

Bush administration failing to achieve its “benchmarks” in Iraq

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US President Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice have all personally warned Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki that time is running out. Deadlines have gone or are fast approaching. Still, the Bush administration is no closer to achieving the “benchmarks” it demanded of the Iraqi government on January 10 and linked to the success of its current military “surge”.

The benchmarks are intended to pressure the Shiite- and Kurdish-dominated Iraqi government into agreeing to a new power-sharing arrangement. The US wanted major concessions made to the predominantly Sunni Arab elite of the former Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein, in the hope that significant sections of the Sunni insurgency would end their armed resistance. The marginalisation of the Baathists and the elevation of Shiite and Kurdish parties following the US invasion was a factor in the eruption of an anti-occupation guerilla war in Sunni areas, as well as the subsequent outbreak of a sectarian civil war.

The revamping of the puppet government in Baghdad was also an essential component of the Bush administration’s broader regional strategy. In its escalating confrontation with Iran, the White House has appealed for support from so-called Sunni states such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, which are hostile to the growing Iranian influence in the region, including within the Iraqi government. In part, the US “benchmarks” are aimed at fashioning a regime in Baghdad more acceptable to US regional allies and supportive of any American military action against Shiite Iran.

At the top of Washington’s agenda is the passage of an Iraqi oil law opening up the country to US corporations, but the legislation is mired in conflicting interests.

The Bush administration has demanded that the Iraqi government revise the US-drafted 2006 constitution that handed control over new oil production to the Kurdish- and Shiite-dominated provinces in the north and south where the country’s main fields are located. Unless the constitution is changed, the central Iraqi government and the predominantly Sunni, but resource-poor, provinces of central and western

Iraq would see the bulk of oil revenue flowing to the Kurdish and Shiite elites. The alienated Sunni establishment would have no material incentive to withdraw its support for the anti-US armed struggle.

In another concession to the Sunni elite, the US has insisted on an end to the “de-Baathification” policy, which excludes senior members of the Baath Party from holding posts in the government, the state administration or military. Bush also wants provincial elections be held later this year, enabling Sunni parties, which boycotted the previous poll, to gain control of the Sunni provinces.

The White House calculated that the Kurdish and Shiite factions would fall into line with the US agenda. On this political front, however, the surge is clearly failing.

The Iraqi constitutional reform committee, which had until May 22 to recommend changes to the constitution to the parliament, could not agree on a final draft. The Kurdish nationalist parties, key allies of the US occupation from the outset, have refused to accept revisions that would take new oil production out of the hands of the semi-autonomous Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), which administers three northern, predominantly Kurdish provinces.

Some Shiite leaders have also opposed any weakening of the regional and provincial powers over the oil industry. The Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), another crucial US ally, has expressed ambitions to establish a Shiite region in southern Iraq, which would contain the largest of Iraq’s untapped oilfields.

The US helped draw up a new oil law overturning regional control, which was accepted by Maliki’s cabinet in April. Parliament is supposed to pass the bill by May 31. The legislation calls for 93 percent of Iraq’s untapped oil fields to be put under the control of a state-owned national oil company, which would be answerable to the central government and would allocate contracts to foreign corporations. Revenues would be collected by the national government, then distributed to the provinces on the basis of population and need.

The failure to modify the constitution, however,

effectively kills the new oil law. The KRG issued a statement on April 27 labelling the proposed legislation “unconstitutional”. It declared that the law “will not be supported by the KRG in the federal parliament”. The establishment of a national oil company, the KRG stated, “breaches requirements under the Iraq constitution that the petroleum sector be developed through private investment, with regional control over new petroleum fields, and joint development between regions and the federal government of currently producing fields”.

The wording of the original constitution also means the KRG has a veto over any changes affecting its powers. Clause 126 (4) of the document states: “Articles of the constitution may not be amended if such amendment takes away from the powers of the regions that are not within the exclusive powers of the federal authorities, except by the approval of the legislative authority of the concerned region and the approval of the majority of its citizens in a general referendum.”

The Kurdish parties have also rejected any change to the constitutionally mandated date of December 31, 2007, to hold a referendum in the province of Kirkuk to determine whether it will become part of the Kurdish region. Over 40 percent of Iraq’s known oil fields are located in Kirkuk.

The Shiite movement led by cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, two Sunni-based parties and the secular front headed by former interim prime minister Iyad Allawi have each declared their opposition to the referendum. The International Crisis Group warned in an April report that full-scale civil war was likely to erupt in northern Iraq if the Kurdish parties did not give up their ambitions to take the province. Representatives of the Arab and Turkomen communities in Kirkuk have threatened to take up arms to prevent the referendum—which has been structured to ensure that Kurdish voters will be a clear majority in the area.

While the Kurdish nationalists are blocking the oil law and threatening to plunge the north into turmoil, the Shiite parties in the government are blocking any end to de-Baathification.

The Shiite clerical establishment, the SIIC and the Sadrist movement have opposed any large-scale rehabilitation of the former regime’s upper echelon. While the Bush administration considers “national reconciliation” to be an essential ingredient in convincing Sunni insurgents to lay down their arms, the Shiite religious factions view it as threat to their power and privileges. Moreover, their supporters among the Shiite population suffered brutal repression under Saddam Hussein and bitterly oppose any concessions to the Baathists.

A Sadrist legislator, Falah Hassan Shansal, told the *Washington Post* last week: “If national reconciliation is at

the expense of return of the assassin Baathists, then we will reject reconciliation.”

The Maliki government is stalling on setting dates for the holding of provincial elections. Maliki’s Da’wa Party and the SIIC fear that the Sadrist movement will take control of most of the predominantly Shiite southern provinces if polls take place.

A significant section of the Shiite population view Da’wa and the SIIC as US puppets. The Sadrists, by contrast, fought a brief uprising against American forces in 2004. While they subsequently entered into a coalition with the other Shiite parties and the government, the Sadrists have strengthened their base of support by demanding that the Bush administration set a timetable for the withdrawal of all US and foreign troops. In April, as popular opposition heightened toward the US “surge” in Baghdad, Sadr ordered his supporters to resign from Maliki’s cabinet.

The Sadrists boycotted the provincial elections in 2005 but believe they can now win most of the south in any new poll. In a show of political strength, hundreds of thousands of people took part in a Sadrist rally in Najaf on April 9 to protest against the US occupation. Over the past several months, bloody clashes have taken place between the Saadrist Mahdi Army and rival Shiite militias in Basra, Najaf, Nasiriyah, and smaller southern cities, as local rivalries intensify.

Concerned that the Sadrist movement could become a dangerous focus for opposition to the US occupation, the US military is seeking to weaken or destroy the Mahdi Army and take control of its stronghold in the Baghdad suburb of Sadr City. However, US military operations against the Mahdi Army have done little to weaken its influence.



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