

Party like it's 2003

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Remember the proud purple fingers of Iraqi voters in the nation's first parliamentary elections in December 2005?

In that election, voters soundly rejected interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, who had been installed by the Iraqi Governing Council, seven Iraqis chosen by U.S. authorities. The December 2005 election eventually resulted in the formation of the current government headed by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki.

Since taking power one year ago, Maliki's government has proven utterly inept. Profound political and sectarian divides remain, as do key issues about regional autonomy, division of oil revenues, power sharing among parties and security.

Absent any hard deadlines from the United States for meeting these goals, Maliki has been content to float along on a tide of U.S. money and blood. His chief accomplishment has been the botched hanging of Saddam Hussein.

On Wednesday, Maliki got a surprise visit from Vice President Dick Cheney, which is a little like getting a surprise visit from Tom Hagen, Vito Corleone's consigliere. A bland press statement was issued after their meeting, but Maliki can expect a horse's head in his bed any morning.

Cheney is en route to visit his longtime friends in Saudi Arabia, one of the two big dogs in the Middle East. The Saudis are known to be suspicious of Maliki's ties to the other big dog, Iran. Maliki's political support comes from fundamentalist Shiite religious parties with ties to Iran. He has an on-again, off-again relationship with Moqtada al-Sadr, the fundamentalist Shiite cleric whose Iranian-backed militia holds the key to security in Baghdad.

The Saudis reportedly would be more comfortable with a secular Shiite in control of the Iraqi government, someone less in the sway of Tehran, someone like, say, the aforementioned Ayad Allawi. Never mind that Allawi's list of candidates got only 13 percent of the Parliamentary seats in the December 2005 elections.

Never mind that he has decamped for London and Amman rather than risk the uncertainties of Baghdad. Allawi may be the Saudis' choice, which would put the Bush administration in a box.

Yes, Allawi, neurologist, secular Shiite and a former Ba'ath Party member who has good relationships with

Iraqi Sunnis, might be more of a unity prime minister, assuming the Iraqis want unity. And yes, the Bush administration has a long relationship with Allawi. In the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, he was one of the Iraqis who provided the convenient, albeit bogus, intelligence that Saddam had ties to al-Qaida and was on the verge of acquiring weapons of mass destruction.

But a Saudi-financed no-confidence vote in the Iraqi Parliament that would force a new election could well backfire spectacularly. It probably would end the grudging cooperation of Iraq's Shiite religious leaders with the U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in Baghdad. The Mahdi Army, which has gone largely underground, might well re-emerge. It might well trigger all-out civil war.

And then there's the issue of whether, having spent \$400 billion and 3,381 lives to bring democracy to Iraq, the United States should be taking part in a cabal to install its own stooge.

In the meantime, some 35,000 U.S. troops have been notified that they'll be deploying as replacements to Iraq later this year - surge or no surge. Democrats in Congress are promising to give President George W. Bush only half the \$93 billion he's requested for military operations in Iraq, the better to put pressure on the Maliki government. Bush is threatening to veto the half-a-loaf measure. And Dick Cheney, of all people, is touring the Middle East as Mr. Fix-it.

The United States is continuing to do the same things and expecting different results. By definition, this is insanity.

Reprinted from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

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