

Babylon Election Protest

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Peaceful demonstrators hold out for an elected governor for southern province.

In the southern Iraqi town of al-Hilla, demonstrators are camped out in the streets to demand that United States-led coalition administrators practice the democracy they preach when it comes to local government.

Since December 10, up to 5,000 protesters have been sleeping in tents and cooking their meals in front of the provincial government building as they stage their peaceful sit-in.

Their initial demand was for the removal of a governor whom they accused of corruption, and then they began protesting about the failure of the Coalition Provisional Authority, CPA, to hold democratic elections for his successor.

They said they were forced to act because when they previously complained to the local CPA office - on a monthly basis - they had always been turned away.

In the first three days of the sit-in, demonstrators demanded that the CPA oust the governor of Babylon province, Iskander Witwit, a man they said was corrupt and a former high-ranking member of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath party.

Local Shia cleric Rasool al-Musawi supported the claims with photocopies of what appeared to be a November 23 decree from the head of the US-appointed Governing Council ordering Witwit's removal from office. The document - seen by IWPR - recommended that Witwit face investigation for alleged abuses of his position.

Musawi also displayed what appeared to be a December 9 decree from the CPA's Iraqi De-Ba'athification Council which stated that Witwit had been a high-ranking member of the party and was thus ineligible for public office.

One of the protesters, Ahmed Reda Abbas, said the Americans had selected Witwit a week after the war ended, when he occupied the local provincial headquarters office and presented himself as a natural leader.

Governor Witwit resigned three days into the protests, and the CPA replaced him with former air force officer Imad Lefta Merdan.

However, protesters were left unhappy by the change, which went against two of their three demands. As well as getting rid of the old governor, they wanted his replacement to be a civilian and to be democratically elected rather than appointed from above.

Neither the local CPA representative nor Witwit himself would discuss the case with IWPR.

The CPA is said to be concerned that if municipal elections were held, radicals opposed to the foreign

administrators would win. It has also said that elections are not feasible in the chaos of post-war Iraq, given the uncertain security and the absence of electoral rolls.

But advocates of elections say workable voter lists could be compiled if the authorities decided to do so. In June, the CPA was preparing to hold elections in the neighbouring provincial capital of Najaf, but a voter registration drive run by US Marines was cancelled after protests by local military commanders.

Since then, street protests against US-appointed governors have become common throughout the south.

Some people fear the demonstrations are a dangerous phenomenon, and that they could spread to other regions. The governor of neighbouring Diwaniya has indicated that he might resign following street protests.

A speaker at a recent seminar, organised by the CPA to promote understanding of democracy, said the al-Hilla demonstration was nothing more than "mob action".

"Every sect wants to have its own representative at the expense of the others," he said.

But a police colonel in al-Hilla, surveying the seated demonstrators, said he had refused to carry out orders to break up the sit-in. "The demands of the citizens come first," he said. "They are more important than my post."

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