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A New Dictator?

by Ted Galen Carpenter

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Proponents of the invasion and occupation of Iraq have stressed repeatedly that one of the great achievements was the creation of a free, democratic country. The selection of political leaders through fair elections and the establishment of a legal system that protected basic freedoms stood in stark contrast to Saddam Hussein's brazen dictatorship. Indeed, the birth of a democratic Iraq was one of the few developments pro-war types could cite that made the sacrifice of more than 4,200 American lives and the expenditure of some \$700 billion even arguably worthwhile.

Now even that achievement seems to be on increasingly shaky ground. The government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki is exhibiting disturbingly authoritarian behavior on multiple fronts. The most recent incident, on January 14, was the Independent High Electoral Commission's decision to bar more than 500 candidates, representing 15 different parties, from running in the March 7 elections. That purge was even more far-reaching than the original recommendation by the parliamentary Justice and Accountability Commission to bar 439 candidates.

In virtually all cases, the official justification for excluding those candidates and their parties is that they had ties to Saddam's old Baathist Party. Some of those allegations are undoubtedly true, but both screening commissions appeared to apply extraordinarily broad criteria for what constituted illicit ties to the old regime. In many instances, the connections were tenuous at best, and snared individuals who were either extremely low-level Baathist functionaries or who merely had unofficial links to the party.

As one might suspect, given the Sunni domination of Saddam's Baathist regime, most of the candidates now barred from the ballot are Sunnis. Since the membership of the Justice and Accountability Commission is composed mainly of Shiites and Kurds, allegations of bias were not long in coming. And although the High Electoral Commission is ostensibly independent and nonpartisan, angry Sunni politicians charged that the membership on that body was equally rigged.

The move to disqualify so many candidates has exacerbated the already simmering tensions between Maliki's largely Shiite government and Iraq's Sunni minority. Some Sunni leaders are threatening to boycott the March elections, which would be a worrisome development. The Sunni boycott of the elections in 2005 was one catalyst that led to a surge in sectarian tensions and the subsequent spike in violence that drove Iraq to the brink of civil war.

Barring Sunni candidates is not the only action by the Maliki government that has seemed high-handed. Over the past few months, the authorities in Baghdad have repeatedly cracked down on the Awakening Councils, the Sunni groups that the United States helped create and generously funded as part of the surge strategy in 2007 and 2008. The arrests of hundreds of Awakening Council members, including several prominent leaders, have fueled suspicions that Maliki aims to create a Shiite dictatorship and engage in payback for all the atrocities that Saddam's regime committed against the Shiite population.

But signs of Maliki's authoritarian tendencies are not confined to actions directed against the

Sunni minority. Indeed, some of his actions suggest that he aims to be an equal opportunity autocrat. Over the past year, the government has harassed and attempted to muzzle the news media and anyone else it considers a critic. Officials have launched lawsuits against journalists and their employers for allegedly libelous (broadly construed) comments. The Maliki government also pushed through a law to close media outlets that “encourage” terrorism or violence. Even worse, that law imposes the same penalty for encouraging “tensions”—a vacuous category that essentially allows the government to ban media critics whenever it wishes.

If those measures weren't enough, there are now new rules (with virtually unlimited discretion given to authorities who review the applications) to license television satellite trucks, censor books, and control internet cafes. Reuters concluded that such measures evoke memories of “the laws used to muzzle [the media] under Saddam Hussein.”

Maliki is certainly not yet as ruthlessly authoritarian as Saddam, but the trend is not encouraging. At a minimum, Iraq seems to be on the path to becoming what Fareed Zakaria aptly describes as an “illiberal democracy.” That outcome was hardly what U.S. leaders had in mind when they touted the Iraq mission as a success.

It will be worse than ironic if the United States merely ousted one Iraqi autocrat to see him replaced by another. Saddam was at least thoroughly secular in his orientation and unrelentingly hostile to Islamist forces. Maliki and the various factions that he relies on as the base of his political support are noticeably less secular.

Moreover, Saddam was a mortal adversary of the revolutionary regime in Iran. Maliki, on the other hand, is disturbingly cozy with Iran. The effusive, red-carpet welcome that he gave to Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad during the latter's visit to Baghdad in March 2008 is just one indicator among many of a quiet, but very real, partnership between the Shiite regime in Tehran and Maliki's predominantly Shiite government.

Developments in Iraq suggest that the United States may have paid an enormous price in blood and treasure merely to end up with an authoritarian rather than a democratic Iraq. Even worse, it may well turn out to be an authoritarian Iraq that is under considerable Iranian influence. Those Americans who chortle that the surge worked and that we “won” in Iraq ought to reflect long and hard about the dubious quality of our victory prize.

Ted Galen Carpenter, vice president for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute, is the author of eight books on international affairs, including *Smart Power: Toward a Prudent Foreign Policy for America* (2008). He is also a contributing editor to *The National Interest*.

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