

US Vice President attempts to strongarm Iraqi political leaders

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US Vice President Dick Cheney flew into Baghdad on Wednesday to insist that the various political factions within the Iraqi parliament accept Washington's demands and ratify legislation that the Bush administration can present as signs of "progress" in the Iraq war.

According to the *New York Times*, Cheney engaged in 12 hours of intense discussions. He held separate meetings with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shiite; President Jalal Talabani, a Kurd; and Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi, a Sunni; in a bid to get agreement from the rival ethnic and sectarian parties. He also met with the ministers of oil, finances, interior and foreign affairs; the Iraqi army's Baghdad commander; and Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, leader of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), the largest Shiite faction in Maliki's government.

Cheney insisted that the Iraqi parliament cancel a two-month break scheduled to begin on June 30 if it has not passed key pieces of legislation. In January, the Bush administration issued an ultimatum to the Shiite and Kurdish parties that dominate Maliki's government. It demanded that they enact a US-drafted oil law and make a range of political and economic concessions to the Sunni Arab establishment that formed the upper echelon of Saddam Hussein's regime and was marginalised by the US occupation.

The White House considers these measures essential to stemming the predominantly Sunni anti-occupation insurgency and creating the conditions to exploit Iraq's vast oil and gas resources. Cheney told a press conference: "I did make it clear that we believe it is very important to move on the issues before us in a timely fashion and that any undue delay would be difficult to explain." Making clear the urgency, Cheney told the Iraqi factions: "We hoped they would approach

these issues with all deliberate dispatch."

Cheney is the third senior Bush official to travel to Iraq in the past month to pressure the government in Baghdad to implement Washington's demands. Defense Secretary William Gates held talks with Maliki in April, while Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice visited earlier this month en route to the recent international conference on Iraqi security in Egypt.

The diplomatic activity is a clear sign of desperation in the White House. Four years after Bush strutted the decks of an aircraft carrier and declared victory in Iraq, a considerable proportion of the US war machine is still tied down by an estimated 20,000 to 30,000 guerillas. The US military has proven incapable of defeating the anti-occupation insurgency.

Domestically, Bush heads one of the most reviled administrations in American history. The lies about weapons of mass destruction used to justify an invasion, which has led to the deaths of thousands of American soldiers and hundreds of thousands of Iraqis, have long been exposed. Mass antiwar sentiment in the United States resulted in an electoral debacle for the Republicans last November. The vast majority of Americans want the war ended and troops withdrawn.

Within American ruling circles, the administration is the target of increasingly bitter recriminations over the outcome of the Iraq war. The domestic opposition to the quagmire in Iraq is becoming an obstacle to the use of American military power for other purposes, including against Iran.

The Bush administration's response—the "surge" announced in January—has been to throw thousands of additional troops into combat in Iraq and to try to refashion the puppet government in Baghdad to include the Sunni factions. At the same time, it is demanding that a crackdown against the Shiite faction led by cleric

Moqtada al-Sadr, which has become a focus for popular opposition to the US occupation. The Pentagon also fears that the Sadrist militia could attack American forces in the event of any US confrontation with Iran's Shiite regime.

However, four months after the "surge" was unveiled, next to no progress has been made toward the US objectives. The Shiite establishment continues to resist any reconciliation with the Sunni elites that would lessen the power and privilege it gained after Hussein's overthrow. The Kurdish parties, which have established a de-facto separate state in northern Iraq, are resisting the oil law as it would give the central government control over the oil resources in territory they control or aspire to control.

The impasse created by the conflicting vested interests has led Sunni-based parties to threaten to abandon the political process altogether. Moqtada al-Sadr's movement has already responded to US military attacks on its strongholds by walking out of Maliki's cabinet and organising anti-occupation protests. The armed resistance to the occupation—by both Sunni and Shiite guerilla groups—is also burgeoning. US casualties in April were the highest for the year. In summary, the "surge" is looming as another political debacle for the Bush administration.

The crisis confronting the White House was exemplified by Cheney's visit. As with every high profile visit to Iraq, the trip was unannounced. He entered the country in secret wearing a bullet-proof vest and was rushed under heavy guard from the airport to the fortified Green Zone in central Baghdad.

Word of Cheney's presence spread and provoked a hostile reaction. Angry demonstrations were held by the Sadrist movement in Baghdad, Najaf and Karbala, denouncing the US occupation and labelling the US vice president a "sponsor of terrorism". In the late afternoon, a rocket fired from the predominantly Shiite suburbs to the east of the Green Zone shook the building where he was meeting with Iraqi politicians.

Despite hours of talks, Cheney effectively left empty-handed. Maliki could give no commitment to pass the legislation wanted by Washington or even to ensure that parliament would continue sitting past June 30. By contrast, the day before Cheney's visit, Sadrist legislators secured a parliamentary majority for a non-binding resolution demanding the US set a timetable

for the withdrawal of all its military forces.

In Washington, the Bush administration is no doubt weighing up other options. If the present political set-up in Baghdad will not serve US ends, the alternative is to dispense with the Iraqi parliament altogether and impose an openly dictatorial form of rule.



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