

Despite US pressure, no agreement reached on Iraqi constitution

By James Cogan
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After six weeks of negotiations and intense pressure from Washington, the Iraqi political factions supporting the US occupation of Iraq failed to agree on the wording of a new constitution by the August 15 deadline set down by the Bush administration. At 20 minutes to midnight, the parliament voted instead to give the committee drawing up the document until August 22 to finalise a draft.

The reasons for the delay serve to highlight the utterly anti-democratic and illegitimate character of the entire process. Under the protection of thousands of US troops and completely sealed off from the Iraqi people, the layers of the Iraqi ruling class who have been prepared to collaborate with the colonial conquest of the country are using sectarianism and communalism to try and lay claim to a portion of the spoils of war.

The inability to reach an agreement by August 15 was due to the refusal of Arab Sunni legislators to bow down to the demands of the Kurdish nationalist and main Shiite fundamentalist organisations that the future Iraqi state have a federal structure, with a weak central government and powerful autonomous regions.

The three Kurdish provinces of northern Iraq are already an autonomous zone, with its own regional government and armed forces. The Kurdish leadership is demanding that the constitution expand their territory to include the oil-rich area around the city of Kirkuk. At one point, the Kurdish delegation proposed that the constitution specifically give the Kurdish region the right to secede from Iraq in eight years time.

The Shiite Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI) has raised demands for the establishment of an autonomous region in southern Iraq, incorporating nine, predominantly Shiite-populated provinces where some 50 percent of the country's oil industry is located. Both the Shiite and Kurdish factions demanded that regional governments be given control over most of the

income generated by the oil industry.

Federalism has been endorsed by the main Shiite cleric Ali al-Sistani, who has consistently advocated taking advantage of the US invasion of Iraq to gain greater wealth and political power for the Shia elite and clergy. As well as autonomy, SCIRI and Da'awa called for the constitution to give "a guiding role" to the Shiite clergy and assert Islam as "the primary source" of the country's legal code. Such a measure would make way for Iranian-style religious courts—giving Sistani and the Shiite religious establishment another source of privilege.

Representatives of the Sunni Arab establishment, which formed the core support for the Iraqi state since the country's independence, denounced the calls for federalism as a recipe for the country's break-up. The head of the Sunni delegation on the constitutional committee, Saleh Mutlak, declared: "If we accept federalism, the country will be finished."

Against a federal structure, the Sunni participants in the constitutional committee advocated the maintenance of a strong central government in Baghdad that controls the bulk of the oil revenues. Their motives are just as venal as those of the Shiite and Kurdish bourgeoisie. Under the Baathists, a dictatorial regime in Baghdad was used to appropriate the lion's share of Iraq's energy wealth for a narrow Sunni elite, against their Kurdish and Shiite rivals. The central and western areas of the country, where most Sunnis live, have little in the way of oil and gas.

As the horse-trading has gone on, the US has made little attempt to hide its frustration with the failure of the Iraqi factions to produce a document. Bush and other officials repeatedly declared that the deadline should be met.

In particular, US pressure had been brought to bear on the Shiite parties that dominate the Iraqi government to make overtures toward the Sunni elite. The main Sunni political and religious organisations called for a boycott of the elections earlier this year, while Sunni groups are

fighting the bulk of the guerilla war against the American forces in Iraq. As the war drags on, and popular opposition swells in the US, the hope in Washington has been that the insurgency can be weakened by buying off a section of the Sunni establishment with promises that they will continue to enjoy a privileged position.

More fundamentally, the constitution and the election to follow in December are considered crucial to the transformation of Iraq into an American client-state. The government that will be installed by the end of the year will be able to begin the privatisation of Iraq's state-owned oil industry and sign off on agreements establishing long-term US military bases. The US military plans centre on the Iraqi government having sufficient legitimacy and armed forces to gradually reduce American troop numbers to 60,000, making them available for use elsewhere.

The raising of autonomy demands by the Shiites in the past few weeks, and Sunni recriminations, therefore "stunned the Bush administration", according to unnamed officials cited in the *New York Times* on August 14. According to a report by the British *Observer*, the impatience and anger reached the point on Sunday where the US ambassador in Iraq, Zalmay Khalilzad, simply handed the Iraqis a constitution written by US officials and told them it was a "guide to compromise".

Khalilzad told CNN later: "This constitution can be a national compact bringing Sunnis in, isolating extremists and Baathist-hardliners and setting the stage over time for defeating them."

The US draft dealt with the intractable divisions over Shiite autonomy in the south by deferring any decision until after the elections in December. While the Shiite parties agreed under US pressure, however, the Sunni group allegedly rejected the deal as it simply delayed the matter instead of ruling it out.

Over next days there is little doubt that vast pressure will be brought to bear to reach a settlement and ensure a constitution that is endorsed by all three of the main factions is ready for August 22. There are only two alternatives—both of which would dramatically heighten the problems facing US imperialism in Iraq.

One is the dissolution of the parliament that was elected on January 30, new elections and the formation of a new constitutional committee. The other is the Shiite and Kurdish blocs using their control of the existing parliament to ram through a constitution that satisfies their demands regardless of the opposition.

This would be tantamount to a declaration of civil war

against the Sunni population by the US-installed Baghdad regime. As well as fueling the insurgency, it would most likely result in a concerted campaign by Sunni political and religious organisations for a rejection of the document in the referendum that is scheduled to be held on October 15. A two-thirds "No" vote in three of Iraq's 18 provinces prevents the constitution being adopted.

The three province veto clause was inserted into the political framework on the insistence of the Kurdish parties, with the backing of the US, so they could defeat any constitution that did not deliver autonomy. It now has the potential to rebound against them. At least four provinces have a clear Sunni majority.

None of the discussions and conflicts around the constitution reflect, in any sense, the needs and aspirations of the vast mass of the Iraqi people. The US invasion and occupation has produced a situation in which millions of people are struggling to survive without steady incomes and reliable electricity, water and other basic services. Every day dozens of civilians are killed or maimed by US-led troops or in indiscriminate bombings carried out by Islamic extremist opponents of the occupation. As many as 4,000 civilians have lost their lives just since the January 30 election.

The greater the social catastrophe facing the Iraqi working class, the more every faction of the ruling class has promoted communalism to both deflect away from the crisis and as the means of securing power and privilege for themselves. The logical outcome is the outbreak of fratricidal conflict that will ultimately only serve to benefit US imperialism and its agenda of dominating the resources and territory of the Middle East.

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