

## **More Troubling Developments in Maliki's Iraq**

Ted Galen Carpenter / July 27, 2012

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Hopes for a stable, democratic Iraq suffered a series of blows in recent weeks. All of those adverse developments point to greater instability and the growth of repression. Such trends are especially worrisome for Iraq's Kurdish region, which thus far has been able to avoid most of the problems that continue to plague the rest of the country.

One of the troubling signs has been the resurgence of violence. According to the prominent U.S. international affairs website Antiwar.com, more than 500 Iraqis were killed in the month of June alone. Other outlets, including the Associated Press, reported somewhat lower totals, but those outlets normally count only civilian casualties, not those of military or police personnel or anti-government insurgents. Whatever the exact total, the number of casualties confirmed that the security environment in Iraq is anything but peaceful.

And matters have not improved during July. Just as the month began, 40 people were killed and another 75 wounded in a horrific truck bombing at a market in Diwaniya. Some of the attacks in both June and July appear to be similar to the sectarian violence that convulsed Iraq in 2006 and 2007 when the country was on the brink of full-scale civil war. Two of the worst attacks were directed against Shi'ite pilgrims on their way to religious shrines.

In addition to the flaring of violence, the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is becoming ever more blatant about its corrupt, authoritarian behavior. In June, the regime once again tried to harass and stifle hostile media outlets. Only an international outcry, led by the United States, caused the government to back down from its censorship efforts.

That move was very likely just a tactical retreat, however. A more insidious initiative was the draft of a law that purports to regulate internet use. That legislation would impose jail terms of up to life imprisonment for "undermining the independence, unity, or safety of the country, or its supreme economic, political, military, or security interests." Similar penalties could be imposed for

publishing information designed to weaken confidence in the financial system, damage the national economy, or defame the country.

The prominent international civil liberties group Human Rights Watch issued a report in mid-July strongly condemning the draft law. “Given the vagueness and breadth of these provisions, as well as the severity of the punishment for the violations, authorities could use the law to punish any expression that they claim constitutes a threat to some governmental, religious or social interest,” the report stated. Human Rights Watch warned further that the law could easily be used to “deter legitimate criticisms of or peaceful challenges to governmental or religious officials or policies.” Given the crucial role that the internet and other information technology now plays for journalism and the overall dissemination of information, those are not minor concerns. Perhaps most ominous, the Human Rights Watch report concluded that the proposed legislation was not an isolated incident. Instead, it is “part of a broader pattern of restrictions on fundamental freedoms in Iraq.”

Indeed, outright censorship or intimidation of the news media is not the only worrisome tactic in the Maliki government’s arsenal. In the city of Kirkuk, Maliki’s political associates reportedly promised some journalists free land if they provided more favorable coverage to Baghdad’s policies and performance.

There are growing indications that Iraq is sinking back into an environment of violent, corrupt authoritarianism. The government and people of the Kurdish region may soon have to decide whether they should—or even can—remain loyal to a country that seems intent to go down such a path.

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