DEMOCRACY'S PROSPECTS IN IRAQ

by Eric Davis

For many, it now seems that the hopes and expectations of the large majority of Iraqis that a more participatory and tolerant society would be created in the wake of the fall of the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein may have been naive and unrealistic. The inability of the Interim Iraqi Government (IIG) and U.S. military forces to suppress a widespread insurgency seems to underscore this view. The hostility of many Iraqis towards the U.S. occupation of Iraq is cited as further evidence that democracy will not find fertile soil in Iraq. But does the current unrest in Iraq really indicate a lack of commitment to creating democracy? Would Iraqis prefer a return to authoritarian rule?

Public opinion polls show that Iraqis continue to support democracy in large numbers. Iraqi society is highly capable of creating a political community characterized by democratic governance. However, many factors are working against the will of the citizenry, including a wide array of domestic and international forces. Despite the heavy odds that have been stacked against them, Iraqis continue to press forward to create a more democratic and just society.

A widespread insurgency was planned by the Baathist regime prior to its being overthrown in March 2003. Knowing that the Iraqi army would be unable to confront U.S. military superiority, Saddam's regime organized a resistance movement that would fight American forces after the war ended. Large caches of arms and money were planted throughout Iraq, especially in the rural towns and villages of the so-called Sunni Arab Triangle northwest of Baghdad. These resources were to be used in escalating attacks on American military units intended to sap the U.S. forces' resolve and force them from Iraq.

This insurgency has involved, first and foremost, members of the massive security apparatus Saddam created before being overthrown, the Fedayeen and other elite military units loyal to Saddam, and high-ranking army officers and Baath Party officials. After Saddam created what Iraqi sociologist Faleh Abdel Jabar calls "the family-party state" when he became president in 1979, dominated by close family members and tribal associates, the Baathist regime became more an organized crime syndicate than a political organization. Those who ran the family-party state, having lost their political and economic prerogatives, organized the initial uprising.

However, the insurgency grew much wider in the months following Saddam and the Baathist regime's overthrow. Iraq's porous border allowed foreign radicals, many of them Islamist militants, to infiltrate the country and widen the insurgency's social and political base beyond former regime loyalists. Gradually, the insurgency also began to attract rural inhabitants of the Sunni Arab Triangle. These included young, nationalistic Iraqis not necessarily associated with the Baath Party, many of whom were even hostile to Saddam. In their view, the U.S. occupation threatened to marginalize the Sunni Arab community, which would lose the privileged access to the state it had enjoyed since the Ottoman period. This latter group of Sunni Arabs found much of the American troops' behavior--e.g., public interrogations of handcuffed and blindfolded male insurgents--shaming and insulting.

Other Sunni Arab supporters of the insurgency have come from tribes that were close to the Baathist regime. During the 1990s, Saddam made a concerted effort to retribalize much of rural Iraqi society. Having lost hundreds of rural Baath Party officials during the March-April 1991 Intifada following the Gulf War, he literally recreated tribal power structures that had all but disappeared. Established and newly created tribal leaders became the Baath Party's minions in the countryside, where they were able to expand their landownership and economic power.

Despite the insurgency's intensity, large areas of Iraq have remained relatively calm. The Kurds, representing 15-20% of the Iraqi population, have not joined the uprising. In the south, the vast majority of the Shia, constituting 60% of Iraq's population, have likewise avoided violent confrontation with Iraqi and American security forces. The important exception has
male Shiites who, like their counterparts in the Sunni Arab triangle, envision a bleak future for themselves. But al-Sadr's militia has found itself fighting not only American forces but other Shiite groups. These include the Badr Brigade of the Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI), which rejects al-Sadr's claim to leadership of the Shiite community.

While political violence has led to many deaths and threatens Iraq's ability to hold free, nationwide elections, the large majority of Iraqis neither support nor are engaged in violent opposition to the IIG nor the U.S. troops that still remain in Iraq. Indeed, during a series of coordinated attacks in five Iraqi cities on June 24 that led to over 100 Iraqi deaths and 300 wounded, Sunni and Shiite clerics, many of them hostile to the U.S. occupation, strongly condemned the killing of Iraqis in their Friday sermons the following day and called upon foreign militants to leave the country.

To understand why the insurgency has been able to destabilize Iraq and impede the movement toward democratization, we need to examine U.S. policy in Iraq. Ironically, many decisions taken by the former Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) after the war's end in March 2003 helped strengthen the insurgency. The CPA inadvertently created serious obstacles to a democratic transition in Iraq. The U.S. military's failure to prevent widespread looting after Baghdad fell sent a negative message—namely, that the United States did not have a well thought-out plan for post-Baathist Iraq. Its failure to protect cultural sites such as the National Library and the Iraq Museum, while it did secure the Republican Palace and the Ministry of Oil, sent the same message. Many Iraqis accordingly exercised great caution in committing to U.S.-proposed projects intended to reestablish civil society and ultimately create a democratic state.

Polls show that while Iraqis of all ethnic groups support democracy, physical and economic security are even higher priorities. Despite warnings from Iraqi and American military experts not to do so, CPA administrator Paul Bremer dissolved the Iraqi Governing Council established following the Baathist regime's collapse. By not establishing sufficient contacts with prominent Sunni and Shiite clerics, many of them hostile to the U.S. occupation, strongly condemned the killing of Iraqis in their Friday sermons the following day and called upon foreign militants to leave the country.

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Iraq's current political problems cannot be attributed solely to the insurgency and the CPA's political decisions. Because the post-Baathist Sunni Arab community had no recognized political authority, it was difficult for the CPA, and will remain difficult for the IIG, to identify interlocutors with whom to negotiate on political interests and creating new political institutions. The struggle between the Hawza and the Sadrists has prevented the Shia from being able to speak with one voice, and this disunity threatens to dilute their political power. The Kurds insist that they be given strong, constitutionally-specified protections that will prevent Baghdad from engaging in the type of attacks on Iraqi Kurdistan that have characterized many Arab governments in the past. However, al-Sistani and the Hawza oppose a constitution that gives the Kurds the types of guarantees that would amount to veto power over policy decisions. In short, contention among Iraq's political elites constitutes another serious impediment to democratization in Iraq.

But social and political behavior among Iraqis at the grassroots level tells a story beyond the ethnic divisions so often used to characterize Iraqi politics. There has been a massive flowering of the institutions of civil society since the war ended. The Iraqi Communist Party's People's Path reappeared in Baghdad shortly after the war, followed by a flood of newspapers and magazines in Arabic, English, and the languages of Iraq's major minority groups. Labor unions began to reorganize legally for the first time since the early 1960s. Iraqi women, with the help of the CPA and many NGOs, established a large number of organizations to protect rights that Iraqi women had already won earlier in the twentieth century. A large number of literary organizations were formed, and numerous artist groups and experimental theater troupes appeared in Baghdad. The latter organizations count many Iraqi youth among their members, indicating that it is not just those older Iraqis who are conversant with pre-Baathist civil society who support creating democracy. Many of these new organizations are inter-ethnic in membership.

Of great importance as well to a nascent Iraqi civil society is the reemergence throughout Iraq of a coffeehouse culture. It is in this important, albeit informal, institution that the political and cultural ideas of the day are discussed and debated. And notwithstanding that the shadowy "15th of Shaban Movement" has spread fear in Basra, closing nightclubs and stores selling alcohol, intellectuals from all ethnic backgrounds and all parts of the country traveled to the city this past May to reestablish al-Mirbad, one of Iraq's most prominent poetry festivals, traditionally held near Basra and known throughout the Arab world.

Despite considerable intimidation, countless Iraqis have offered themselves as candidates for elected municipal and town councils. Many of these elected officials have been killed or wounded by insurgents, yet the organizations for the most part continue to function. Large numbers of Iraqis report to work daily in Iraq's 26 ministries and numerous government agencies, most of which are now under IIG control. Numerous Iraqi police have been killed, but they are quickly replaced by new volunteers. Support for Muqtada al-Sadr may actually reflect dissatisfaction with the United States for not having provided better national security and for the Abu Ghraib prison abuses, as well as concerns about its long-term objectives in Iraq. But in a May 2004 CPA poll, only 2% of Iraqis indicated that they would support al-Sadr for president.

What, then, are the prospects for democracy in Iraq? Clearly, the United States should try to mobilize more international support for the new IIG headed by Prime Minister Iyad Allawi and President Ghazi Ajil al-Yawir, who enjoy Iraqis' support. However, Iraqis increasingly view the project of creating democracy in their country as one intended to subordinate Iraqi national interests to those of the United States. To create a democratic state in Iraq that does not fit its preconceived "domino democracy" model for the region, the United States must engage in a much more extensive dialogue with the Iraqi citizenry. The best U.S. foreign policy towards Iraq will be to act a facilitator of Iraqi desires rather than to try to manipulate the IIG and successor elected governments to adopt policies that replicate our own views of how democracy should operate. Resources given to Iraq will need to address the populace's needs rather than those of specific elites. While inter-elite politics must be taken seriously, U.S. foreign policy should promote transcending rather than reinforcing ethnic divisions. It should not be linked to immediate returns, but rather to the long-term goal of a politically stable and prosperous Iraq.

Violence, questionable policy decisions by the U.S. government, and intra-elite struggle should not be allowed to derail what could turn out to be one of the defining moments of the modern Middle East, namely an Iraq characterized by a functioning democracy, a government that promotes political tolerance and social justice, and a flourishing civil society. The model offered by Iraq could stimulate progressive political and social change throughout the region. In the end, though, democracy is about self-empowerment. Iraqis must be given the power to shape their own future if democratic institutions and practices are to be seen as culturally authentic and not as imported from abroad. Only then will those who seek to reimpose authoritarian rule find themselves excoriated from the Iraqi body politic.