Iraq: US occupation faces crisis of its own making

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The much-touted successes of the Bush administration's deployment of 30,000 American additional troops to Iraq last year rest on unstable and rapidly eroding foundations. The unstated fear in the Pentagon debate over how many American troops can be withdrawn this year is that the policies associated with the surge have created potential triggers for a return to wide-spread resistance.

Three laws passed by the Iraqi parliament on February 13 embody the looming crisis. The legislation consisted of the government's 2008 budget, an amnesty for thousands of Sunnis who have been detained during counter-insurgency operations and, finally, the definition of the power-sharing arrangements between the federal government in Baghdad and provincial authorities and the naming of October 1 as the date for long-overdue provincial elections. In January, a law was enacted that went some way toward lifting US-imposed restrictions on political activities by former members of the Sunni-dominated Baath Party of former dictator Saddam Hussein.

US ambassador in Iraq Ryan Crocker hailed the bills' passage as "important steps forward". The parliament, he declared, "deserves congratulations from all of us". The truth is that the legislation was accepted only because of intense pressure on a number of major factions in the Iraqi establishment to accept a curtailment of their ambitions. In many cases, political groupings have been compelled to accept policies that fail to meet the guarantees they were given by US officials and officers in exchange for cooperating with the occupation.

The Sunni establishment, which has suffered the greatest losses of power and privilege under US occupation, has been left with an array of grievances. The de-Baathification law still bars former Baathists from holding positions in security ministries. The military and police remain firmly under the influence of the Shiite fundamentalist parties that dominate the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

The amnesty law, which Sunni parties had claimed would free the majority of detainees, only applies to those in Iraqi government facilities—not the more than 20,000 people being held in US-operated prison camps. It also does not cover thousands of men accused of "terrorism" and other charges levelled against Iraqis captured while engaged in armed resistance to the US occupation.

Now, aggravating the sense of betrayal, the provincial election law makes clear that the US authorities and the Shiite-dominated government are offering Sunni factions the role of a side-lined minority at best.

The last provincial elections in 2005 were boycotted by the majority of Sunnis out of sympathy for the insurgency. The low turnout in majority Sunni provinces led to the formation of unrepresentative governments by Shiite parties or Sunni groups that were collaborating with the occupation.

The former insurgent groups that have agreed during the past year to end resistance and join US-backed Awakening Councils demanded that they be represented in the provincial governments before new ballots were held. One reason is their concern that the parties installed in 2005 will use their grip over electoral authorities to rig the vote in October. The provincial law did not meet this concern. It instead proposed that the United Nations—which has little presence in the country, and especially not in the volatile Sunni areas—assist in organising and monitoring the ballot.

The limited character of the concessions to Sunni demands coincides with growing frustration inside the ranks of the Awakening Councils. The primary motive for ending much of the insurgency last year was fear in the Sunni elite and population as a whole over the entrenchment of Shiite fundamentalist power. The bloody Sunni-Shiite civil war that developed throughout 2006 led to mass killings in Sunni areas and the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Sunnis from Baghdad and other mixed areas.

In desperation, tribal councils and Baathist-linked insurgent groups in western Iraq and the surrounds of Baghdad accepted US overtures for a deal. In exchange for a ceasefire and substantial bribes, they formed US-financed militias—which now number close to 80,000—to work with American units in hunting down and destroying Islamist groups that continued resistance. American troops prevent Shiite troops, police and militia from entering the areas under the control of the Awakening Councils. In Iraq's capital, the US military has flung up 12-foot concrete walls around Sunni suburbs to protect them from Shiite militias, establishing little more than ghettos.

The curbing of Sunni attacks on US forces has been a key factor in the substantial drop in American casualties. The collaboration, however, has not led to the hoped-for significant political openings for the Sunni elite or their followers. The Shiite parties view the Awakening Councils as a long-term threat to their power. Maliki has refused demands that the Sunni militias be recruited into the military or police.

The tensions are now surfacing. In Diyala province, the

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Awakening Council has suspended all cooperation with the occupation and the government over allegations that the local Shiite police are continuing to launch pogroms against Sunnis. Over recent weeks there have been several more incidents in which US troops have allegedly mistaken the militiamen for insurgents and attacked them. A Sunni militia in Babil, close to Baghdad, temporarily suspended all collaboration this week over the US killing of three of its members and two women in separate incidents last Thursday and Friday.

In the western Anbar province, the Awakening Council has issued an ultimatum to the provincial government to resign by April or it will use its 20,000-strong Sunni militia to overthrow it. The government is headed by the Sunni Iraqi Islamic Party, one of the few Sunni organisations to stand candidates in the 2005 ballot. Only 2 percent of the population of Anbar voted.

Another key aspect of the provincial law only intensifies the prospect of violence over the coming months. The legislation leaves the way open for provinces in other parts of Iraq to form regions with comparable powers to the Kurdish Regional Government in the north (KRG). There is still no oil law to block regions from using clauses of the 2005 US-drafted constitution to claim jurisdiction over the development of new oil and gas fields. In the north, the KRG has proceeded in defiance of opposition in Baghdad to sign contracts with transnational companies for the exploration and opening up of 15 fields.

The main party of the Shiite business and clerical establishment, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), is a strong advocate of regionalism. It will be seeking to gain control of the majority Shiite-populated southern provinces in the October election and pursue its perspective of establishing an oil-rich autonomous region centred on the Shiite religious capital, Najaf. The focus of its efforts will be Basra—the centre of the oil industry—which is currently governed by a Shiite faction which opposes ISCI's plans.

An ISCI-controlled Shiite regional government is expected to seek to appropriate the bulk of the oil revenues generated by new developments in the south, where more than 60 percent of Iraq's reserves are located. Shiite regionalism therefore threatens to deprive the elite in both the central Sunni provinces and Baghdad, with its mixed Sunni-Shiite population, of any minor benefits from the planned opening up of Iraq's vast untapped oil and gas resources to US and other transnational energy corporations.

The centralist tendencies that advocate the concentration of powers in the hands of the Baghdad government include Sunni parties, the alliance headed by former Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, as well as the Baghdad-based Shiite Sadrist movement and the Basra-based Shiite Islamic Virtue Party. Apart from their rejection of regionalism, these factions agree on little else. They represent rival and, at times, openly hostile tendencies.

They came together, however, to attempt to block the provincial law. The vote for the bill was deadlocked 82-82 and only passed by the speaker's casting vote. They also combined in an outpouring of resentment against the Kurdish region during the parliamentary sittings. The centralists stridently called for the share of the federal budget paid to the KRG to be reduced from 17 percent to between 14 and 15 percent. While a compromise was reached that agreed to the 17 percent, it stipulated that a census must be held before the next budget to determine what percentage of the population actually lives in the KRG. A majority rejected a Kurdish demand that the Baghdad government pay the wages of the 80,000-strong Kurdish *peshmerga* militiamen in northern Iraq.

The conflict over regionalism creates two additional flashpoints. Firstly, within the ranks of the Shiite Sadrist movement, there are increasing demands for its leader Moqtada al Sadr to end his opposition to armed resistance to the pro-US government. While the Sadrist Mahdi Army militia generally complied with the "ceasefire" that Sadr announced last August, the US military and ISCI-controlled forces stepped up operations to substantially weaken the Sadrist position in the south ahead of the provincial elections. Hundreds and possibly thousands of Mahdi militiamen have been killed or detained during the surge. More and more dissident groupings are breaking with Sadr in order to fight back.

Over the past several days, US forces in Baghdad have come under stepped-up attack from alleged "rogue" Shiite militiamen. On Monday and Tuesday, Katuysha rockets were fired at American bases in and near the capital, killing at least one civilian contractor and wounding two soldiers.

The second volatile area is the northern oil-rich city of Kirkuk. The opposition in Baghdad toward the Kurdish nationalists' claims on resources has further poisoned the debate over the holding of a referendum in Kirkuk to determine whether the majority Kurdish population wishes to join the KRG.

The Bush administration pressured the Kurdish leadership last December to accept a delay in the scheduled holding of a vote in order to cement Washington's own geo-political relations with Turkey, which opposes any strengthening of Kurdish regionalism.

The KRG now faces the likelihood that the Iraqi parliamentary majority will push for the delay to become indefinite. Open warfare over the issue is becoming more likely. Moreover, there are signals that the Turkish government intends to intervene to ensure no vote takes place. The Turkish media reported this week that the plans are being finalised for the deployment of tens of thousands of Turkish troops into northern Iraq during March. While the ostensible reason is to hunt down Kurdish separatists of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), the operation will be designed to threaten the KRG into dropping its designs on Kirkuk.

A year after the surge began, disgruntled Sunni, Shiite and, increasingly, Kurdish factions are seething with resentment toward the cynical manipulation and false promises made by the Bush White House and US commander General David Petraeus. The political alienation is intensified by the social catastrophe that continues to afflict the vast majority of the population. For all the talk of "reconstruction", millions of people lack jobs, clean water, adequate food, fuel, electricity and sewerage. The ebb in the anti-occupation insurgency over the past six months may prove to be short-lived.

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