

Policy Watch: Iraqi democracy's obstacles

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Whatever else has gone wrong in Iraq, the Bush administration can point to the fact that free elections have been held there and that a democratically elected government is in place, albeit not really in power. But can Iraq emerge as a functioning democracy if American forces leave -- or even if they do not?

The Bush administration rightly points out that other countries that were long ruled by authoritarian regimes have successfully democratized. Iraqis, it argues, can also do so. But as can be seen from reading Hanna Batatu's monumental 1,283-page book, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq (1978)*, there are some serious obstacles to democratization in Iraq.

Due to the tremendous news coverage Iraq has received since the 2003 American-led intervention of that country and increasingly problematic occupation of it afterward, Iraq's demographic breakdown is well known: Shiite Arabs are a majority in the country and are located primarily in the south; the Sunni Arab minority is located in the middle; and the Kurdish minority is located in the north (where it forms a majority). And as is also well known, the backbone of Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime was the Sunni Arab minority -- especially Sunni Arabs from his home region around the town of Tikrit. Sunni Arab dominance, though, was not only a characteristic of Saddam Hussein's "revolutionary" regime, but also of previous regimes in Iraq. In the late 19th century, for example, the declining Ottoman Empire relied on Sunni Arabs to maintain its rule in the provinces that would become Iraq.

It was the British who created Iraq within its present borders at the end of World War I and who installed a king from the Hashemite family (now on the throne only in Jordan) to rule it. Similar to the Ottomans, the Hashemite kings relied primarily on Sunni Arabs as officers in their army. By the time of the 1958 Iraqi revolution that overthrew the monarchy, the Iraqi army officer corps was almost entirely Sunni Arab.

Discontent certainly existed in Iraq under the monarchy. By the 1950's, revolutionary opposition parties had sprung up to challenge it, including both the Communist Party and the Baath Party. Batatu showed that the membership of these parties, at least in their early years, was largely drawn from the non-dominant groups in Iraq.

But as he also pointed out, it was not the Baathists or Communists who made the 1958 revolution, but the "Free Officers" instead -- who, like most Iraqi officers, were primarily Sunni Arab. Over the next ten years, there were several coups in which different army officers seized power from one another. In 1963, though, the Baath Party came to power for the first time, but dissension soon arose between its military and civilian leaders. These groups, Batatu noted, were also divided along sectarian lines: Baathist military leaders were almost entirely Sunni Arab whereas a majority of its civilian leaders were Shiite Arab.

Between the time it lost power later in 1963 and regained it in 1968, the composition of the Baath Party underwent a dramatic transformation. As Batatu observed, "the role of the Sunnis had risen sharply, while that of the Shiites had decisively declined." In addition, the leadership of the Baath had been taken over in 1964 by two Sunni Arabs from the town of Tikrit: Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr and Saddam Hussein. Under their influence, not just Sunnis but Takritis had

become the dominant force within the Baath by the time it resumed power in 1968.

As is well known, the dominance of the Sunni Arabs, especially the Takritis, only increased under Baath rule, as did the oppression of both the Kurds and the Shiite Arabs -- especially after Saddam Hussein seized full power in 1978. Both the Kurds and the Shiite Arabs revolted against Saddam in early 1991 in the wake of the defeat of his forces in Kuwait at the hands of a U.S.-led coalition. Whereas the Kurdish rebels received some American support in creating an "autonomous zone" outside of his control, he moved quickly to quell the Arab Shiite rebellion once it was clear that neither the United States nor anyone else would intervene on their behalf.

With this tortured history in mind, it is not surprising that the American-sponsored democratization efforts in Iraq since 2003 have resulted in the emergence of both Kurdish nationalism and Sunni-Shiite antagonism. Kurdish public opinion overwhelmingly supports the creation of an independent Kurdish state, but this is strongly opposed by neighboring countries (especially Turkey) and not supported by anyone else (including the United States, which does not want to further strain relations with Turkey). Although the Kurds seem to understand that they cannot attain their maximal goal at present, they have worked assiduously to run their own affairs and maintain their own security in the North outside the control of the national government in Baghdad.

The Shiite Arabs, by contrast, have not sought secession from Iraq; since they are the majority in it, democratization will lead to their dominance over the country. This is something that the previously dominant Sunni Arabs strongly wish to avoid. A civil war, complete with ethnic cleansing, has emerged between these two communities that the United States and its allies appear powerless to halt. Complicating the problem is the tremendous distrust that Iraq's three principal communities have for one another, as well as for foreigners, as was documented in a path-breaking article on Iraqi public opinion by Ronald Inglehart, Mansoor Moaddel and Mark Tessler entitled, "Xenophobia and In-Group Solidarity in Iraq: A Natural Experiment on the Impact of Insecurity."

American efforts encouraging leaders from the three communities to cooperate with each other have been hampered by the prevalence of hard-line views on all sides, the availability of external support for them, and the ease with which the hard-liners can stigmatize anyone cooperating with the American "occupiers."

How this conflict will play out is not at all clear, especially with the war's growing unpopularity in the United States raising the possibility of an American withdrawal from Iraq. But whether America goes or stays, the tortured history of Sunni-Shiite and Arab-Kurdish relations in Iraq that long predates Saddam Hussein indicates that Iraq has far more to overcome than most countries in order to successfully make the transition from authoritarianism to democracy.

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