

Iraq: Political factions manoeuvre for next election

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A political realignment is taking place in Iraq ahead of national elections on January 30, with Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki seeking to retain Washington's support by attempting to meet a series of concerns in American ruling circles over the future of the Iraq occupation.

To provide the forces needed for President Obama's refocus of US foreign policy on Central Asia and the war in Afghanistan, the Pentagon is working to extricate equipment and troops from Iraq. According to Brigadier General Heidi Brown, by September 2010, the White House wants to cut the number of military personnel from the present 130,000 to 50,000. While the bulk of the US troop withdrawals will take place after the Iraqi election, most remaining Marine units and one Army brigade are being pulled out by the end of this year.

The objective of the six-and-a-half year occupation has been to consolidate the country as a US client state and military base in the Middle East and to open up its large oil and gas resources to corporate exploitation. Washington's primary concern, therefore, as US troops are withdrawn, is that Iraq does not politically fracture, remains subservient to Washington and does not come under the sway of regional powers such as Iran.

Maliki's orientation dovetails with that of the US strategic and military planners. Unlike the elections in January and December 2005, his Da'wa Party has refused to ally with the two formations that have dominated the previous puppet governments—the Shiite Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) and the Kurdish nationalist bloc. Instead, Maliki is putting himself forward as an Iraqi nationalist advocate of a centralised state and an opponent of both Shiite sectarianism and Kurdish territorial claims in the north.

Maliki's position could change over the coming months if it becomes clear he will be defeated. At this point, however, Da'wa will directly oppose the ISCI-led Iraqi National Alliance (INA)—which is largely made up of Shiite religious parties—in the majority Shiite-populated southern provinces. To provide substance to his claim of being “non-sectarian,” Maliki is believed to be seeking an alliance with the Sunni tribal

Awakening movement in the western province of Anbar and the Al-Hadbaa Party, which secured control of the northern province of Nineveh in provincial elections in January by opposing Kurdish expansion.

Maliki's break with the Shiite alliance corresponds with US concerns that ISCI is too close to the religious and political hierarchy in Iran. ISCI was formed in Iran in 1982 by Iraqi Shiite fundamentalist exiles. The protracted illness and death last month of its leader, Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim, who backed the US invasion, may lead to factional infighting and the sidelining of other leaders known to be close to Washington, particularly the current ISCI vice-president, Adel Abd al-Mehdi.

By separating from ISCI, Maliki is seeking to distance Da'wa from policies that earned the hatred of substantial sections of the Sunni and Shiite population. ISCI's Iranian-trained Badr Brigade militia served as a ruthless ally of the US military in the repression of the anti-occupation insurgency. Thousands of its members joined the Iraqi Army and special police units that were involved in the death squad operations that killed thousands of Sunnis and led to a mass Sunni exodus from Baghdad in 2006 and 2007.

Badr Brigade loyalists also played leading roles in the offensives in 2007 and 2008 against sections of the Shiite Sadrist movement. Sadrist fighters continued to resist the occupation even though cleric Moqtada al-Sadr called for an end to resistance in 2005 and Sadrists joined the first Shiite alliance and subsequently took positions in the government.

The Sadrists ultimately walked out of Maliki's government in 2007 to try to maintain credibility. They have lost much of their support among the Shiite working class and urban poor, however. In the provincial elections in January, barely 40 percent of people voted in former Sadrist strongholds such as Sadr City in Baghdad and Sadrist-backed candidates generally did poorly. Sadr now resides in the Iranian city of Qum, where he is seeking to boost his religious credentials.

Underscoring the chasm that exists between the Sadrist

movement and its former social base, its leaders agreed last month to take part in the ISCI-led INA in the coming election. The INA also includes the Basra-based Fadhila Party and a break-away from Da'wa led by Ibrahim al-Jaafari—the first Shiite prime minister under occupation.

Ahmad Chalabi—the CIA-paid Iraqi exile who helped the Bush administration fabricate the lies about Iraqi “weapons of mass destruction”—has also resurfaced as a prominent INA member. He was so hated in Iraq that the occupation regime ultimately decided he was politically unusable. Less than a year after the invasion, he was accused by US officials of being an Iranian spy and sidelined. In the December 2005 elections, his Iraqi National Congress did not win a single seat in parliament.

Maliki will be hoping to duplicate what took place in the provincial elections, in which Da'wa and its allies opposed ISCI and removed ISCI governors from power in most of the southern provinces.

Da'wa derived its support in the south primarily from Shiite members of the new public service and the bloated security apparatus of over 600,000 Iraqi soldiers and police. Its electoral success has been primarily due to mass abstention among the working class and urban poor, who are alienated from all of the existing parties, including the Sadrists.

Maliki's US-backed campaign of “national unity” and “stability” is largely directed toward the Sunni Arab elites, who were marginalised after the US invasion and the fall of Saddam Hussein. While many Sunnis have been involved in the anti-occupation insurgency and suffered the worst US repression, Maliki is hoping that the support of Sunni parties and their voters could compensate for the likely low turn-out among Shiites.

Washington has been insisting for at least three years that Maliki reach a deal with the Sunni organisations. The dramatic reduction in anti-occupation resistance during the 2007 US troop surge was partially the result of buying off sections of the Sunni insurgency with offers of amnesty, cash and a degree of political power. At the same time, the US military and Iraq's Shiite-dominated security forces carried out mass killings of Sunni insurgents and civilians in areas that continued to resist.

Insurgent leaderships accepted substantial bribes to convert their guerrilla forces into US-paid militias, numbering over 100,000. Washington is determined to ensure that this arrangement does not break down as US troops are withdrawn. Maliki is offering the Anbar and Nineveh Awakenings an alliance predicated on continued payments to their leaderships, jobs for militia members, particularly in the security forces, and positions in the next government.

In northern Iraq, the coming together of the Sunni and Shiite elite around Maliki would mean the central government would aggressively oppose any expansion of the autonomous Kurdish region.

The Kurdish nationalist parties have demanded since 2003 that the oil-rich province of Kirkuk and the Kurdish-populated areas of Nineveh and other northern provinces should be placed under the jurisdiction of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG). These claims are bitterly opposed by the Maliki government and Arab-based parties—both Sunni and Shiite—who believe it would ultimately lead to the Iraq's partition. These parties appeal to the ethnic Arab and Turkomen population in the disputed territories who fear repression at Kurdish hands.

While the Bush administration initially relied heavily on the Kurdish parties following the 2003 invasion, Washington has shifted course, particularly since the troop surge. A referendum on the future status of Kirkuk and the disputed territories was supposed to have been held by November 2007, according to the US-written Iraqi constitution. It was “postponed” under White House pressure and is unlikely to ever take place.

In recent months, US officials and senior military commanders have made repeated visits to the KRG to warn the Kurdish leadership against insisting on a referendum. Washington is deeply concerned, however, that ongoing tensions could erupt in an Arab-Kurdish civil war that would plunge northern Iraq into chaos and threaten to involve neighbouring regional powers.

The election campaign marks the beginning of a new and volatile stage of the neo-colonial US takeover of Iraq. After the deaths of some 1.2 million people and the reduction of the country to Third World conditions, the Obama administration calculates that it can consolidate an American client state with minimal direct US military involvement.

This policy, however, is based on the gamble that sections of the Shiite establishment around ISCI will accept being marginalised, that the Kurdish nationalists will forsake their ambitions and, above all, that the Iraqi working class will continue to bear the appalling living standards and lack of democratic rights imposed by the US occupation without rebelling.



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