

US demands bring Iraqi government to brink of collapse

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4 April 2007

Opposition among factions of the Iraqi elite to the policies being demanded by Washington has brought the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki to the brink of collapse, and with it, the façade that the US invasion has installed some form of democratic regime in Baghdad.

On Sunday, Ali al-Sistani, the highest ranking Shiite cleric in Iraq, stated that he opposed Maliki's announcement that he was seeking to abolish a range of laws that prohibit thousands of former members of Saddam Hussein's Baath party from holding government jobs or claiming retirement pensions. Maliki's agreement to end what is known as "de-Baathification" was extracted by the exiting US ambassador in Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad. The *New York Times* reported on Monday that Maliki's revised laws were "overseen" by Khalilzad.

Sistani's opposition makes it unlikely that the White House's plan to end de-Baathification will be supported by the largest faction in the Iraqi parliament—the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) coalition of Shiite religious parties, which Maliki himself belongs to. For the Bush administration, it is yet another blow to its plans to salvage something from the catastrophe that faces US imperialism in the Middle East.

Saddam Hussein's regime derived the bulk of its support from Sunni Arabs, whose upper classes have historically comprised the ruling elite in what is now Iraq. De-Baathification—the deliberate impoverishment and marginalisation of tens of thousands of members of the Sunni establishment—was one of a number of US policies aimed at re-fashioning Iraq into a pliant puppet state, resting on the support of Kurdish nationalist parties in the north and Shiite religious parties in Baghdad and the south. Alongside de-Baathification, the occupation launched a reign of terror against Sunni

Arab communities, rounding up thousands of men for abuse and intimidation in prisons like Abu Ghraib.

The result of the initial US policies after March 2003, however, was the complete opposite of what was predicted in the White House and Pentagon. The "shock-and-awe" brutality did not create a subjugated population but provoked a well-organised anti-occupation insurgency among former Baathists. The elevation of Shiite religious parties did not establish stability, but inflamed sectarian tensions between Shiites and Sunnis which has since burgeoned into a nightmarish civil war marked by indiscriminate bombings and death squads.

Having produced a debacle that has claimed thousands of American and hundreds of thousands of Iraqi lives, the Bush administration began insisting from late 2005 that the Shiite-dominated government end de-Baathification and embark on "national reconciliation" with Sunni organisations. The desperate hope in Washington has been that restoring some of the position lost by the Sunni establishment would lead to a significant reduction in the insurgency and stabilise the country sufficiently for its oil resources to be exploited.

The "surge" announced by Bush in January was coupled with political demands that Maliki's government make major concessions to the Sunni elite, cooperate with a crackdown on powerful Shiite militias, and ensure the passage of an oil and gas law that opened the country's resources to US and other transnationals.

The US occupation, however, confronts contradictions of its own creation. Bush and his cabinet pass off Maliki as the head of a "national unity" government that enjoys the support of the majority of the population. In reality, the country has no central authority and the government exerts next to no control.

The 2003 invasion shattered the only national institution that the bourgeoisie in Iraq was ever able to create—the army and its predominantly Sunni Arab officer caste. An array of tribal, sectarian and ethnic-based warlords has filled the political vacuum, ruling over suburbs and districts—or entire provinces in the case of the Kurdish nationalist parties—like feudal fiefdoms. Participation in the national government is viewed by all ruling factions as simply the means of getting their hands on resources that can be used to shore up support and extend their regional or local influence.

Supporters of Shiite organisations such as the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) and Maliki's Da'awa Party, for example, have taken over southern provincial governments and dominate the new Iraqi army and public service. The Shiite movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr has used its hold over the health ministry and four other ministries to employ thousands of its Mahdi Army militiamen as "security guards" and take control of hospitals, clinics and other key public buildings.

Sistani's rejection of de-Baathification reflects the interests of a Shiite elite who will not readily cede the power they have amassed to a revamped central state—particularly one that seeks to deliver privileges back to their Sunni rivals.

There is a widespread perception in Iraq that the US is turning against the Shiite parties for the benefit of the Hussein-era Sunni ruling class. The tensions that the Bush administration has provoked with the Shiite regime in Iran are fuelling the anti-US sentiment. There are already signs that the Sadrist movement is under intense pressure from its supporters to order the Mahdi Army back onto the streets and confront US troops.

In response to the surge, Maliki convinced Sadr to order his militia to go to ground and not to resist US operations in the Shiite suburbs of Baghdad. Last week, areas no longer defended by the Mahdi Army were struck by Sunni extremists, who killed and wounded hundreds of Shiites with car bombs. Sadr responded with a bitter denunciation of the US presence in Iraq and called for mass anti-occupation demonstrations on April 9. On Friday, reports filtered out that Mahdi Army militiamen fired on Kurdish government troops who attempted to prevent them carrying out revenge attacks in a Sunni district.

The other plans of the Bush administration that Maliki has sought to implement are also unravelling. Last month, a draft oil and gas law was announced with great fanfare. In northern Iraq, an already volatile situation has been vastly inflamed as a result. In exchange for supporting to the law, the Kurdish parties extracted an agreement in February that tens of thousands of Arabs and ethnic Turkomen would be paid to leave the oil-rich city of Kirkuk before a referendum in December over its incorporation into the autonomous "Kurdish Regional Government" (KRG).

Turkey—which is brutally repressing a Kurdish separatist movement—again warned that it would not allow a Kurdish mini-state on its border to gain control of lucrative oil resources. Tensions within Kirkuk have reached breaking point, raising the prospect of bloody fighting between Kurds, Turks and Arabs.

As a consequence, the KRG is under pressure to recall the brigades of Kurdish troops that Maliki requested be sent to assist the US forces against the Sadrist militia in Baghdad—at the very point when open clashes are looming. For its part, the Turkish government is facing nationalist demands to invade northern Iraq, using the pretext of defending the Turkic-speaking inhabitants of Kirkuk.

As for the oil and gas law being pushed by the Bush administration, it has been denounced by a range of factions in the Iraqi parliament and is unlikely to garner sufficient support to be ratified.

An inexorable logic is driving the US occupation toward dispensing with the Shiite-dominated government and openly imposing a regime that would seek to rest on the military and repress the masses as brutally as that of Saddam Hussein. The real motive behind the invasion of Iraq—US domination over the country's resources and territory—cannot be reconciled with the myriad of political and social aspirations among the Iraqi people.



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