

Now Iraqis know what it's to live under democracy

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which war correspondents are attempting to report from the Iraqi side".

In Iraq's fledgling democracy the foreign press contingent has been warned. It isn't reporters who are wanted but PR persons willing to paint a rosy hue around the interim

nizant of the power of the press and the need to respect its truth-seeking foot soldiers as we saw with what alacrity and fanfare abducted British journalist James Brandon was reprieved from what could have been the jaws of death. And according to various

reporter Yvonne Ridley, who praised her captors and later converted to Islam. On the other hand, Allawi isn't concerned about his image. He has little inclination to be perceived as "Mr. Nice Guy" preferring to flex his muscles and show who is boss a la Sharon. But unlike Sharon he is prepared to sacrifice his own

threatening to quit unless talks with the Mahdi Army resumed. Tens of others shook their fists and protested the military operation shouting "Yes to Najaf". A letter signed by Shiites and non-Shiites alike addressed to Allawi and his Cabinet demanded "an immediate cease-fire and cessation of all military activities in Najaf and other Iraqi cities".

Allawi must decide which side of the political spectrum he's on. If he continues "inviting" his American buddies to bomb so-called insurgents' safe houses resulting in civilian casualties and to fire on his fellow-Iraqis in Najaf destroying centuries-old tomb stones in the process and risking the very existence of the Imam Ali mosque, then his tenure as prime minister is likely to be short.

This is the time for inflated egos and will to power to be put aside. Sadr has reportedly agreed to accept a temporary United Nations peacekeeping force in Iraq. Until tempers have cooled and when and if Iraq's democracy becomes a reality, surely this compromise should be seriously assessed.

Iraqis must stick together until the invading armies pack their bags and the foreign press ship out en masse. They should keep uppermost in their minds the old "divide and rule" policy of the British and resist its reconditioned and still ugly face in Iraq today.

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Taleban leadership respected the media's independence judging by the comparatively courteous treatment meted out to another released British reporter Yvonne Ridley, who praised her captors and later converted to Islam. On the other hand, Allawi isn't concerned about his image. He has little inclination to be perceived as "Mr. Nice Guy" preferring to flex his muscles and show who is boss a la Sharon. But unlike Sharon he is prepared to sacrifice his own compatriots in so doing and even risk a global Shiite uprising should the sacred mosque be seriously damaged. In the meantime, not only the Islamic world is outraged but also many of Allawi's colleagues.**

government and its US backers. No doubt Hollywood-style script writers and creative directors would be welcomed provided they were willing to point their talents at Jessica Lynch-type scenarios, designed to show the heroic deeds or charitable leanings of America's finest and their Iraqi yes-men. By contrast, Moqtada Sadr is fully cog-

reports in the British dailies, foreign journalists have often been welcomed by the Mahdi militia and even benefited from its protection and simple hospitality.

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A delegate at Sunday's conference Nadim Al-Jadari of the Shia Political Council jumped on to the platform

cleric Moqtada Sadr in the first place by imprisoning one of his top aides, tamping down on peaceful demonstrations and halting the press on Sadr's newspaper.

In the light of this unvarnished hostility to the press on the part of Allawi and his American friends - the pliable corps of journalists (sic) embedded with the US military excluded - shouldn't the "accidental" bombing of Al-Jazeera's offices in both Kabul and Baghdad be looked at in a different light, not to mention the tank shell which was fired by Marines at Baghdad's Palestine Hotel, the foreign media's home from home?

At the time Sky's David Chater reported his disbelief when the tank barrel slowly turned toward the hotel, adding its operator must have known there were journalists on its roof. Al-Jazeera has always maintained it handed its Baghdad office coordinates to the coalition after the debacle in Afghanistan. Perhaps that was its mistake. Prior to the invasion, former BBC war correspondent Kate Adie had warned that the Pentagon threatened to fire on the satellite uplink positions of independent journalists.

When she questioned a senior Pentagon officer on the lethal consequences of such actions, she was allegedly told: "Who cares...they've been warned". This was backed up by Phillip Knightley, author of a book entitled *First Casualty*, who said the Pentagon had threatened that they "may find it necessary to bomb areas in

Tucked safely within Iraq's fortress-like so-called green zone, and flanked by his American minders, Iraq's imposed Prime Minister Iyad Allawi waxed lyrical on the joys of democracy last Sunday in front of an assembly of religious and political elites. As the controversial figure favourably compared the status quo to decades of Saddam Hussein's brutal rule, ironically US tanks were once again rumbling and spewing over the ancient stones of the holy city of Najaf after reporters were told "get out or be arrested".

The authoritarian order was reportedly issued by that champion of democratic values Allawi himself - a man who has been awarded the power to declare emergency law, has reintroduced the death penalty and closed down the Qatar-based Arabic-language news network Al-Jazeera.

Proving they meant business, Allawi's emissaries told journalists staying in the city's Bar Najaf hotel: "You have been warned. You have two hours. If you don't leave you will be shot". And as if to prove the point, bullets were fired through the hotel doorway resulting in an Arab reporter suffering slight injuries from shattered glass.

Both the former (sic) occupying foreign power and its Iraqi appointees have given a whole new reality to the saying "don't shoot the messenger" or in this case the media. It was the former US Viceroy in Iraq L. Paul Bremer who stirred up trouble for Shiite