Violent crackdown on Iraqi opposition

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Dozens of armed police shut down the Baghdad offices of two opposition political parties Sunday, in the latest demonstration of the dictatorial reality of US-occupied Iraq's nominally "democratic" government.

Officials of the Iraqi Nation Party and the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) said that their offices had been seized two days after tens of thousands turned out in anti-government demonstrations that met with violent repression from the security forces of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

The Iraqi cabinet denied that it was outlawing the two parties, claiming instead that the buildings were state property and had been taken because the Ministry of Defense was "in need of these buildings now."

A senior leader of the Iraqi Nation Party, Mithal al-Alusi, told the *New York Times* that officials of Maliki's Dawa Party had spoken to him before the March 4 protests and asked him to throw his support behind the government. He said that the seizure of the offices was an act of retaliation for this refusal.

The action against the ICP and Iraqi Nation Party is part of an ongoing wave of political repression in Iraq, conducted both by the Maliki government and its principal coalition partners, the two Kurdish parties that jointly control the regional government in Kurdistan.

Journalists covering an anti-government protest March 4 in Basra, in southern Iraq, were seized and beaten by police.

Gunmen in military uniforms raided an independent radio station in the Kurdish town of Kalar. The station's director, Azad Othman, told the Associated Press the volunteer station had been reporting extensively on demonstrations in Sulaimaniyah against the two ruling parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

These attacks follow nationwide raids the previous Sunday in which Iraqi police detained 300 people, mainly journalists, artists, lawyers and other intellectuals who were taking part in the ongoing protests, held for the last several Fridays in imitation of the huge Egyptian demonstrations that forced the resignation of President Hosni Mubarak.

The protesters have focused their actions on Baghdad's Tahrir (Liberation) Square in honor of the square of the same name in the center of Cairo.

The protests on Friday, February 25 were among the largest in the Arab world, and a total of 29 people were killed, shot to death by security forces in at least eight cities, including Baghdad, Fallujah, Mosul and Tikrit.

As the *Washington Post* described the protests: "Witnesses in Baghdad and as far north as Kirkuk described watching last week as security forces in black uniforms, tracksuits and T-shirts roared up in trucks and Humvees, attacked protesters, rounded up others from cafes and homes and hauled them off, blindfolded, to army detention centers. Entire neighborhoods—primarily Sunni Muslim areas where residents are generally opposed to Maliki, a Shiite—were blockaded to prevent residents from joining the demonstrations. Journalists were beaten."

The *Post* quoted human rights activist Salam Mohammed al-Segar, one of those beaten during a sit-in, declaring, "Maliki is starting to act like Saddam Hussein, to use the same fear, to plant it inside Iraqis who criticize him. The US must feel embarrassed right now—it is they who promised a modern state, a democratic state. But in reality?"

The repression was so flagrant that the Obama administration felt obliged to issue a statement describing US officials as "deeply troubled." Maliki defended the actions of the security forces, blaming the victims and claiming they were former supporters of Saddam Hussein.

Anti-government demonstrations continued Monday, March 7 on a smaller scale. Thousands took to the streets of Baghdad, Fallujah and Sulaimaniyah in what

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they called a “Day of Regret” to mark the first anniversary of the Iraqi elections that left a badly divided parliament. Despite finishing second in the number of seats in parliament, Maliki was able to cobble together a coalition of Shiite and Kurdish parties and remain in office.

The criticism of Maliki by the Obama administration and by US newspapers like the *Times* and the *Post* reveals mounting tension between the Iraqi puppet regime and its American overlord. Washington has long regarded Maliki as too close to Iran and sought to insure the inclusion of former Prime Minister Iyyad Allawi, a long-time CIA asset, in the new government.

Allawi’s Iraqiya Party, which drew its main support in the Sunni-populated areas, won the largest number of seats in parliament, 91 to Maliki’s 89, but has been shut out of any significant political role and is now beginning to break apart. Eight members of Iraqiya quit the party this week and announced they were forming a new parliamentary bloc.

Allawi himself declared last week that he would not accept a largely ceremonial position as head of a national security council that would have little power. He told a press conference March 3 that he was declining the post “because of a lack of commitment to national partnership.”

The press conference raised eyebrows because it was held in Najaf, the Shiite holy city, and Allawi appeared side by side with Moqtada al-Sadr, leader of a Shiite-based movement that clashed repeatedly with the US occupation only to line up behind Maliki in last year’s parliamentary maneuvering.

Both Allawi and Al-Sadr criticized the growing concentration of power in the hands of Maliki, particularly in the wake of a court ruling that gave the prime minister power to place his nominees in control of Iraq’s central bank, the human rights committee, and many other agencies.

Beyond the factional interests of Maliki’s bourgeois opponents, however, there is indisputable evidence of a turn to mass repression on the part of the regime that was created by the US invasion and occupation of Iraq.

A report issued by the US-based Human Rights Watch February 21 found that “human rights abuses are commonplace” in Iraq. “Eight years after the US invasion, life in Iraq is actually getting worse for women and minorities, while journalists and detainees face significant rights violations,” the organization declared. “Today, Iraq is at a crossroads—either it embraces due process and human rights or it risks reverting to a police state.”

Despite widespread reports of systematic torture by Iraqi police interrogators, the report said, US military authorities routinely transfer detainees to Iraqi prisons where they know they will be abused, the report said.

Human Rights Watch singled out a severe retrogression in the status of women and girls, who under the secular dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and the Baath Party were “relatively better protected than other countries in the region.” Forced marriages, forced prostitution, domestic abuse and sexual abuse have all risen sharply in the years since the US invasion.

The report also pointed to mounting attacks on what it called “marginalized groups,” including religious minorities like Sabian Mandaeans, Assyrian and Chaldean Christians, and Yazidis, as well abuse and discrimination against the tens of thousands of amputees and others disabled by war, civil war and terrorist attacks.

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