

Iraq lurches toward sectarian warfare

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The Obama administration's claims last week that US military occupation had bequeathed democracy to Iraq were disintegrating even before the last American troops left on Sunday.

Just four days after the official withdrawal, the always tense relations between the Shiite- and Sunni-based factions within the country's government have led to an open split along sectarian and geographical lines, raising the prospect of a civil war that could draw in neighbouring states or be exploited to justify the return of US forces.

Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, the head of the coalition of Shiite parties that dominates the parliament, is being accused by the Iraqiya alliance of Sunni-based parties of attempting to establish a dictatorship. Last Friday, Iraqiya MPs began a boycott after the Shiite majority put a no-confidence motion against Sunni vice prime minister Saleh Mutlaq for labelling Maliki a "dictator." On Sunday, intelligence agencies under Maliki's command boarded an aircraft carrying Sunni vice president Tariq al-Hashemi and dragged off seven of his bodyguards on charges of terrorism.

An arrest warrant was issued on Monday against Hashemi himself, claiming that he was behind a series of bombings, including an alleged attempt to assassinate Maliki. Three of his arrested bodyguards were presented on live television, apparently confessing to carrying out terrorist acts on Hashemi's orders. Hashemi has taken refuge in the autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq's three northern provinces, where authorities have refused to obey court orders that he be arrested and returned to Baghdad.

The result has been the effective collapse of the so-called national unity government formed under US pressure in December 2010, nine months after national elections. Maliki retained the prime ministership, but the

three major Shiite, Sunni and Kurdish blocs were each given government ministries in the name of power-sharing. After the charges were laid against Hashemi, Iraqiya announced that Sunni ministers would no longer perform their duties.

The move against Hashemi follows the arrest over the past several months of hundreds of predominantly Sunni former members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party and ex-army officers on charges of plotting to overthrow the government. Maliki alleges to have information from pro-US former Libyan interim leader Mahmoud Jibril that the Gaddafi regime was financing and encouraging a Sunni uprising once US forces had left.

In an interview with Reuters on Tuesday, Iraqiya leader Iyad Allawi denounced the wave of arrests, labelled the televised confessions as "fabricated," compared Maliki with Hussein, and implicitly appealed for outside intervention to prevent civil war.

"We fear the return of dictatorship by this authoritarian way of governing," Allawi said. "Maliki has crossed all red lines and Iraq is now facing a very, very serious and very difficult situation... My fear is that the Iraqi people will lose faith in the political process and sectarianism will prevail. Unless the international community and the region get involved and unless sense prevails, Iraq is heading towards a very big conflict."

Kurdish leader Massud Barzani declared the situation was a "deep crisis." Attempting to straddle the Shiite and Sunni camps, he stated that "we must not underestimate or tolerate terrorism; at the same time, however, security forces should not be used for political objectives."

Through the fog of alleged conspiracies and intrigues, more fundamental issues are involved in the rising tensions.

Every faction of the venal Iraqi elite collaborated with the US occupation and bears the responsibility for the resulting social catastrophe. They each fear an eruption of popular opposition, similar to the movements that have emerged across the Middle East this year. The uprising against the Assad regime in Syria, on Iraq's western border, is provoking the greatest concerns. Millions of desperately impoverished and oppressed Iraqi workers and urban poor, including the one million Iraqi refugees in Syria, are being politicised by events.

Sectarianism is being exploited by the ruling elites to divert social discontent in reactionary directions. In the predominantly Sunni provinces of Anbar, Nineveh, Salahaddin and Diyala, local organisations are raising demands for the same autonomy from the central government as the Kurdish region, which controls its own security forces, budget and foreign affairs. Last week, the provincial government in Diyala unilaterally declared itself autonomous on the grounds that the Shiite-dominated Baghdad government was starving it of funds for services and reconstruction.

During the armed resistance to the US occupation, autonomy was opposed by the insurgent organisations, many of whom were based in Sunni areas. A de-facto partition of the country is now viewed by the Sunni elite as a means of maintaining control over the population, pressuring Baghdad to grant them a greater share of national oil income and forging their own relations with neighbouring states. Sunni extremists denounce Maliki's government as a puppet of the Shiite-based regime in Iran and call for closer ties with Saudi Arabia, Jordan and other Arab countries.

For their part, Maliki and the Shiite parties are seeking to channel unrest within the majority Shiite population into fears that the departure of American forces is being accompanied by a Sunni plot to re-establish an anti-Shiite dictatorship similar to Hussein's. The calls for autonomy in Sunni areas are taking place in the context of a US-driven campaign against Iran and its regional allies such as the Syrian regime of Bashar Assad.

Maliki has pointedly refused to support regional condemnations of Assad's repression of anti-government protests. If Assad's government falls, it will most likely be replaced by a fiercely anti-Iranian regime, backed by Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and based on sectarian Sunni

movements that are developing close ties with Sunni parties and tribes in western Iraq.

A December 20 article in the British *Guardian* cited Ali Hatem Suleiman, a leader of the large Dulaimi tribe in Anbar province, which borders Syria. He warned that "the people are preparing for war" against the Maliki government and admitted that Iraqi Sunni fighters would potentially cross into Syria to aid the anti-Assad uprising. Suleiman bluntly said: "If Assad is gone, at least our back will be secured, especially in Anbar... It is Arab versus Persian [Iran]."

The danger of sectarian warfare is considerable. In Diyala, Shiite militiamen loyal to cleric Moqtada al-Sadr have blockaded roads in protest against the declaration of autonomy. In Baghdad, Shiite troops of the Iraqi Army have been deployed outside the homes of leading politicians in largely Sunni-populated suburbs.

The civilian population of all backgrounds are living with the increasing fear of a new round of bloodshed. Sectarian violence, deliberately stoked by the US occupation, claimed tens of thousands of lives, particularly between 2006 and 2008, and displaced an estimated 4.7 million Iraqis from their homes.

Developments in Iraq are being followed intensely in Washington. US Vice President Joe Biden reportedly rang Maliki and the speaker of the Iraqi parliament on Tuesday to press for all factional leaders "to meet and work through their differences together." If a sectarian civil war erupts, tens of thousands of US troops, stationed in Kuwait, Bahrain and other Gulf states, could be sent back into Iraq to protect American strategic and economic interests.



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