

Iraqi cabinet established nine months after election

James Cogan
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The Iraqi parliament ratified Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's new cabinet on Tuesday, more than nine months after the March 7 election. Its composition conforms to US demands that Maliki give cabinet posts to all the main ethno-sectarian factions in the parliament and senior positions to the Sunni-based Iraqiya alliance led by former CIA asset Ayad Allawi. At the same time, it leaves Maliki, now a proven servant of the US occupation of the country, firmly in charge of the key security ministries that control the armed forces and paramilitary National Police.

Out of 45 cabinet positions, Maliki named candidates for only 35, including his post of prime minister and three deputy prime ministers. Acting ministers were appointed for the remaining 10 positions. Maliki nominated himself to serve as the acting minister for the key portfolios of Defence, Interior and National Security.

US State Department official Philip Crowley declared on Wednesday that Washington had not "dictated the terms of the government". In reality, constant American pressure was applied to Maliki, Allawi, Kurdish leaders and other prominent Iraqi politicians throughout the entire nine-month process to form a cabinet. The US intervention included numerous personal phone calls and visits to Baghdad by both President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden.

The key objective of the Obama administration has been to ensure that the next Iraqi government will "request" a long-term military partnership with the US when the current Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) expires at the end of 2011. The SOFA is the legal basis upon which some 50,000 American troops remain in Iraq, operating from large strategic air bases such as Balad and Tallil and Al Asad. US imperialism spent billions of dollars

establishing these advanced bases as part of its wider strategic plans and has no intention of abandoning them.

A secondary objective of Washington has been to compel the Shiite and Kurdish parties that dominated the earlier puppet governments in Iraq to give greater powers and privileges to the Sunni establishment, which had largely supported the former Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein and been marginalised following the 2003 invasion. The bulk of the insurgency against the US occupation was waged in Sunni-populated areas of the country. During 2007 and 2008, a combination of mass killings and financial pay-offs brought most of the Sunni resistance to an end, allowing the US military to withdraw some of its forces and redeploy them to Afghanistan.

As it reduces its footprint in Iraq to a handful of key bases, the US has clear interests in preventing the re-emergence of an anti-occupation resistance. Washington has therefore insisted on a power-sharing arrangement in which the Sunni elite is paid off with key positions.

Over the past nine months, the US has insisted to both Maliki and Allawi that they form a "national unity" government that includes all factions. The election result was inconclusive, with Allawi's largely Sunni-backed coalition winning 91 seats in the 325-member parliament, and Maliki's Shiite coalition winning 89. With neither having a majority, they either had to combine or gain the support of two other parliamentary blocs: the Shiite fundamentalists, including those loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, and the Kurdish nationalists, whose main concern is protecting the autonomous status of the Kurdish north of Iraq.

The US has broadly achieved its aims of a national unity government, with the key ministries held by figures from

Maliki's and Allawi's coalitions, and the anti-occupation Sadrists relegated to less sensitive posts.

Saleh al-Mutlaq, a figure close to the former Baathist establishment and one of the most senior figures in Iraqiya, has been appointed one of the deputy prime ministers. In January, Mutlaq was banned from standing in the election and holding any political position under the "anti-Baathist" laws enacted by the previous Shiite and Kurdish-dominated government. To appease Washington and clear the way for his cabinet appointment, the ban on Mutlaq and two other Sunni politicians was reversed by a parliamentary vote on Saturday.

Nine other members of Iraqiya were also given cabinet positions, including Finance, Industry and Communications. While Allawi was not among them, he is slated to head a body known as the National Council for Security Policies. The Council has not been convened and its actual role and powers are still the subject of backroom negotiations between the US, Maliki and Allawi. Ostensibly, however, it will have influence over the security forces and shape Iraqi foreign policy, including the formulation of long-term military relations with the US.

Allawi, after months of bitterly demanding that he named prime minister, told journalists that the new government would have Iraqiya's "full support". He pledged it would play "an active, productive and cooperative role".

Twenty members of the two Shiite fundamentalist coalitions were appointed to the cabinet. The Sadrist bloc was given eight posts, but, as the US had demanded, not any foreign policy or security-related portfolios.

The Sadrists staged a short-lived uprising against the US occupation in 2004 and still formally call for the withdrawal of US forces from Iraq. Over recent years, Sadr has built up close ties with the Iranian regime and is viewed by the White House and Pentagon as little more than a stalking horse for Tehran to frustrate US ambitions for a permanent presence.

US officials allowed the Sadrists to have some representation in order to placate their large social base among the Shiite urban poor in Baghdad and major southern Iraqi cities. Sadr's movement plays a critical

role for the US and the Maliki government by suppressing calls among the Shiite majority for armed resistance to the occupation. Recognising the importance of the Sadrists in containing social discontent, Maliki has put two of their leaders in charge of the labour and housing ministries.

The oil ministry has been handed over to Abdul Karim al-Luaibi, a technocrat close to Maliki who negotiated the first contracts that gave major energy transnationals access to Iraq's untapped oil reserves. Prominent Shiite fundamentalist Hussein al-Shahristani, the former oil minister, has been elevated to deputy prime minister for energy issues and the acting minister for electricity.

Luaibi and Shahristani are expected to aggressively push ahead with the further opening up of Iraq's resources to foreign companies, with the perspective of increasing oil production from 2.5 million barrels per day to 12 million barrels. Luaibi told journalists that one of his priorities would be to resolve a long-standing dispute with the autonomous Kurdish Regional Government in the north, which has insisted on its right to enter into oil contracts separate from the national government.

Obama and Biden reportedly both telephoned Maliki and Allawi to congratulate them on the cabinet. Former US ambassador to Iraq Christopher Hill told the *New York Times*: "This is a good day for US policy in Iraq. Iraqis are not fond of giving Christmas presents, but I think they gave us one today." The backslapping and self-congratulations in Washington underscore the utterly venal character of the Iraqi government and the pro-imperialist agenda it will seek to pursue over the following months and years.

The new "national unity" government—under intense pressure from Washington—has temporarily papered over sharp differences in the Iraqi political establishment, but has not resolved the deep political turmoil in the ruling elites, much less the acute economic and social crisis facing working people.



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