

Strategic Insight

Democracy in Iraq?

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Do Iraqis believe that democracy can take root in their country? Interviews that I have conducted with recent Iraqi émigrés shed light on the Iraqi people's perceptions of a post-Saddam future. Several compelling points emerged from these conversations:

- Iraqi émigrés report that Sunni Muslims in Iraq are asking their Shi'a Muslim friends if they can take refuge in their homes if Saddam falls. Such activity suggests that the Sunnis expect the Shi'a to seek revenge for years of oppression at the hands of the Saddam regime. Consequently, the Sunnis may support the current regime not out of love for Saddam but out of fear for what will happen if he loses power.
- Iraqis widely believe that the United States does not genuinely support democracy in a post-Saddam Iraq. These feelings emerged after the 1991 Gulf uprising when many Iraqis felt they were abandoned after the first President Bush called for the Iraqi people to revolt against Saddam. Iraqis maintain that American forces literally watched as the Republican Guards crushed their rebellion. Since then they say that the United States has never had an interest in dismantling the Ba'ath government but rather is only concerned about overthrowing Saddam while keeping the old system intact.
- Iraqis doubt that the United States could support democracy in their country because with the Arab Shi'as constituting the majority in Iraq, a post-Saddam leader would most likely be a Shi'a. The Iraqis with whom I spoke felt that the United States would not accept such a leader because he might ally with Shi'a Iran and then dominate the Gulf.
- Iraqis are wary of the United States imposing a government from above as the British did in the 1920's. The Iraqi reaction to this imposition in the 1920's was a national revolt that swept through most of the country. Iraq's various factions united in opposition to this British-sponsored government. The same scenario could replay itself if the Americans were to impose a government on Iraq.

Despite these obstacles, there is reason to believe that a viable democracy can take root in a post-Saddam Iraq:

- Dispelling the popular notion that democracy is entirely foreign to the Islamic Middle East, Iran, Turkey and Lebanon have elected legislative assemblies and set limits on the length of presidential terms.
- Although Iraq is today ruled by a dictator with extensive security agencies to preserve his power, there are precedents of such police states evolving into democratic societies. In the Romanian example, when Nicolae Ceausescu ordered his elite security services to suppress riots in Romania in 1989, the army joined with civilians in a mass uprising that unraveled his regime. Romania today is a functioning democracy, and while there are numerous cultural and historic differences with Iraq, Romania's success does show that it is possible for a police state to evolve into a democratic society.

- In the period from 1922-1958, Iraq was a constitutional monarchy with elections and a vibrant civil society. Thus the notion and practice of democracy are not completely foreign to Iraq.

Iraqis doubt the United States' commitment to democracy in their country. The popular belief is that the United States aims to remove Saddam but maintain the Ba'th system of government, or replace it with a military regime. However, democracy is not without precedent in Iraq, and a genuine effort to establish a democratic government in the wake of Saddam's deposal could very well succeed.

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