

MUNICH, 28 April 1971 (CAA/X)

The failure of discussions during the past two years on the formation of a national front government in Iraq was officially confirmed in the policy statement by Vice-President Saddam Hussein al-Takriti, published in the Iraqi Press on March 16. He said that the ruling Ba'ath Party, which had invited other left-wing forces to join the proposed front, had put forward reasonable conditions intended to safeguard the Revolution, but that the prospective partners - chief among which is the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP) - appeared unable to make up their minds to accept them. In a statement published on March 12, Saddam Hussein had stressed that the Ba'ath would not permit pressure or infringement of its sovereignty by any foreign Power and called on the ICP to "mend its ways" if the discussions were to be resumed.

The breakdown in the Ba'ath-ICP dialogue has caused the ICP and other Arab Communist Parties to accuse the Iraqi Government of persecuting "progressives". An article in the Soviet newspaper, Sovetskaya Rossiya, in February, asked how long "criminal reactionary elements in Iraq" would "enjoy opportunities to perpetrate their black deeds and thereby smear the name of that country in the eyes of progressive and democratically-minded people". The newspaper assured the ICP of the support of the Soviet people and of the "democratic public" in other countries. Letters of protest were sent to the Iraqi President from Western Communist Parties, and on March 26, in the Italian weekly Rinascita, Gian Carlo Pajetta, a member of the Italian Communist Party Directorate, deplored "anti-Communism" in Iraq and Sudan and described the problem of relations between governments and local Communists as "a measure of revolutionary maturity". Since Communists and Marxists in the Arab world were, he claimed, "objectively a component of the anti-imperialist movement", failure to achieve an understanding with them "cannot be other than an extremely negative element".

As Saddam Hussein indicated, the Ba'ath is incensed by the ICP's attempt to back up its demands by enlisting the support of foreign Communist Parties and Communist countries with which the Ba'ath has otherwise good relations. Ba'ath suspicion of the ICP has been increased by the Communists' open rejection of the basis for the proposed national front government. In an article in the ICP's clandestine newspaper, Tariq al-Sha'ab, reproduced in the Beirut newspaper al-Nida on February 21, the party claimed that "the way the national council is to be formed has come as a big shock to the Iraqi people", because the council could "never be a substitute for an elected parliament". Ironically, the ICP statement coincided with one by the Syrian Communist Party welcoming moves by the Syrian Ba'ath government to set up a "people's council", on the same lines as that proposed in Iraq, and describing it as "an important step in widening the popular base" of the Syrian régime. The condemnation by the ICP appears therefore as a purely tactical move in its negotiations with the government.

Support for the Iraqi Government, and revelations of the basic weakness of the ICP, have come from an unusual source. Aziz al-Haj, formerly a rising member of the ICP Central Committee and until recently secretary of

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a dissident Communist group, the Central Command, published a long letter in the Tunisian weekly Jeune Afrique on February 9. He confirmed reports that he had been appointed to "a government post" (Iraqi representative at UNESCO), but rejected the view that this is the only sign of an opening for the Left in the Ba'ath government. He said that several hundred Iraqi Communists were restored to government jobs after the Ba'ath came to power in 1968 and that many "important government posts" are held by Communists. He also rebutted accusations that the Secretary-General of the ICP, Aziz Muhammed, had been kidnapped by Iraqi security forces.

The most revealing part of al-Haj's letter was his discussion of the internal ICP dispute that led to his defection from the party in September, 1967. He confirmed that the split was due to disagreement over policy towards the Arif government and, earlier, towards the Qasim régime in 1959-63. He accused the pro-Moscow leadership of the party of acting "with a haughty indifference towards the masses, refusing any dialogue with the rank-and-file, stifling internal democracy and employing the most bureaucratic leadership methods", and described it as "a conglomeration of intellectuals divorced from the masses, having no serious revolutionary theory and playing the game of the Soviet Communist Party, accepting all its analyses and all its positions in order to disguise its own failure to set up and apply a coherent revolutionary policy".

Al-Haj denied, however, that his Central Command was "pro-Chinese". He described its position as being nearer to that of the Korean or Vietnamese Communists, supporting both "the two great fraternal parties". It is clear therefore that the main reasons for the division in the ICP were dissatisfaction with Soviet unwillingness or inability to support the party after the anti-Communist purges of 1963, Soviet advice to the party during the Qasim régime which resulted in its virtual collapse when Qasim fell, and above all the unquestioning acceptance by the ICP leadership throughout this period of Soviet tactical and policy directives. The Central Command appears to be partly a nationalist reaction against Soviet attempts to dictate to the ICP without understanding conditions in Iraq.

On his own change of views, al-Haj said that after the Central Command was formed he led the group in guerrilla activities against the Arif government; this revolt only lasted during June, 1968, before the Ba'ath came to power. He himself was arrested in February, 1969. He denied that he was tortured, as some observers have claimed, and attributed his "self-criticism" on radio and television in April, 1969, solely to the influence of discussions with the Ba'athist leaders during his imprisonment. Due to these and to "a certain number of documents which were unknown to us", which he saw in prison, he decided that the ICP had been mistaken in its view of the Ba'ath and had failed to "take account of the important changes" within the Ba'ath since 1963.