

THE DEMOCRATIZATION PROCESS IN IRAQ

Decades of tyranny, wars and oppression have left the Iraqi society divided, lacking initiative and vulnerable to various sensitivities. Describing the challenges faced in Iraq's ongoing transition due to the recent history of the nation, the author offers suggestions as to how they can be overcome, covering the political, economic, institution building and foreign policy spheres. The importance of leaving ethnic and religious divisions in the past and reconstructing a national identity is emphasized and a vision for Iraq's regional and global role is related.

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Iraq is undergoing a significant and historic transition. It is trying to become a federal, democratic, modern state, leaving dictatorship and its associated violence behind. This major transformation is occurring after decades of continuous, large scale internal and external war, untold oppression and absolute tyranny. All of these affected Iraq and its people for many years. Thus, Iraq turned into a closed, terrible police state where horror and violence prevailed. The rule of one party, similar to that of the communist party system which existed in the former-socialist block, controlled the life of the Iraqi people as well as the state itself. Both the party and the state were controlled by one person, supported by a gang of oppressors.

The collapse of the state and its vital institutions following the Second Gulf War which liberated Iraq from Saddam Hussein's tyrannical rule, unfortunately, left its borders open to criminals and terrorists of various inclinations. The conditions that followed provided ample reason and a conducive environment for an insurgency to take hold and grow. The fact that coalition countries did not have a post-conflict policy in Iraq led the nation to drift into uncharted waters. Hence, de-Baathification and the disbanding of the army and other security institutions; practices that marked liberation, helped evil forces unite in their common objectives to undermine stability and obstruct the political process in Iraq.

The timing for the war on the regime of Saddam Hussein was unfortunate. It came after the war on Al Qaida in Afghanistan. This sequence of events was used cleverly by adversaries who antagonize peace and stability by portraying these conflicts as a war on Islam in a bid to further muddy the waters.

Saddam's regime caused many problems in Iraq; one of which was the destruction of the middle class. The middle class is the dynamo, inspiration and leadership in any society. Years of war in Iraq left the country with a very small middle class and it is still shrinking. Worse yet, what is left of the middle class was deprived of its will and capability.

Iraq's progress towards democracy and rule of law must undergo various stages of change. These changes come in the form of processes which are determined largely by Iraq's recent experiences and violent history: the effects of the aggressive repression by Saddam Hussein and the errors in calculation of the liberating powers. One mistake of the liberating powers was to allow the collapse of the state of Iraq and its vital institutions. The collapse occurred

in a political vacuum, filled by a foreign presence. However, this is history. Now, creating the right conditions to establish a stable, strong, peaceful and democratic Iraq should be our goal.

The first of the processes that needs to take place is the political one, which involves free elections with an aim to establishing a parliament. This assembly should be supplemented by an upper house to create checks and balances. Free elections should enable the establishment of the rule of law. Justice for all Iraqis should be ensured through the establishment of an independent judicial system. The political process must also develop tools to implement the foundation of a full blown constitutional democracy. This entails creating a constitution which should incorporate the national heritage and cultural characteristics of Iraq and embed them in modern, secular and liberal ideals. Indeed, the constitution must make provisions for preserving the identity of the nation, and guarantee its territorial integrity. Achieving this goal will require genuine efforts to adopt a reconciliatory approach to political, social and religious differences between the interested parties. Moreover, it is of paramount importance to implement measures that will unite the people of Iraq rather than divide them. The concepts of eradication, uprooting and mass purges, punishment and vengeance should be reserved only for terrorists and their associated evil forces. Punishment should not be directed towards those who had no choice but to join a political party in order to live but toward those who committed crimes and should be brought to justice.

At the core of the political process lies the need to achieve national unity and reconciliation. How can we cement this unity? What efforts should be spent in developing a concept of reconciliation - in words as well as deeds? And how will the religious, ethnic and other segments of Iraq's population be engaged in constructive rather than destructive dialogue on these fundamental issues? The multicultural society of Iraq should be a source of strength for the political process, adding more substance and helping it to move ahead. All of this should be brought to the agenda and incorporated in a national debate throughout the country. This is not an easy task. Decades of tyranny, wars and oppression have left the Iraqi society divided, lacking initiative and vulnerable to various sensitivities. The creation of a constitution should indeed be used as a vehicle to reconcile the differences and strengthen the unification of the nation.

The second of these processes is the building or rebuilding of collapsed institutions in Iraq, focusing first on the vital institutions for security and the economy. Private and public institutions in Iraq were either dismantled or gutted. The security and economic situation which prevails in the country has not provided the right conditions for thousands of qualified Iraqi expatriates to return to Iraq. Moreover, many of the institutions that were formed following liberation have experienced major problems, which should be avoided in the future. These problems revolve around the identity of these institutions, a sense of belonging and a hierarchy of command. Iraqis should perceive that the institutions are for Iraqis and accountable to Iraqis. This and only this will give real identity to our institutions and render them functional. The absence of pride, self reliance, self assurance and esteem may lead to psychological apathy and indifference. This would be counter productive. These are some of the fundamental issues that lie at the core of the process of reestablishing our institutions. Trivial matters to some can be very important to others. The color of the flag and the sound of the national anthem make a big difference in the process of institution building. Institution building is a continuous and ever evolving process. Training, screening, resources, procedures should all have an Iraqi identity to them. The guiding rules for protecting such institutions are loyalty to the state (and constitution), efficiency and dedication.

Getting the institutions of the country back on track is extremely important. Services must be provided for insuring security of the nation, and defending it. This is crucial for both institution building and nation building, and thus vital to promoting democracy. These actions will help the political process steam ahead. Invariably, institutions are unifying organs. They unite societies by overriding ethnic, religious and political divides. As we build our security institutions, one of the most important things to do is to insure those local militias are integrated into the civil, security and military institutions, both public and private.

The third process is economic reconstruction. This should include addressing the immediate, intermediate and long term economic requirements. Immediate problems such as reducing unemployment, actively engaging in debt relief and debt forgiveness, fixing the rate of exchange of Iraqi dinnar against other currencies, controlling inflation, activating donors' schemes and investing in revenue producing infrastructures such as oil and tourism should be tackled first. The reduction of subsidies, increasing wages and curtailing government spending are also concerns of immediate to intermediate term. This is partly to prepare for debt forgiveness restructuring and partly for creating conditions and incentives to encourage

potential donors. It is also important for medium term economic planning and prepares the economy for liberalization by laying out incentives for privatization and attracting both local and foreign investments.

The liberalization and shifting from a state controlled economy towards full market economy should be approached carefully and gradually. A market economy goes hand in hand with democracy and free societies. The local private sector in Iraq was mostly politicized and incorporated directly or indirectly into the state during Saddam's era. Migrant Iraqi capital is understandably still reluctant to return to Iraq. Laws in banking, insurance and investments set during the interim government period should be amended if need be, but activated as soon as possible. Credit schemes should be made available to encourage private sector and foreign investments to grow and become the driving force of the economy. However, labor protection laws such as insuring employment of the local labor forces, training and various other programs should take precedence.

Injecting and investing capital in developing the infrastructure and rehabilitating revenue producing industries such as oil and tourism is vital for Iraq. The revenues which can be generated from these industries will make cash available for development and reconstruction. These should be seen as priorities. Liberalization and privatization of down stream oil and gas, setting out rules and making incentives for production sharing arrangements in oil and gas, should be a way of increasing capital and attracting recent and advanced technology. Formation of a completely private Iraqi National Oil Cooperation and another one for gas, lie at the heart of developing Iraq's economic capabilities, maximizing revenues and encouraging private sector and foreign investment.

The systems of taxes and customs should be well thought out. The scale of taxations and exemptions should be laid out carefully. Retirement and pension schemes should be liberalized and turned over to private banks and other private sector outfits whenever applicable. This would enhance the economy. However, government laws and guidelines should be adopted to protect consumers.

Longer term economic policy revolves around sustainability, further development and continuous investment in Iraq, as well as locking into global economies. Further injection of

capital in revenue producing projects and continuous privatization would need to remain a constant feature of any long term economic policy.

Medium to long term economic policies should be targeted towards liberalization. The strategic focus should be on decreasing dependency on public budgets, moving to the private sector and encouraging foreign investment. Monitoring frameworks that support liberal economic policies should also be set up in parallel.

The fourth process involves proactive foreign policy aiming at plugging Iraq into regional Arab/Islamic circles as well as global international circles. Foreign policy should be actively engaged in cementing peace in the region, contributing to world stability and economic growth. Strategically, once Iraq is a stable, strong, peaceful and democratic country it could be a great asset for stability in the world at large but most definitely the main source of stability in the troubled region of the Middle East.

It is important for Iraq to act as bridge for Arab and Islamic countries. Having two Islamic neighbors, Turkey and Iran, as well as a Kurdish and Turkoman component to its population puts Iraq in a unique position to play such a vital role. Iraq will and should have a constructive role in regional gatherings, global forums and international platforms.

Amongst Iraq foreign policy priorities and objectives is to form a linkage to NATO. After all, NATO exists just north of Iraq. Iraq could make up the southern flank of NATO. Iraq should develop and activate a core of moderate Arab and Islamic countries to be able to collectively work on eradicating terrorism, advocating democracy and human rights, providing local policing and contributing to peace and stability in the region. Such a core may help stabilize economies, fight poverty and spread moderation through the Islamic world. Iraq should develop free trade agreements and engage global partners. Joining the Gulf Cooperation Council and looking into the possibility of expanding it should also be among Iraq's foreign policy objectives.

The restructuring of the Arab League should be seriously considered. The aiming should be to make the League more oriented to fostering economic development and growth, promoting cultural ties and contributing to democratization in the Arab world. A basic Bill of

Rights should be embraced by a reoriented Arab League where Iraq could and should play a major role.

The political, economic, institutional and foreign policy restructuring processes outlined above are a means to make the future vision for Iraq come true. This vision was just a dream before the removal of Saddam Hussein and his regime. Now, with hard work and dedication, help and support from the family of nations, as well as the courage to strive through adverse conditions, this dream can and will become a reality.