

# Iraqi government on brink of collapse following cabinet walkouts

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The political survival of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is in doubt following the withdrawal from his cabinet of two political blocs that derive the bulk of their support from Iraq's Sunni Arab population. A variety of sectarian and ethnic cliques in Baghdad are reportedly involved in discussion with the Bush administration over ousting Maliki and forming a new government when the Iraqi parliament resumes in September.

Five ministers from the Iraqi Accordance Front (IAF) resigned their positions last Wednesday. On July 25, the IAF gave Maliki seven days to announce a major purge of Shiite militia members within the new Iraqi army and police, increased funding for government services in Sunni areas and the release of thousands of Sunnis detained in US and government prisons on suspicion of involvement in the anti-occupation insurgency. In their resignation statement, the Sunni ministers accused Maliki of "arrogance" and having "led Iraq to a level of misery it had not seen in modern history".

The IAF functions as the political wing of the powerful Association of Muslim Scholars (AMS), an organisation of several thousand clerics who bitterly resent the loss of Sunni influence following the US overthrow of the largely Sunni-based Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein. Since 2003, Shiite fundamentalist opponents of Baath Party rule have dominated the various US puppet governments in Baghdad. The AMS regularly accuses the Shiite-led government of infiltrating Shiite militias into the security forces to murder Sunni opponents. It also alleges the government deliberately restricts services and reconstruction work in Sunni areas.

The walkout by the Sunni ministers had one primary aim: to end Maliki's ability to claim he heads a "national unity" government that represents all Iraq's sectarian and ethnic groups—one of the Bush administration's so-called benchmarks. On Monday, they were joined by four ministers from the Iraqi National List of Iyad Allawi, who announced they will boycott all cabinet meetings until Maliki ends his "marginalisation" of Sunnis.

A total of 17 ministers have now left or are boycotting his cabinet. A member of Allawi's list resigned earlier this year while six ministers from the Sadrist Shiite movement walked out in April. The Sadrists, who posture as opponents of the US occupation, resigned after Maliki rejected the demand of their leader, cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, for a timetable specifying when all foreign troops would leave Iraq. The latest defections reduce the cabinet to a barely functioning rump.

There is no doubt that the Bush administration is behind the effort to bring down Maliki's government. Iyad Allawi is little more than a US stooge. In the lead-up to the war, he had a

hand in fabricating the lies that Iraq had weapons of mass destruction and that the Iraqi people would welcome a US invasion. He was rewarded in 2004, when the occupation installed him as the country's unelected interim prime minister. He undoubtedly harbours ambitions to retake the position and would have sought Washington's blessing before announcing his List's boycott of the cabinet.

Speaking from a luxury villa in Jordan where he spends much of his time, Allawi summed up the US attitude toward Maliki in the *New York Times* this week: "The national unity government is a myth, not a reality. The political process is going nowhere."

US frustrations with Maliki have been growing since he was named by the ruling United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) as its candidate for prime minister in May 2006. He has been repeatedly accused by the US military of thwarting its attempts to destroy the powerful Sadrist militia—the Mahdi Army. While no longer in the cabinet, the Sadrists still provide the main base of support for Maliki within the Shiite UIA, along with his own Da'wa Party. The other major party in the coalition, the Supreme Islamic Iraqi Council (SIIC), wants one of its leaders, current vice-president Adel Abdul Mahdi, to be prime minister.

This year, Maliki has failed to even secure the necessary support within his own coalition, let alone other factions, for Washington's "benchmarks". Among the main US demands are legislation that would open Iraq's oil industry to foreign investment and an end to the policy of "de-Baathification" that prevents thousands of predominantly Sunni ex-members of Hussein's party from holding government or military positions. In US circles, the marginalisation of former Baathists is held responsible for a large part of the insurgency in Iraq.

Fueling US antagonism toward not only Maliki but all the Shiite factions in Iraq are their political and religious relations with Iran. Under conditions of rising tensions between Washington and Tehran, many Shiite politicians still consider Iran the natural ally of a Shiite-dominated Iraqi state. Maliki again caused outrage in Washington by meeting on Wednesday with Iranian leaders and declaring Iran was playing a "constructive role" in stabilising Iraq. A major element of US propaganda against Tehran is the accusation that Iranian special forces are supplying rogue Sadrist militiamen with explosives to attack US troops.

Throughout this year, the US military has been shifting away from a Shiite-led government in Baghdad. It has sought to develop an alternative base of support for the US occupation in Sunni areas. Millions of dollars have been handed out to secure alliances with Sunni tribal leaders and insurgent groups across Baghdad and western and central Iraq. In the main, these new Sunni allies are utterly hostile to Maliki's government, which they denounce as a puppet of Iran rather than Washington.

The 25,000 Sunni militiamen who have been recruited are viewed by Maliki as a threat to Shiite power. His objections, however, have been ignored by the US commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus, and dismissed by the Bush administration.

The abandonment of Maliki's government by the Sunni IAF and Allawi's List is bringing these simmering tensions to a head. With just 21 ministers still loyal to the prime minister out of the original 38, there is tremendous pressure even within the Shiite UIA to propose an alternative leader rather than risk being excluded from power altogether.

Intense manoeuvring is underway. Saleh al-Mutlaq, the leader of the small Sunni Iraqi National Dialogue Front, told the *New York Times* this week that he was seeking talks with the IAF, Allawi's group and the anti-UIA Shiite Fadhila Party over forming a rival coalition. If such a grouping were able to get the support of the 55-strong Kurdistan Alliance (KA) in the parliament, it would have an outright majority and could govern without any of the Shiite fundamentalist parties. Allawi would be the most likely candidate for prime minister.

According to the Egypt-based *Al-Ahram*, the Bush administration is working on another option. Bush has reportedly held phone conversations over the past two weeks with SIIC's leading candidate for prime minister, Adel Abdul Mahdi, as well as the party's leader, cleric Abdul Aziz al-Hakim. He has also spoken with Kurdish president Jalal Talabani and Sunni vice-president Tariq Hashemi.

The US is apparently backing the creation of a new coalition consisting of SIIC, factions of Da'wa prepared to abandon Maliki, Allawi's List, Hashemi's faction of the Iraqi Accordance Front and the Kurdish parties. Allawi or Mahdi would head such a government. It would exclude Maliki and the Sadrists, as well as Fadhila and Sunni groupings such as Mutlaq's which are antagonistic toward US demands for the sell-off of Iraq's oil.

The price being demanded by the Kurdish parties is clear. They would want Kurdish control over the northern city of Kirkuk and the oilfields that surround it. Hinting at their willingness to be bought, Talabani pointedly declared last week that the Sunni criticisms of Maliki were "mostly fair". Mahmoud Othman, a Kurdish legislator, told the *Al-Ahram Weekly* that the Kurdish parties wanted to enhance "reconciliation by including Allawi in the political process".

SIIC's collaboration in a move against Maliki has a similar price. It has been pushing for the creation of an autonomous region in its southern Iraqi stronghold that would control the country's southern oilfields. SIIC's regionalism is bitterly opposed and would be resisted by the Baghdad-centred Sadrist movement. If SIIC and the Kurdish parties have their way, Iraq will be effectively partitioned along ethnic and sectarian lines—a move that can only accelerate large-scale ethnic cleansing, sectarian violence and instability, not only in Iraq but throughout the region.

The Bush administration's barely disguised efforts to oust Maliki once again make a mockery of its claims to have created a sovereign, democratic government in Baghdad. Whatever the final outcome of its political manipulations, the White House is seeking a new regime that will more effectively implement US demands, particularly for the opening up of Iraqi oilfields to US corporations, and ruthlessly suppress ongoing opposition to the occupation. Moreover, by eliminating or at least diluting Shiite influence in the Baghdad government, the US is clearing the decks for a sharp escalation of its confrontation with Iran, including the use of military force.

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