

The Iraqi opposition conference: born in an Iraqi womb

openDemocracy, 5 December 2002

The meeting of the Iraqi Opposition in London on 13-15 December will bring together representatives from Arab and European states as well as leading American figures, with the aim of establishing an Iraqi Opposition Congress. In the last few days, Zalmay Khalil Zawahiri was personally appointed ambassador-at-large by President Bush with the task of liaising with the 'Free Iraqis'; his work is already well under way.

The most important fact about the forthcoming conference is that it is happening at all. The labour pains accompanying its birth are a positive sign that it is indeed taking place inside the Iraqi womb. The very difficulties it faces point to a shift towards more democratic practices.

Iraq has witnessed the establishment of 'national fronts' before in its history, in the form of alliances between opposition parties and political factions. One of the most important of these was the National Unity Front, which preceded the 14 July revolution in 1958. In the republican period, 'national fronts' were established as a basis for governments - for example the Socialist Union of 1964 during the rule of 'Abd al-Salam 'Arif, or the 'National Patriotic Progressive Front' at the beginning of the Ba'athist period in 1968.

In both cases, these were mere facades, quickly abandoned. As for fronts formed outside the country, these were constrained by the wishes of the countries harbouring them, and mostly vanished without any effect on events in Iraq or elsewhere.

A short history of congresses A new phenomenon following the Second Gulf War has been the appearance of 'national congresses', starting with the Salah al-Din Congress in 1992, from which the Iraqi National Congress was formed. This embraced an extremely wide range of political groups, from Communists on the left to Islamists on the right, passing through various liberal and nationalist factions among others.

This national congress was a parliamentary organisation constituted through elections, rather than a front formed through an alliance between political parties. Rules for representation were set out, apportioning influence to different political tendencies instead of specific parties. Anyone who reads the constitution of the

Iraqi National Congress will see that it is a parliamentary constitution that enshrines elections and collective leadership as its key principles.

However, this experiment foundered, and the National Congress swiftly metamorphosed from an Iraqi parliament into a mere political faction. The main reason for this was that the authority of the Congress was linked to Washington's plans for regime change, which were abandoned in favour of a policy of containment.

The impossibility of bringing about change in Iraq without external support meant that cooperation with the United States was essential for most Iraqi groups, especially since no regional or Arab power was willing to provide any significant assistance.

Overcoming old divisions The Iraqi opposition today finds itself facing a programme for change put forward by the United States. Once again, there is a need to convene an Iraqi national conference able to select a united leadership that represents the widest possible range of Iraqi opposition groups. But herein lies the greatest challenge for the Iraqi opposition. It will not be possible simply to reproduce the Salah al-Din experiment. A new representative body must be formed which reflects the current political situation.

The idea of convening a new congress of the Iraqi opposition was put forward by a group consisting of the two Kurdish parties, the Supreme Islamic Council and the Iraqi National Accord, together known as the 'group of four'. The group informed the US State Department of its intention to convene the congress and to finance it from its own resources.

The US agreed to the proposal, and suggested the addition of two more parties in order to widen participation in the congress: Ahmad Chalabi of the National Congress, and Sherif Ali for the monarchist movement. The 'group of six' was invited to Washington on 9 August to meet representatives of the State Department and the Defense Department. This resulted in them agreeing to convene the congress.

The Washington meeting did not attempt to discuss or overcome the differences that exist between the six parties, or to discuss the basis on which the congress should be convened. This matter was left to the six themselves, especially since the US administration was keen to avoid any direct intervention that could lead to accusations of interference and imposing its own supporters.

Although the six were all members of the original National Congress, their differences prevented new members joining and led to the withdrawal of others – hence the impossibility of returning to the previous framework, and the need for a new structure for the National Congress. This will be no easy task after a decade of infighting and squabbling. Some of the six are wary about the idea of convening a congress, to the extent of questioning its importance. Without the insistence of the Kurdish parties and the eagerness of the US administration to see the congress succeed, they would not have persisted in the discussions.

US encouragement US pressure has taken the form of letters and visits, starting with a letter to the six from Mark Grossman, aide to the US Secretary of State, dated 11 October, in which he urged them to fulfil the mission they were entrusted with by the Washington meeting. This was followed by a visit to London, on 15–17 November, of a US delegation representing different branches of the administration, aiming to assist the six in overcoming their differences.

Two days after this, the White House sent a letter stressing the need for the conference to be convened, signed by Richard Armitage (Deputy Secretary of State), Paul Wolfowitz (Deputy Defense Secretary), Stephen Hadley (Deputy National Security Adviser) and Louis Loby (aide to the vice-president for national security affairs).

The presence of these names on the White House letter was in itself a message to the Iraqi opposition that the previous struggles within the US administration, where factions sided with different opposition groups, have been replaced by a united front: meaning that any group standing in the way of the convening of a national congress will be completely cut off from support in the administration. This has altered the nature of the rivalry between the six groups from the previous threats of withdrawal by some groups to competing in their attempts to win over Iraqi public opinion.

Positive rivalry The Islamic Council nominated representatives from more than twenty Islamic organisations, in response to accusations that it was monopolising Islamic representation. The preparatory committee has also approached sections of the Islamic Propagation Party with regard to their participation in the conference, along with other Islamic organisations and figures.

Ahmad Chalabi called for a greater number of independents, and particularly representatives from liberal groups, in order to increase his representation at the conference, and succeeded in raising the number of members to 260. Later, during the visit of the US delegation, it was agreed to raise the number again to 300

participants, provided the extra numbers consisted of independents and liberals.

In addition, the recommendations of the committees concerned with democratic principles, prepared by more than thirty political and intellectual figures, will be included in the conference papers, along with an opportunity for the writers of this paper to participate in the congress themselves. This rivalry has also extended to the Turkmen and Assyrian minorities, whose demands for greater representation were approved by the preparatory committee.

The allowing of increased participation by independents is a positive step, providing that it is not influenced by their allegiance to one faction or another. There can be no 'pure' independents, as all the participants are aligned against the dictatorial regime, but by 'independent' what is meant is those who are not affiliated to any party or political grouping, who represent their own views and who do not speak in the name of others.

In this way, the rivalry between the six has become a positive factor encouraging democratic practices instead of the authoritarianism that has characterised national fronts and previous opposition congresses.

Dealing with difference One of the most important functions of the forthcoming Opposition Congress is to set out a new framework for dealing with differences between factions. The problem is not the existence of these differences, which is a natural feature of any western parliament or political party, but the way in which they are resolved.

The success of the Congress in enshrining democratic practices is far more important than the re-issuing of previous recommendations. The struggle for power is nothing new or shameful, but what is important is the means by which power is achieved: the voting slip, or the bullet.

The Iraqi community now has an opportunity to prove that it is capable of practising what it preaches. If we cannot fight the regime with arms, we can at least undermine it by presenting a civilised alternative through a parliamentary system.

Iraqis and Americans: mutual needs The question now is: where do the interests of the Iraqi opposition convening the conference meet with those of the US? While Washington has no need for the Iraqi opposition, or even its allies in NATO, in order to carry out regime change by military means, it still needs the Iraqi opposition for the following reasons: * It will provide a cover of Iraqi popular support for US military intervention, strengthening domestic support and European support in particular for the US case. This is where the conference has a role in sending a

powerful and clear message to US and world opinion. This is not possible without broad Iraqi participation.

The White House letter highlighted this in its expectations of the conference, expressing hopes that the conference would include the widest possible range of Iraqi opposition groups in order to set out to the world a convincing vision of the future of Iraq. The hope is that it will become a showcase for the wishes of the Iraqi people, calling for freedom and the establishment of a peaceful, democratic, multi-ethnic Iraq with full territorial integrity and sovereignty, coexisting peacefully with its neighbours, and free of weapons of mass destruction in conformity with the relevant Security Council resolutions.

* The US needs cooperation from the Iraqi opposition regarding post-Saddam Iraq, especially regarding the transitional period, which represents one of the main features of the US exit policy. As well as military preparations, the US administration is considering the arrangements for a transitional period.

The options still open to the US include temporary US military rule; the instigation of a military coup; or coordinating a US assault with a military rebellion which would remove Saddam Hussein and open the way for a temporary Iraqi military government. This means that Washington is not currently prepared to nominate any Iraqi faction to rule Iraq.

* The convening of the Iraqi opposition conference, and its success in selecting a committee for continuation, coordination and leadership, will create a new political framework allowing the current feud between the Iraqi National Congress and the 'group of four' to be resolved. Such a framework could be widened after the change of regime to become something like the Afghan Loya Jirga, or temporary parliament.

Time to decide By sending its letter, Washington has thrown its entire weight behind the Opposition conference in a manner that leaves no room for parties attempting to obstruct proceedings. US officials have repeatedly stressed the fact that considerations of time allow no room for lengthy negotiations.

While Washington knows what it wants from the conference and is prepared to provide its support, it remains for the Iraqi opposition, particularly the 'group of six', to agree on what they want from the conference itself, prior to arguing over their relative share of representatives.