Amid Mounting Sectarian Violence, Political Stalemate continues in Iraq

By Peter Symonds
Global Research, March 19, 2006
World Socialist Web Site 19 March 2006

Three months after the Iraqi national elections, no new government has been formed in Baghdad. The deadlock between two communally-based blocs of parties is just one more symptom of the political and social catastrophe that the Bush administration has created in the three years since its criminal invasion of Iraq.

The Iraqi National Assembly met for the first time on Thursday for a formal swearing in, amid escalating sectarian violence, a deepening social crisis and a major US air and ground assault near the city of Samarra. As part of elaborate security measures surrounding the meeting, US and Iraqi security forces clamped a no-drive curfew throughout the city beginning Wednesday evening.

The session, which was held inside the heavily-fortified Green Zone in Central Baghdad, lasted barely 30 minutes and made no decisions other than to assign the post of assembly speaker, temporarily, to the veteran Sunni politician Adnan Pachachi.

Pachachi summed up the prevailing mood of pessimism. "The country is going through dangerous times, it faces challenges, and the perils come from every direction. Sectarian tensions have increased. We have to prove to the world that there will not be civil war between the people of the country. The danger is still there, and our enemies are watching us," he declared, before being cut off by a rival Shiite leader.

Since the bombing of the Al-Askariya mosque in Samarra on February 22, hundreds, if not thousands, of people have been slaughtered by Shiite and Sunni militia in a wave of attacks and reprisals. As well as indiscriminate bombings, many of the victims have been tortured and killed execution-style.

Baghdad authorities announced on Tuesday that the bodies of 86 men had been found in the previous two days in different parts of the city. Most had been shot or strangled. Last Sunday, an apparently coordinated assault on the working class Shiite suburb of Sadr City, involving rockets, bombs and mortars, killed 52 people and injured nearly 300.

In a bid to stamp its authority on the deteriorating situation, the US military launched a major offensive on Thursday near Samarra. Described by US officials as the largest air assault since the 2003 invasion, the operation, coded-named "Swarmer", involved 1,500 US and Iraqi troops and hundreds of armoured vehicles, as well as attack helicopters and air transport.

None of the Iraqi politicians, who gathered behind protective barricades in the Green Zone, can address the disaster facing the Iraqi people. All of the parties, except two Sunni-based

formations, supported the US invasion and have participated in the puppet regimes that have sanctioned the US occupation and its ongoing campaign of military repression.

US ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad bluntly spelled out the political prerequisite for participation in the next Baghdad government when he chided Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr for his rather empty public appeals for US withdrawal. In a "message" to al-Sadr in the al-Hayat newspaper, Khalilzad bluntly declared: "You cannot be a part of the government, while at the same time you issue statements demanding that we leave."

Al-Sadr, whose movement clashed with the US military in 2004, has now thrown his political weight behind the Shiite-based United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) and the current prime minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari. Jaafari, who is also the UIA's nominee as the next prime minister, is opposed by an alliance involving the two Sunni parties, the Kurdish Alliance (KA) and the National Iraqi List of long-time CIA asset Iyad Allawi.

All of these leaderships are under intense pressure from their social base to improve the appalling living conditions facing the majority of the population. The universal character of this popular hostility was highlighted by a violent protest this week in Halabja in the Kurdish north, previously regarded as the most stable region of the country.

Hundreds of Halabja residents, protesting over poor housing and the lack of water and electricity, set fire to a memorial erected to the 1988 poison gas attack on the town by the Iraqi army that left more than 5,000 dead. "[Kurdish] officials visit Halabja just for the publicity. Halabja looks the same as the day it was attacked," a shopkeeper told the press. Kurdish security forces opened fire on the protest, killing at least one man and wounding eight others.

Having no solution to this social crisis, the KA, like its Shiite and Sunni counterparts, shamelessly resorts to stirring up communal tensions to shore up its base of support and to advance the narrow interests of the Kurdish ruling cliques. One of the main KA demands is for the northern city of Kirkuk and its adjacent oil-rich districts to be included in an autonomous Kurdish region–a demand that Jaafari, backed by the Sadrist movement, has adamantly opposed.

It is impossible, however, to explain the current standoff over the next government simply from the competing communal and sectarian interests of the venal ruling cliques in Iraq. The incongruous character of these alliances is perhaps best illustrated by the coalition between two Sunni parties–the Iraqi Consensus Front and the Iraqi Front for National Dialogue–that have connections to the anti-occupation insurgency, and Iyad Allawi, who as prime minister gave the green light for US military's levelling of the Sunni town of Fallujah in 2004.

Above all, the decisions about the next Iraqi government will be made in Washington, not Baghdad. Having relied on Jaafari and the UIA to help wage a dirty war of attrition against the predominantly-Sunni armed resistance, the Bush administration has switched tack. As it provokes a new confrontation with neighbouring Iran, Washington is concerned about the loyalties of the Shiite parties, all of which, to a lesser or greater degree, have ties with Tehran.

The current deadlock between the UIA and its rivals is the product of US efforts to cut the Shiite parties down to size and to include approved Sunni parties in the next Iraqi government–a tactic that is also aimed at politically dividing the anti-occupation resistance.

All of this cynical manoeuvring, which is being overseen by US ambassador Khalilzad, is carried out under the fraudulent banner of forming "a national unity government". Khalilzad, who is one of the Bush administration's chief political fixers, played the same role in Afghanistan where he secured the installation of US puppet Hamid Karzai as president.

Khalilzad's behind-the-scenes efforts to bully, bribe and cajole the Iraqi parties to accept Washingtonâ€™s plan intensified last week. Having broken the Kurdish parties away from their previous alliance with the UIA, he has engineered a situation where neither bloc has the necessary two-thirds of assembly seats to elect the president and two vice-presidents, who in turn select the prime minister.

After a series of "make or break" meetings of political leaders that began last Sunday, Khalilzad told the New York Times that he felt the "logjam" had been broken "because people realised that if one side has red lines, all sides will have red lines". His main "success" appears to have been to get al-Sadr's supporters to drop their opposition to the inclusion of Allawi, who sanctioned the bloody US attacks on the Sadrist militia in Najaf in 2004.

In the present highly-charged sectarian climate, however, the UAI is still unwilling to make major concessions. As a result, Khalilzad, with the approval of the White House, has taken the extraordinary step of seeking talks with top Iranian officials–even as Washington is menacing Iran with sanctions and military strikes. For its part, Tehran has quickly modified its anti-US bluster and declared its willingness to discuss how to assist Washington in maintaining its occupation of Iraq.

Any "national unity government" formed under these circumstances will inevitably be a highly unstable formation, which, far from ending sectarian conflict, will only inflame the tensions that are plunging the country towards civil war. All of this makes a mockery of the absurd claims of the Bush administration to be moving towards "democracy" in Iraq. Washington's chief objective remains the same as three years ago: to subjugate Iraq and its people in order to loot its oil and to transform the country into a base of operations for its broader strategic and economic ambitions throughout the region.

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