

# Who has won in Najaf?



HARUN UR RASHID

politics. His philosophy is "don't complain too loudly and don't be violent." Because of this philosophy, Al-Sistani survived the Saddam Hussein regime.

His aides say that Al-Sistani intervenes only as a last resort in crisis for interest of people. During the US invasion, he issued a direction to his followers not to interfere with the US-led troops. At the same, he refused to meet any official of the dissolved American administration in Iraq including the

that the second winner out of the deal is the cleric, Muqtada Al-Sadr. He and his militia are allowed to go free. Al-Sistani provided an escape route for Muqtada Al Sadr and it came at the right moment when US forces were closing in to assault his militia. Although Muqtada Al Sadr surrendered the keys to the Holy Shrine of Imam Ali in Najaf, to the representative of the Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, his Mehdi militia men melted away with weapons. Furthermore, the Allawi

Allawi government to use force catapulted Muqtada from a minor cleric to a powerful figure in Iraq, having large number of supporters among poor urban Shi'ite community in Iraq.

### Al-Sistani's influence on future events

By brokering a peace deal, Grand Ayatollah Al Sistani's influence in Iraq is fully assured. His pronouncements will be crucial in coming months for both the US and the interim government. His intervention

constitution for Iraq, leading to a constitutionally-elected government by December 31, 2005.

**Conclusion**  
Political observers believe that although Muqtada Al Sadr agreed to the truce, it is a mere tactics. The Najaf deal does not cure the "disease" but only relieves temporarily its symptoms. Neither Al Sistani nor the interim government of Iraq can shut Muqtada Al-Sadr permanently out, partly because he is the son of late Grand Ayatollah Sadiq Al Sadr (assassinated by the agents of Saddam Hussein in the 90s) and partly, because he has become the symbol of opposition of foreign occupation of his country.

The crux of the issue is that the anger of Iraqi people, both Sunnis and Shi'ites, prevails against the US military presence (148,000 US troops) in Iraq, coupled with a perception that the US-picked Allawi government is a "puppet" of the US. The Najaf and Falluja uprisings have been stark reminders to the Allawi interim government and the US of the huge hurdles ahead in Iraq. (President Bush finally acknowledged that he had "miscalculated" the post-war condition in Iraq, *The New York Times* recently reported).

Many think that it is not the last time Muqtada Al Sadr's armed resistance against the US occupation has occurred. The Sadr movement has now a large following in the country and is getting widespread acceptance among the poor, in preference to the more widely accepted Grand Ayatollah Al Sistani.

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BOTTOM LINE

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US administrator Paul Bremer.

### Al-Sistani's deal

On August 26, this frail Grand Ayatollah, who had a heart-operation in London, flew back to Iraq and issued a direction to his followers to peacefully march to Najaf to save the city. Tens of thousands of his followers complied with his orders.

With his arrival in Najaf, he brokered a peace deal. Najaf is to be declared a "weapons-free-zone." Compensation should be paid to people who have been victims to violence and to destruction of their property. Fair elections should be held and electoral roll should begin soon after proper census. All forces – US forces and Mehdi militia – have to withdraw from Najaf and Kufa. Everyone accepted and complied with the terms of the peace deal. Many say that it is not an agreement but an order from the Grand Ayatollah.

Many political analysts believe

government said that Muqtada Al Sadr and his militia men would not face arrest. This means that the young Al Sadr retained his prestige and honour to his supporters because he did not subject himself either to the US forces or to the un-elected Allawi interim government.

### Government's weakness

Although both the Iraqi interim government and the US forces may express relief, they fully realise the limitations of what they can do in such armed resistance. Both of them wanted at heart to avoid the kind of unsatisfactory deal that ended the rebellion in Najaf. Despite tough talking by the Allawi government, it could not either corner or clinch a deal with Muqtada, despite showing its "olive branch" to the young cleric. Iraqi people found the government ineffective and helpless to do anything against Muqtada Al Sadr. Rather the ill-thought actions of the

underscores the fact that the Shi'ite community (60 percent of the Iraqi population) will never be underdogs in the new Iraq. To many, in particular to Sunnis and Kurds, the Ayatollah's role suggests that they may not receive a fair deal in the new constitution of Iraq and that new Iraq will be less secular than the old.

Three crucial developments are to occur towards democracy in terms of the UN Security Council resolution 1546 of June 8 in which the Grand Ayatollah's views will have deep impact on Iraqi people. First is the holding of direct democratic elections to a Transitional National Assembly, by December 31, 2004 and in no case later than January 31, 2005. Second, the Transitional Assembly will have responsibility to form a transitional government (the interim government will be dissolved). Third, the Transitional Assembly will draft a permanent

PEACE has finally been restored to the holy city of Najaf, Iraq's center for Shi'ite learning, after the unexpected intervention of the Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani. It is not difficult to pick the first winner in the three-week stand-off in Najaf. It is the Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani. He demonstrated what he could do within hours of his arrival in Najaf what the interim Iraqi government, backed by the US forces, failed for three weeks. Some say that it seems that Grand Ayatollah suddenly snapped his fingers and everyone became at once subdued and quiet.

### Traditional role of Ayatollahs

Ayatollahs are eminent juristic Islamic scholars, who in the Shi'ia tradition, act as spiritual and in certain situations, as community leaders. Although born in Iran, Grand Ayatollah Al-Sistani is the topmost revered Shi'ite leader in Iraq. He is a respected, recluse leader and is one of the only five Grand Ayatollahs among entire Shi'ite community in the world. He possesses impeccable scholarly credentials. His interpretation of Islamic precepts and practices is moderate and he shuns extremism.

Al-Sistani is not an advocate of clerical activism, preferring the traditional "quietist" approach to

# Where are their children?

ESAM SOHAIL

ONLY in Bangladesh can you be forty, a multimillionaire, and married with three kids and yet be counted on as a frontline "student" leader.

They have no real stake in the very higher education system they so readily abuse as a birthright. And so we are in the midst of another strike affecting educational institutions. Indeed, I talk of the politicians of all the major half a dozen parties whose kids are routinely sent either to foreign lands or to the expensive private universities where they are largely immune from the proclivities of so-called student politics.

This newspaper has time and again, rightly so, called for a severe reform of the culture of agitational student politics that has become usual in our higher educational institutions because innocent students and their parents should not pay the price for someone's unbridled lust for power. That reform is nowhere in sight, understandably so.

University-age students provide a fertile mind, effusive energy, and ready muscle-power for any political outfit wanting to make a show of strength. Add to the mix the promises of a few thousand takas, protection from law enforcement, and seasoned leaders who are professional "students," and any two pence

politician can have enough misguided hands to force shutdowns, burn public property, and cancel examinations. If this is the legacy of the glory of student politics of the past, we can live without it.

Come on, let us be honest. Apart from the principled politics of a few leftist student organisations (with philosophies that I totally disagree with), most campus politics are about raw state power: either you are fighting on behalf of masters who want to keep it or at the behest of those who want to get it. The rest of it, curriculum, fees, cultural programmes, fresher receptions, and volunteer activities are simply facades for public consumption.

The three major student organisations are but he stormtroopers of their parent organizations who provide a violent society's muscle-power in exchange for the unhampered running of extortion rackets in all public colleges and universities. Burn a BRTC bus for us and we will protest if you are caught selling admission forms for a profit-that is the bargain in a nutshell. None of us want to believe that this is the end result of a "glorious heritage" of student politics. Yet in our hearts we know the truth.

You want to talk about elitism in education, this is the classic example. The progeny of the wealthy and the powerful go on to get an educa-

tion in an atmosphere where hartals and campus violence are rare. They come back into society ready to take-over from their parents. The children of the less fortunate, however, spend years living in the shadows of mastaans in residence halls, hoping that they might be able to get their degrees while their hair is still dark.

How many sons and daughters of cabinet ministers, former cabinet ministers, and MPs do you see enrolled at Dhaka University? And these are the people who ask regular folks to disrupt education for the good of the country's future. How dare they?

If student politics are about debate, deliberation, and student union elections devoted solely to student welfare and campus issues, they are a welcome addition to the total educational experience. When such activities become simply the reservoir of extortion and violence, no matter how nostalgic the past, they are a clear and present danger to our efforts to promote higher education irrespective of class and background.

Party-based student politics as we know it today have no place in a democratic society striving for equality and excellence. They serve none but the city-dwelling privileged political class at the expense of the masses of rural poor whose taxes pay for public universities and whose kids suffer the most from campus agitation. By patronising such politics, the major parties are deliberately, deviously and decisively protecting the very social inequalities that they lecture again at every opportunity.

It is called hypocrisy but then we should not be surprised, should we?

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