

Under pressure from below, Sadrists ministers withdraw from Iraqi cabinet

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Six ministers of the Iraqi cabinet, members of the Shiite fundamentalist movement headed by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, formally resigned their positions on Monday. The Sadrists declared they were responding to the mass sentiment among their supporters that US and other foreign troops must be ordered to leave the country.

At a press conference in Baghdad, Sadrist representative Nassar al-Rubaie read a statement by Sadr, which declared that the resignations were in line with the “will of people” expressed during the anti-US protests by Iraqi Shiites on April 9. “The main reasons”, Rubaie stressed, “are the prime minister’s lack of response to the demands of nearly one million people in Najaf asking for the withdrawal of US forces, and against the deterioration taking place in security and services.”

Last week’s huge protest in Najaf has been deliberately downplayed in the US media and political establishment. It demonstrated, however, the anger and resentment that has been generated in the Shiite populated areas of Baghdad and southern Iraq by the escalation in US military activity ordered by President Bush in January.

The build-up of US troops has two objectives. Firstly, it is aimed at destroying the insurgent cells in Sunni Arab areas of Baghdad and western Iraq, which have waged a guerilla war against the occupation since the 2003 invasion. Secondly, it is aimed at weakening and, if possible, shattering the Shiite movement that is loyal to Sadr.

Washington has labelled the Sadrists as the “greatest threat to stability”—a euphemism for US control over Iraq. While Sadr has not called for open resistance to the US military since late 2004, and instructed his followers to participate in the US-vetted parliament, his

organisation has been compelled to articulate the anti-colonial sentiment of its social base in order to retain influence. The Sadrist movement derives the bulk of its political support from the Shiite working class and urban poor, who have consistently opposed the US occupation and whose desperate living conditions under Saddam Hussein have only worsened under American rule.

In November, reflecting the outrage of their supporters, the Sadrist members of parliament walked out after Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki met with Bush. They only returned to the parliamentary benches in January, where they have opposed the US-drafted proposed oil law that would open the country’s energy resources to foreign ownership. They have also opposed the US call for political concessions to the predominantly Sunni, upper echelons of the former Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, who are believed to be leading significant segments of the insurgency. While Washington views a potential settlement with the Baathists as a means of lessening resistance to the occupation, the Shiite masses view it as an attempt to put their former oppressors back into positions of power and privilege.

Despite their participation in the government, the Sadrists’ populist criticisms of the occupation have seen their support grow in Baghdad and the southern provinces of Iraq. The Sadrist Mahdi Army militia has also grown under the conditions of escalating sectarian attacks on Shiite civilians by Sunni extremists over the past two years. Since the destruction of a revered Shiite mosque in February last year, the Mahdi Army is believed to have conducted an ongoing campaign of reprisals that have killed thousands of Sunni men and ethnically cleansed thousands of Sunni families from Shiite neighbourhoods. By the beginning of the year,

the Mahdi Army was estimated to have as many as 60,000 fighters. It had effectively taken over much of eastern Baghdad and was competing for control of a number of southern cities.

Four years after invading Iraq, the Bush administration is faced with a situation where the most powerful political force in the country is not its own military or the Iraqi government it installed, but a volatile Shiite fundamentalist movement that opposes the selling off the country's oil industry and any suggestion of long-term US bases.

The additional US troops being sent to Iraq are being used to try to fundamentally weaken the Sadrists. US troops have entered the movement's stronghold, the densely-populated working class Sadr City suburb in eastern Baghdad. Other operations have been launched against the Mahdi Army in cities where the Sadrists are involved in power struggles with other Shiite parties.

Until now, Sadr has ordered his supporters not to attempt to physically resist. In 2004, thousands of poorly-armed Shiite fighters who rose up in the cleric's name were slaughtered by US firepower in Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf. As the US has initiated operations over the past weeks, the Sadrists have sought to avoid confrontation in order to preserve their forces. They are also seeking to avoid giving the occupation a pretext for illegalising their organisation on the eve of provincial elections in which they expect to win formal control over much of southern Iraq. The Mahdi Army has generally obeyed Sadr, although there have been relatively minor clashes with occupation troops in Diwaniya, to the south of Baghdad, and Iraq's second largest city Basra. Sadr and his top leadership have gone into hiding.

However, the actions of the US military have led to bitter recriminations in the Sadrist ranks against the lack of resistance. Hundreds of lower-level Mahdi Army fighters have been detained by US and government troops on allegations of involvement in sectarian violence. While the militia that once guarded Shiite communities has gone to ground, alleged Sunni extremists have seized the opportunity to unleash a wave of vicious bombings. On Saturday, a car bombing killed 32 and wounded 150 near a Shiite shrine in Karbala. Survivors attacked government police, accusing them of failing to prevent the attack. On Sunday, six bombs killed over 50 people in Shiite areas

of Baghdad.

The walkout from cabinet, in the wake of the Najaf demonstration, reflects the tremendous pressure on the Sadrists from below to allow the Mahdi Army to protect the Shiite population and fight back against US provocations. The Sadrists have remained in the parliament and not walked out of the ruling Shiite coalition. However, the Sadrist balancing act—accommodating to the US occupation on the one hand, while appealing to their social base on the other—is becoming increasingly untenable.

The Sadrist walkout is one more sign that the Maliki government is reaching the point of collapse. Formally, Maliki still has the numbers in parliament to rule. Politically, however, he has depended on the Sadrists to provide his puppet regime some semblance of credibility, particularly among the Shiite masses. Maliki has been told by the Bush administration that continued US support depends on carrying out its demands. Yet, as the mass protest in Najaf revealed, the government confronts widespread popular opposition to the ongoing US occupation.

The Bush administration has barely disguised its alternative to the Maliki government. Since August last year, there have been continuing hints that the US may simply oust Maliki, install a strongman and intensify its repression against the Iraqi population. At the same time, however, the US is setting the stage for a far broader rebellion by the Iraqi working class and urban poor against the despised occupation and its puppet government.



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