

Washington moves to thwart Sadrist role in a new Iraqi government

Barry Grey
4 October 2010

The decision of the anti-US Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr to throw his support behind caretaker Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki in the months-long stalemate over the formation of a new government in Iraq has set off a flurry of political jockeying within the country and sparked alarm in Washington.

Sadr, in self-imposed exile in Iran since 2007, had up until the announcement on Friday opposed a second term as prime minister for Maliki. Backed by US forces, Maliki in 2008 broke the grip of Sadr's Mahdi Army militia in Baghdad's Sadr City Shiite slum as well as in the southern Shiite capital of Basra. While ordering his supporters to put down their arms, Sadr has continued to denounce the US occupation and called for the total withdrawal of US troops.

As a result of Sadr's anti-occupation posture, his was the only party to gain new seats in the national parliamentary elections held on March 7, winning 39 of the 325 positions. In the election, the Iraqiya block headed by former prime minister and one-time CIA asset Ayad Allawi won the most seats, 91, while Maliki's State of Law bloc won 89. However, both Allawi and Maliki fell far short of the overall 163 majority needed to form a new government, and neither has in the intervening seven months been able to cobble together a sufficiently large coalition.

Maliki's bloc is almost entirely Shiite and overtly religious. Allawi, a Shiite, won the votes of secular Shiites and the overwhelming majority of Sunni voters. The Kurdish parties, which wield quasi-autonomous power in the north of Iraq, won 57 seats.

Allawi has insisted that his bloc will not participate in any government headed by Maliki and has refused to date to entertain the possibility of a broad coalition regime. He has warned of a new outbreak of violence by Sunnis and other minorities.

Washington, fearful that the emergence of an openly sectarian Shiite government will fuel sectarian violence within Iraq and increase Iranian influence over the country, has been pressing for some form of power sharing between Maliki and Allawi. The Obama administration has been particularly intent on excluding from power Sadr and his pro-Iranian allies in the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). The Sadrist forces and ISCI make up the bulk of the Iraqi National Alliance, which made the official announcement Friday nominating Maliki to succeed himself as prime minister.

Maliki hailed the announcement in a televised statement broadcast Friday evening, casting it as a decisive breakthrough in the political stalemate that paves the way for his return to power. He appealed to Allawi and his supporters to participate in a government under his leadership.

However, in a statement on the web site of Allawi's party, spokesman Hayder al-Mulla said a Shiite-dominated government headed by Maliki would violate the voters' desire for "a genuine partnership" of Iraqi groups.

Kurdish spokesmen hailed the announcement and said it increased the likelihood that they would throw their support behind Maliki and propel him to a second term. Kurdish lawmakers met over the weekend to map out their agenda for negotiations with Maliki, set to begin today.

The Kurds will press their demands for control over the oilfields around Kirkuk, including the right to implement deals with foreign oil companies they have unilaterally negotiated, for even greater political autonomy, and for the holding of a much-delayed referendum on political control of Kirkuk, currently contested between the city's Kurdish, Sunni Muslim

and Turkmen populations.

Kurdish spokesmen have also demanded an “inclusive” government with representation from Allawi’s Iraqiya block.

A spokesman for the Sadrists said they have demanded key government posts, including deputy parliamentary speaker and as many as six of the 34 cabinet-level ministry positions to be filled. They are insisting on a post linked to security operations and have raised the possibility of holding the trade ministry. Another party official said the Sadrists would seek the prime minister post after the withdrawal of the remaining 50,000 US troops.

This is anathema to the United States, and Washington will use its immense influence as the occupying power to frustrate these plans. There are already suggestions that some Shiite factions within the Iraqi National Alliance will not go along with Sadr’s support for Maliki, and Allawi’s Iraqiya bloc announced Friday that it was initiating talks with two smaller Shiite groups in the alliance, as well as ten other deputies.

The Obama administration has pressed for a resolution of the government impasse, fearing that a continuation of the logjam will fuel political instability and civil strife. However, there are clear signs that it will work to prolong the stalemate rather than allow Sadr and other pro-Iranian forces to gain significant power in a new government.

The *Washington Post* reported Friday: “But in Washington, a senior Obama administration official said he did not expect Maliki to be able to form a government with the Sadrists and suggested that the agreement may end up accelerating negotiations over a broader-based government. A split among Shiites, with major groups refusing to go along with the Sadrists, leaves Maliki ‘still 30 seats short of a majority,’ the official said. ‘He needs to deal.’”

The US has officially adopted a posture of neutrality toward the outcome of the governmental horse trading in Iraq, but former officials and the media have made clear Washington’s hostility to the Sadrists gaining a political foothold. The *Post* quoted Kenneth Pollack, an analyst with the Brookings Institution and Iraq policymaker in the Clinton administration, as saying, “The Sadrists having a key role in the next government of Iraq was one of the few redlines that the Obama

administration had. They’ve staged this major comeback, and the administration is very, very worried about that. This is something Iran has been trying to do for months. Clearly this is a big win for them and really bad for us.”

The *New York Times* on Saturday quoted Daniel P. Serwer, a vice president at the United States Institute of Peace, as saying in an email: “An Iraqi government that owes its existence to the Sadrists and lacks strong support from Allawi would necessarily be one that leans in Tehran’s direction, something Washington can little afford at the moment.”

Just last week, the deputy commander of US forces in Baghdad accused a Sadr-linked militia group of being behind a surge of rocket attacks targeting the US embassy and other US installations.

As the *Times* article broadly hinted, a major concern of the US is that the presence of the Sadrists would complicate plans being worked out between Washington and Baghdad to maintain a substantial US troop presence in Iraq after the end of 2011, when all US troops are supposed to be removed under the terms of the Status of Forces Agreement between the two countries.

“One of the main issues facing Iraq in the coming year,” the article concluded, “is what, if any, American military presence will continue after the deadline in December, 2011 for withdrawing the remaining 50,000 American troops here.

“Diplomats and military commanders here have already signaled an interest in maintaining a close security relationship with Iraq as it rebuilds its armed services and solidifies its fragile democratic institutions.

“While many Iraqi political and military leaders have expressed support for that, the Sadrists remain opposed to what they call ‘a foreign occupation.’”



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact