

## Iraq: The Thirteenth Hour

The Iraq Parliament on November 27 voted 149-35 to ratify the Status-of-Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the United States. As the vote was being taken, the Deputy Prime Minister, Barham Salih, is quoted as saying: "I remind you that in Iraq things have not happened at the eleventh hour, but at the thirteenth hour." In other words, the key moment is yet to come.

What actually happened? The Iraqi Parliament has 275 members. Those present for the vote were only 198. Those who voted in favor of the text were 149, or a bare majority of the members. The 149 included the members from the two mainstream Shi'a parties (SCIRI and the Prime Minister's party, Dawa), the two Kurdish parties and, crucially, members of the Sunni-based Iraqi Accord Front (IAF).

The favorable vote of the IAF was crucial because Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani had said he would not endorse the agreement unless it had "wide" support, by which he meant substantial Sunni support. So the Sunni had great bargaining power with Prime Minister al-Maliki, whose political future hinged on getting the SOFA agreement adopted. The IAF got two things from al-Maliki. One was that there would be a national referendum on the agreement in July 2009. The second was the substantial support al-Maliki has been giving to the so-called "support councils" in Sunni tribes. That is, al-Maliki is offering both a bribe and a guarantee against future reprisals against the Sunni tribes who have been giving assistance to the American armed forces in the last year in return for material assistance.

Al-Maliki has emerged as the big political victor and shown himself to be a more able political maneuverer than most analysts had expected. Let us see what he has accomplished by passing the SOFA agreement, an agreement which the Iraqis are calling the "withdrawal agreement." His first accomplishment was to hold the Sadrists in check by co-opting the Sadrist strategy - getting the Americans out of Iraq by making a deal with the Sunnis. Both SCIRI (the other mainstream Shi'a party) and the Kurds are grumbling about a possible al-Maliki "dictatorship" in the making, but they had no choice but to ratify the agreement. The Sadrists have preserved their position-in-waiting by voting loudly against the pact.

What's in the pact? The key elements are a requirement that U.S. forces leave all cities and towns by June 2009, and leave Iraq entirely by December 2011. In addition, all U.S. military action must now be coordinated in advance with the Iraqis, and the United States may not use Iraq as a base to attack neighbors (that is, Syria and Iran).

Why did Bush agree? He had no choice. The alternative was for U.S. forces to be illegal after Dec. 31, 2008 and turn the whole issue over to Obama. The U.S. government was so frightened of U.S. congressional reaction to the details of the pact that they refused before the vote to release an English-language version of the pact. They did not want U.S. public discussion of the pact before the Iraqi parliament voted.

The terms of the pact contain some vague language and the U.S. military says it's counting on its ability to interpret the language in ways that it prefers. It is said that Bush has thereby gotten a better deal than Obama's 16-month withdrawal plan. But this is not true at all. It is in fact worse. Obama's proposal had been that U.S. *combat* forces leave in 16 months, but had set no date for "training" forces, leaving open the possibility of indefinite stationing of some U.S. forces. The SOFA agreement gets *all* forces out by December 2011. And Bush, not

Obama, signed off on this.

In practice *all* U.S. forces will depart much sooner than December 2011. This is where the referendum comes in. It will be held in July 2009. U.S. forces must leave cities and towns by June 2009. If they don't, the referendum will surely not pass. If they do, al-Maliki will still have to win the referendum. In order to do that, he will have to take a very tough line with the Americans. Any thought that the U.S. military can "interpret" vague language in its favor is a total illusion. In any case, the referendum may be in trouble, since al-Sistani voiced reservations after the parliamentary vote. Al-Maliki knows that if he yields an inch now to the United States, Moqtada al-Sadr is waiting in the wings.

So al-Maliki has all the chips, and Obama will have none. Obama will have to accede gracefully to the Iraqi demands. These demands will escalate, not become less, as the months go by.

And, by the way, the Ethiopians (U.S. surrogates in Somalia) have just announced that they will pull out their troops by the end of 2008. And President Karzai of Afghanistan has just announced that he wants a formal pull-out date for U.S. and NATO forces there. The general feeling in the region seems to be that talking tough to the United States is not only possible. It pays off. The thirteenth hour is approaching.

by Immanuel Wallerstein