

Bush administration seeks UN aid as Iraqi political crisis mounts

By Patrick Martin
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The chief US administrator in Iraq, Paul Bremer, met with United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan Monday in New York City in an effort to obtain UN assistance to prevent the political crisis in the occupied country from spiraling out of control. Annan is considering a UN mission to Iraq to negotiate with the leading Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who has refused to meet with representatives of the US occupation authority.

The Shiite religious leader has rejected the plan approved by Bremer last November 15 to transfer formal sovereignty on June 30 to an unelected Iraqi government. The new government would be chosen by caucuses of “notables” assembled in each of Iraq’s 18 provinces. The US occupation regime and its hand-picked stooges in the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) would select the members of the caucuses, and thus control the final outcome.

The main purpose of this procedure—which bars the vast majority of the Iraqi population from having any say—is to install a government in Baghdad that will then invite the US military to remain in Iraq for an indefinite period. Far from hastening to end the occupation, as Bremer suggested in comments to the press over the weekend, the Bush administration is moving to cement its grip on Iraq.

Under international law, the present US-appointed IGC has no authority to approve the long-term stationing of American military forces on Iraqi soil, privatize Iraq’s state-run industries or make long-term contracts for the disposition of the country’s oil. Control of Iraq’s oil reserves, second largest in the world, was a principal goal of the US invasion.

Ayatollah Sistani has demanded a general election as the basis for a new government. His followers staged a huge demonstration Monday in Baghdad, with as many as 100,000 people marching behind posters of Sistani, chanting, “Yes, yes to elections! No, no to occupation!” Four days before, a similar protest took place in Basra,

with more than 30,000 participating.

A representative of the Grand Ayatollah, Hashem al-Awad, addressed the crowd in Baghdad, saying, “The sons of the Iraqi people demand a political system based on direct elections and a constitution that realizes justice and equality for everyone.” Implicitly threatening direct action against the occupation regime, he added, “Anything other than that will prompt people to have their own say.”

Sistani met with local leaders from throughout the Shiite south on Friday, at his offices in the city of Najaf, while Shiite clerics throughout the country preached sermons of resistance to their followers. In Karbala, the other major religious center of Shiism, Sheik Abel Mahdi al-Karbalai, a Sistani aide, said, “We’re going to see protests and strikes and civil disobedience, and perhaps confrontations with the occupation force.”

While the Bush administration claimed that a major purpose of its invasion and conquest of Iraq was to replace Saddam Hussein with a democratic government, the current political conflict arises from its fear that Iraqis may democratically choose a government not to Washington’s liking. Since Shiites make up an estimated 60 percent or more of the Iraqi population, parties under the influence of the Shiite clergy could well end up in control of an elected government.

To forestall such an outcome, while maintaining its democratic pretenses, the Bush administration has resorted to transparent evasions, claiming that an election is impractical because there is no voting roll or reliable census, as though its concerns were with the technicalities of the electoral process rather than the likely result.

The UN is being asked to validate these objections to a direct election, and to make the case directly to Sistani, who has held talks with UN officials but refuses to meet face to face with Bremer or other representatives of the occupation regime.

In the event that Sistani remains adamant, the UN could play the role of brokering a compromise and providing an avenue of retreat for Bush and Bremer, who have insisted there can be no change in the June 30 date (selected mainly from the standpoint of Bush's reelection campaign).

Asked by reporters in New York about the possibility the US might drop its opposition to a direct election, Bremer said the question was legitimate and "one where the UN, with its expertise in elections, can offer a perspective." Annan was equally conciliatory, indicating that he was inclined to send a UN team to Iraq, and adding, "The stability of Iraq is everyone's business."

US officials, who spoke with the press on condition they not be identified, were more candid about the dire character of the political crisis. One "senior US official" told the *Washington Post*, "We're between a rock and a hard place.... We want the UN in there, but the situation is moving so fast on the ground that we can't simply turn things over until the UN is on the ground, fully staffed and fully engaged."

The *Post*, one of the most fervent supporters of Bush's attack on Iraq, published an editorial Sunday, entitled "In Search of Rescue," which declared that the administration's strategy for Iraq was "on the verge of unraveling." The editorial baldly admitted that the White House was opposed to elections in Iraq because "the indirect caucus procedure favored by the administration and the Governing Council would maximize their chances of preserving influence."

"All the options in Iraq come with considerable risks," the *Post* cautioned. "But it seems to us the greatest of these would attach to a decision by the United States to press ahead in choosing a government over the opposition of the Shiite clergy."

The political time bombs in Iraq go well beyond the danger—as Washington sees it—of a Shiite fundamentalist regime in Baghdad, possibly with links to Iran. There are mounting political fissures: Shia vs. Sunni, Arab vs. Kurd, secular vs. fundamentalist. Noting these conflicts, one of the most unabashed apologists for the war, *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman, wrote gloomily last week, "our most serious long-term enemy in Iraq may not be the Iraqi insurgents, but the Iraqi people."

On January 17, Massoud Barzani, leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, one of the two main Kurdish nationalist groups and a member of the IGC, said that the Kurds would demand an expanded region of autonomy, including control of the oil-rich region around the city of

Kirkuk, whose population is presently split roughly into thirds—Kurdish, Arab and Turkmen. The KDP and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan oppose Sistani's demand for immediate elections, seeking to carve out a semi-independent region in the north before the election of a new government likely to be dominated by the more populous Arab south.

The same day, a leading Sunni Muslim cleric, Sheik Mohammed Bashar Faidi, the spokesman for the Board of Clergy and Scholars, said that his body might issue a religious decree, or *fatwa*, declaring a Shiite-dominated government to be illegitimate and sanctioning resistance to it.

It was also revealed last week that the Iraqi Governing Council, in a bid to appease the Shiite clergy, had enacted a decree requiring the use of Islamic law, or *sharia*, for domestic issues such as marriage, divorce and child custody. This would drastically worsen the status of women in Iraq, who have, since the overthrow of the monarchy in 1958, enjoyed among the most advanced legal protections of any Muslim country, including the right to vote, to hold public office, and to equality in marital and property disputes. This decree must still be approved by Bremer, the final authority in the regime.

Meanwhile the unstable character of the US occupation was underscored Sunday morning as a powerful truck bomb exploded at the entrance to the US headquarters compound in central Baghdad, killing at least 20 people and wounding scores. A suicide bomber apparently detonated a half ton of explosives when the truck was stopped at a checkpoint leading into the "Green Zone." Most of the dead were Iraqis going into work at the walled compound.

The US death toll in Iraq reached 500 Saturday, with the killing of three American soldiers and two Iraqi civil defense guards by a roadside bomb in Taji, 12 miles north of Baghdad. The 500 deaths include 346 soldiers killed by Iraqi insurgents and 154 who died of "non-hostile" causes, military terminology that includes accidents, suicides or incidents of "friendly fire."

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