



IRAQ'S DEMOCRATIC PROSPECTS

by Kanan Makiya

In the run-up to the Iraq war, many of us reasoned that if a successful democracy took root, then this just might establish a model that would replicate itself throughout the region, forever altering the currently highly negative image that the Arab and Muslim world has of the U.S. After all, Iraq is an overwhelmingly Muslim country, and one in which the U.S. government has invested a great deal of human and material resources.

This thesis, however, has taken some hard knocks, as democratization in Iraq has so far translated only into elections, not the rule of law. Meanwhile, levels of violence have been rising, not falling in Iraq since 2003, reinforcing the false idea held by some Iraqis that democracy is in the end a form of anarchy. The escalation of violence has been particularly significant since the Askariya shrine in Samarra was blown up in late February 2006, an action that marks the success of efforts to undermine the enthusiasm that lay behind the historic vote of December 2005.

What has gone wrong with the democratic project in Iraq, and is it possible to recover the ground lost to the rising levels of sectarian violence? To begin, I will consider the security situation. The violence largely affects 4 out of 18 provinces in Iraq, and not the country as a whole. Unfortunately, Baghdad is in one of those four provinces, which are among the most mixed in terms of ethnic and confessional identities.

The incipient civil war has in fact been building up for nearly two years, during which the Iraqi body count has been steadily rising and the American body count lowering. The insurgency has been targeting Shiites and Kurds for a long time now, with the clear and unambiguous intention of fomenting civil war. New evidence that has just come to light confirms that Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's terrorist operation, Al Qaeda's arm in Iraq, has mapped out the more vulnerable Shiite areas with a view to targeting them and driving families out in the first stages of what amounts to a kind of confessional cleansing of parts of Baghdad. If the conflict was ever about the American occupation of Iraq, clearly it no longer is.

If the war against the insurgency is not going as well as was hoped, in large part this is because the regimes on Iraq's borders--the very ones that would be most undermined by a success story in Iraq--are sustaining it by doing little or nothing to stop the infiltration of determined jihadis from slipping in and wreaking havoc. If anything, the neighboring regimes are aiding them.

Success in Iraq is no longer going to be a strictly Iraqi story, if it ever was going to have been. Real success in Iraq will remain a hostage to events and changes occurring in other parts of the Middle East, changes driven in part by the ripple effects of regime change in Iraq and in part by reformist currents responding to the crisis of the Arab state system as a whole.

In the beginning, the insurgency looked like it was about occupation--a fiercely independent and nationalist people responding to the presence of foreign troops on their soil. But at least today and perhaps earlier, it is clearly not about that. The fact is that an old order in the Middle East is battling the emergence of a new one. Much like the American civil war, it is in the end going to be about what it means today to be an Iraqi. The insurgents know that they cannot possibly win this war, but they can bring the whole house tumbling down, or so at least they believe. Their goal is a sectarian civilian bloodbath, inter-confessional warfare, and the collapse of the state, which would undo everything the U.S. was trying to achieve when it overthrew Saddam Hussein's regime.

We never expected an insurgency of this scope and duration. Should we judge from that failure of judgment that the war itself was a mistake, that democratization was a pipe dream? Should the U.S. be trying to extricate itself at any cost from the mess that it helped to create?

Despite the high levels of violence and the fact that we cannot yet say that the back of the insurgency has been broken, I believe that ultimately history will look kindly upon the U.S. democratization project in the region. That it was done badly and without the requisite planning goes without saying. However, too many people draw from this "bungled" effort large and sweeping lessons about how history will judge this shift in U.S. foreign policy. I am not prepared to make that kind of leap. That the project was mismanaged in numerous ways has implications for the here and now, but it does not yet speak to the

long term. We are on the edge of a chasm from which we can still step back. It is a dangerous moment, but not yet hopeless.

Long before March 2003 I believed that the U.S. conflict with the Baath regime in Iraq, dating back to the annexation of Kuwait in the summer of 1990, could only be resolved by the overthrow of Saddam's regime. Relying on sanctions alone to do the job, I held, was immoral and unworkable. Worse, the removal of sanctions short of overthrow would re-legitimize a regime that was the worst violator of human rights since World War II—and that assessment is from a report issued in the mid 1990s by Max van der Stoep, then the UN Rapporteur for Human Rights.

The burden is on the opponents of regime change in Iraq to say what they would have done with the Saddam regime by the late 1990s. Iraq's society was rotting, its institutions were reduced to pale shadows of their former selves, and the country was in terminal decline, while the Baath regime continued to empower its own people. Sanctions were not working the way the world had thought they would, and 25 million people were paying the price. Surely the international community that had imposed the sanctions in the first place needed to be held responsible, Iraqis would have thought. Continuation of the situation was immoral. But in the end, only the U.S., Great Britain, and a handful of other countries acted. The fact that the U.S. is associated with the removal of such a regime has got to be a good thing, however bad the situation in Iraq might look today.

The administration's emphasis on WMD following 9/11 discomfited many of us. It is not that we thought the regime did not have them; it is just that the focus on weapons detracts from the more human messages of the diminution of cruelty, the spread of political freedoms, and liberation from dictatorship that should be at the centerpiece of U.S. foreign policy.

Even those of us who do not regret our support for the war can acknowledge that big mistakes were made. To begin with, we underestimated the social base upon which the Baath system of government, which entailed terror and a bloated security and social-control apparatus, rested. The armed men of the Baath did not really fight back in March and April 2003, but nor were they repressed or won over by the proponents of the new order, be they Iraqis or the Coalition Provisional Authority. They are fighting back now. And they, not the jihadis, are the logistical, financial, and organizational backbone of the insurgency. We made the situation worse by taking away their jobs in the army and security services and neither punishing them nor immediately reconciling them to the new order.

Personally, I, along with most former Iraqi exiles, underestimated the consequences on a society of thirty years of extreme dictatorship, even if they were liberated, not defeated as the German and Japanese peoples were in 1945. A regime was removed and a people liberated that did not understand what had happened or why.

The people of Iraq emerged into the light of day in a daze, having been cut off from the rest of the world to a degree that is difficult to imagine if you have not lived among them. This raw, profoundly abused population, traumatized by decades of war, repression, uprisings, and brutal campaigns of social extermination like the Anfal, were handed the opportunity to build a nation virtually from scratch.

They were adept at learning to use the most visually arresting symbols of their reentry into the world--the mobile phone and the satellite dish which now proliferate all over Iraq. But it proved infinitely harder to get rid of the mistrust, fear, and unwillingness to take initiative or responsibility that was ingrained by a whole way of survival in police-state conditions.

I also underestimated the wounds in the population left by the betrayal of the Iraqi intifada in 1991. In 1991, more Iraqis died in Saddam's crushing of the uprising than in the US-Iraq war itself. In 2003, Iraqis could not trust the U.S. "I don't believe they are going to do it" was the dominant feeling among Iraqis inside the country. Even after coalition forces had taken half the country, Iraqis who had known nothing but Saddam's lies for all their lives remained skeptical. The presence of more Iraqis--Iraqis able to talk to the skeptics on the ground--with and inside the liberation army in 2003 would have helped. But there were hardly any Iraqis, even as auxiliaries, in the U.S. army that occupied Iraq. This caused much confusion, and it undermined the support that regime-change could have immediately begun to have among Iraqis.

The U.S. mistakes of the postwar period have been much commented upon, particularly what was perhaps the biggest mistake of all: inadequate troop strength. The first, and most lasting consequence of those mistakes was insecurity. Iraq never got over the breakdown of authority that was evident in the looting that broke out on April 9, the day of liberation. Security is never absent in a police state. With liberation associated with the removal of personal security, one cannot expect Iraqis to behave overnight as if they had lived all their lives in a mature democratic state. Underlying many of these mistakes was America's unwillingness or inability to exercise authority in a comprehensible way.

Was military occupation even the right transitional formula for postwar Iraq? Occupation is a sensible temporary solution to the problem of government for peoples who have been defeated, like the Germans and Japanese in 1945. But is it the right formula for a people that you believe you have just liberated from tyranny? Iraq's post-Saddam experience suggests that a reluctant occupier, one who is unable to accept the reality and imperative of his own position of authority, may be the last thing such a country needs.

The chaos of Iraq today was presaged by the looting that followed on the heels of liberation and the CPA's inability to establish order. Perhaps these mistakes can be attributed to the American idea that liberation and responsible democratic political behavior are one and the same thing. They are not. It is terrifying for a population that has been ruled by a tyrant for as long as anyone can remember to sense that no one is in authority. It is difficult to behave democratically in the absence of personal security and the institutions needed to buttress law and order. And it becomes easy to imagine that such

indecisiveness and loss of control is deliberate and planned, part of a bizarre conspiracy to, for instance, gain control of Iraqi oil.

And yet, despite these miscalculations, the Iraq War ushered in an event as big as the January 30, 2005 Iraqi elections, followed by the October referendum on the constitution, followed by an even more impressive election turnout on December 15. That is a truly remarkable paradox. The large turnout in the elections alone suffice to establish the event as a defining moment in the future, not only of Iraq but of the whole Middle East.

Following those elections, despite the many failings of the occupation regime that ended in June 2004, a fledgling, closely watched, and most imperfect democratic process became a reality in an Arab and Muslim country. These were genuine elections, not stage-managed. There were thousands of candidates and a myriad of manifestoes, replete with the kind of backward politics and ad hominem attacks that only the deeply felt hopes and fears of a nation wrestling with its demons can give rise to.

The Arab world has seen elections before. However, virtually all of them were artificial affairs, their outcomes never in doubt. They were in the end celebrations of one version or another of autocracy. Today, the Iraq elections have set off shockwaves in the region, leading to genuine reforms in numerous Arab countries. Last year Kuwaiti women won the right to vote. Countries like Jordan and Egypt found themselves pressed to make reforms. Through their action on the streets, the Lebanese drove their Syrian occupiers out of Lebanon, and the Baath regime in Syria is in crisis.

Behind all of these steps forward is a new attitude towards the Palestinian-Israeli conflict that is beginning to make itself felt. No longer is this the central issue of Arab politics. And this is a good thing. In the long run, it will benefit the Palestinians as much as other Arabs.

The three elections that took place in Iraq in 2005 are not enough to make a democracy but they have certainly changed the regional landscape. Millions of people were seen to be making choices and placing claims on those who would lead them in the future. To act upon one's own world like this is what politics in the purest sense is all about. And it is infectious. The taste of freedom is a hard memory to rub out.

No wonder the political and intellectual elites of the Arab world that have so much invested in the old order are so worried, and no wonder they were so hostile to regime change in Iraq. Today there are new voices for change, other media outlets than the traditional state-sponsored TV and radio stations. The old elites had longed for failure. They trotted out the tired old formulas of anti-Americanism to impart legitimacy to the so-called Iraqi "resistance to American occupation." But the people of Iraq, through their vote in January, put an end to all that.

THE WAY FORWARD

The battle of ideas has only just begun. We have a long way to go. But one can feel, among young Arabs in particular, that finally the region is on the move. Of course, we can't predict the outcome. The Iraqi elections have produced a National Assembly that is, after much procrastination, in the end creating a government. And they produced a document, the new, albeit incomplete and faulty, permanent constitution of Iraq, that wrestles with the question of what it means to be an Iraqi.

Scarred by a brutal dictatorship unmatched in its capacity for cruelty, the Iraqi men and women who took their lives in their hands as they went out to vote are heroes in a sense that cannot be overstated. But they are also victims. And, no matter what so much of modern Arab culture has been trying to persuade us in recent years, there is no virtue in victimhood; it is a debilitating condition, not a quality. It is a condition that exacts a huge toll that it will take at least a generation to ameliorate.

Iraqis have yet to come to terms with their victimhood. They have yet to reconcile this condition with the political attributes of citizenship in a new Iraq. Therefore I am still worried when I contemplate the prospects of democracy in Iraq. This time, of course, the threat to Iraqi life and well-being does not come from the Arab nationalism of the Baath, but from the legacy of that totalizing ideology: the profoundly irrational and self-destructive politics of shrinking oneself down to the mere fact of one's own victimhood as a reaction to the previous totalizing transnational ideologies that have so poisoned one's world.

The terrible lesson of Palestinian politics is that a leadership that elevates victimhood into the be-all and end-all of politics brings untold misery upon its own people. Given political power, this kind of a leadership will in turn victimize. This is an iron law of social and political psychology, confirmed by any number of recent experiences. The insurgents in Iraq fully understand this dynamic; in fact, they are counting on it. That is why their goal is not to win over Iraqi hearts and minds, but to inculcate a state of pervasive physical insecurity conducive to the eruption of the most irrational forms of behavior. Theirs is a politics of fear and intimidation borrowed from the former regime that produced them. It is a politics designed to create a backlash among those very Iraqis who wore as a badge of honor the blue-black mark on their right index finger that showed they had voted.

Foremost among the victims are the Shiites, of whom I am one. Shiite parties won a great electoral victory in December 2005. But they do not yet know what they stand for or what kind of a state they want.

Since 1968, the Baath's answer to the question "Who am I?" was "You are either one of us, or you are dead." They killed anyone who said he was a Kurd, a Shiite, a leftist, a democrat, or a liberal. Contrary to what many Iraqi Shiites believe, the Baath never wanted to build a Sunni confessional state in Iraq. Anti-Shiite sectarianism was introduced on a large scale after

the 1991 uprising. The state that the Baath had built in Iraq up until the 1991 Gulf War thrived on the mistrust, suspicion, and fear that it went about inculcating in everyone. In this sense, it was egalitarian. Atomizing society by breeding hate and a thirst for revenge was the regime's highest ambition and principal tool of social control. Every Iraqi became both complicit in the Baathist enterprise and its victim.

Now that the Shiites have become the majority in the INA, they have inherited the burden of a fractured and deeply atomized country, all of whose minorities have known suffering of one sort or another. How are they going to shoulder that responsibility? The idea of Iraq as pluralist and accommodating is at odds with the Shiite sense of political entitlement arising from their own previous suffering. And yet only the Shiites are in a position to stop the legacy of dictatorship from snatching victory out of the jaws of defeat in the shape of escalating confessional and ethnic violence in the years to come. By virtue of their numbers, the Shiites carry the greatest responsibility for that future. They also have far more to lose than anyone else, and this too is a lesson the insurgents have understood well. The fact that Iraqis are still competing with each other over who has suffered the most, and who did or did not collaborate with Saddam, is not a good sign; it is a sign that what he represented still lives on inside Iraqi hearts. Herein lies the greatest danger of all for Iraq's future.

The insurgency has no chance of winning; it has no program to which to win people over. It will in the end be defeated, not by the U.S. army alone but by the people of Iraq. Increasingly the Iraqis are fighting back; the U.S. is needed but its presence is less and less the reason for the bloodshed. The only question that has a bearing on whether or not this war was worth fighting is what kind of an Iraq will the defeat of the insurgency leave behind.

While it will be a long time before Iraq is a democracy as we understand that word, we can say a few things about the new Iraq that is being born. It will not threaten or attack its neighbors; it will be a greatly decentralized state; and it will represent a new regional model of statehood and nation-formation, one that in all likelihood offers its citizens a variety of lifestyles and models to choose from within the very same Iraq that once knew only the totalizing Arabism of the Baath.

It is of course entirely possible for reasonable people to come to a different conclusion about the war, one not based on what is in the best interests of the people of Iraq. It is hard to look into the eyes of parents who lost their sons or daughters in Iraq and say that their death was justified. But in considering the United States' sacrifice, it should be remembered that the malaise in Arab politics represented by Saddam's regime was a long time in the making; that regime change may have been the only solution for the sanctions problem; that the failings of the Middle East have already brought 9/11; and that ultimately this is not a civilizational divide; but a war of ideas and values as signaled by al-Zarqawi's statement denouncing Iraq's January elections: "We have declared a bitter war against the principle of democracy and all those who seek to enact it."

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