliki’s remarks before the press conference demonstrated, tensions are building up between the Bush administration and the puppet regime it established in Baghdad. According to a report Wednesday in the *New York Times*, key figures in the Maliki government are pushing to amend the terms of the United Nations resolution which retroactively rubber-stamped the US occupation of Iraq and provides the ongoing legal basis for the presence of US and other foreign troops on Iraqi soil.

The forced removal of Maliki would undoubtedly trigger political convulsions throughout the country, and lead to widespread Shia attacks on the occupation forces. Already, according to one press account from Baghdad, 92 percent of the mortar and rocket attacks on the Green Zone, where the US occupation regime is headquartered, come from Sadr City, not from the Sunni areas of the city.

Meanwhile, the military situation in Iraq continues to worsen, with five more US soldiers killed in the 24 hours following Bush’s press conference, bringing the total for the month of October to 96, the highest total in nearly two years. All five of the most recent deaths were in Anbar province, the Sunni-populated region of western Iraq, much of which has become a “no-go” area for American forces because of the need to redeploy troops into the region around Baghdad.



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