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Democracy, Iraq and the middle east

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I am now confronted by casual remarks from many sources to the effect that: “what Iraq needs now is another Saddam”. The implication is that such a divided and fissiparous society is impossible to govern without violent authoritarianism. “Saddam [1] kept the lid on” is another refrain. Iraq, in this view, is the extreme example of a middle-eastern society which cannot govern itself, characterised by tribal, religious and factional conflicts, to which notions of democracy are inappropriate and where any attempt at democratisation is sheer folly.

My response is that the situation today is not somehow a “natural” tendency of Iraqi [2] or middle-eastern society: it is the product of a particular history. Regimes such as that of the Ba’athists and Nasserists, rather than being a remedy to a natural anarchy, played a crucial role in producing these effects. I will expand on this theme, with reference to the arguments advanced in some other contributions to the **openDemocracy** debate [3] on democracy.

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Sami Zubaida’s article forms part of a debate on “Opening democracy [6]”, consisting so far of these articles:

Anthony Barnett & Isabel Hilton, “Democracy and openDemocracy [6]"

Roger Scruton, “Democracy or theocracy? A response to Barnett & Hilton [6]”

John Dunn, “Getting democracy into focus [6]”

Anatol Lieven, “Democratic failure: festering lilies smell worse than weeds [6]”

Mishal Al Sulami, “Democracy in the Arab world: the Islamic foundation [6]”

Fred Dallmayr, “Mobilising global democracy [6]”

Thomas Cushman, “Democracy and its enemies: a response to Barnett & Hilton [6]”

Gisela Stuart, “The body of democracy [6]”

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Democracy: a question of politics

No democrat can differ from the objectives outlined in Anthony Barnett & Isabel Hilton’s article, “Democracy and openDemocracy [6]”. The analytical task, as they see it, is to determine the

conditions for the establishment and spread of democracy: “democratic principles need to be extended to all countries and peoples”. They are aware of the huge obstacles to this task, expressed too in John Dunn’s point (“Getting democracy into focus [6]”) that democracy is not the “default mode” of humanity, but a rare occurrence proceeding from specific and unique historical sequences.

It has been possible, however, to adapt elements of democracy – as ideology and as system of rule – to a wide variety of countries. The process of democratic evolution was never easy or spontaneous, nor was it promoted by a particular religion or culture; it was, and continues to be, the outcome of sequences of conflict and strife, including bloody revolutions.

Roger Scruton [6] seems to argue that Islam as a religion and civilisation is particularly resistant to democracy because of its belief in the sovereignty of God and its exclusion of non-Muslims from equal citizenship. Mishal Al Sulami (“Democracy in the Arab world: the Islamic foundation [6]”) argues in contrast that Islam and its “*shura* system” are convergent with democracy as a method of government. Both these opposing positions are “essentialist"’, attributing a fixed character to a world religion.

Democracy [7] as ideology and system is – irrespective of the ancient Greek origins of the word – a modern phenomenon which developed in the process of political struggles. In those conflicts, religious authorities almost always stood on the side of absolute rulers and tyrannical regimes and against liberationist forces. This applies to Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists and others. In modern times, some religious reformers found in their varied traditions elements from which they could support democracy and human rights, while others continued to deny them.

The corpus of scriptures and canonical sources in all world religions include diverse and contradictory themes and texts which can be exploited for a variety of political positions. Mishal Al Sulami [8] follows a noble tradition of Muslim reformers who have mined their corpus for liberal programmes of government and law.

Shura, as Al Sulami tells us, is an injunction from early Islam for rulers to consult (though it is not clear with whom exactly). The idea was largely ignored in the long history of Islamic caliphates and sultanates, which were, like most historical regimes absolute and arbitrary. Modern reformers, notably Muhammad Abduh [9] (1849-1905) and his disciples used it as a cornerstone to read democracy into Islam, which can only be a welcome interpretation.

But *shura* is also only a word which can be used in a variety of contexts and for different purposes, including pretences of reform by absolute rulers, as happened in Saudi Arabia in recent “reforms”. Religious and cultural traditions are malleable with regard to politics, but more often than not religious authority has sided with despotism and against democracy, and this is certainly the case with many Muslim authorities today. In fact, the only guarantees of liberal regimes and legislations have been in the practical separation of these matters from religion.

Most countries of the middle east [10] experienced processes of secularisation in all spheres of life throughout the 20th century, and included social and political forces at both elite and popular levels which favoured liberation and participation and engaged in struggles for these aims. Religious reaction and “fundamentalism” gained influence in the closing decades of the century; they represented attempts to roll back secularisation. They had limited success, but only in the context of other social and political developments favouring dictatorial regimes. The obstacles are not just religious and cultural, but a configuration of socio-economic and political factors. In what follows I attempt to illustrate these processes with examples, mainly from Iraq.

To reiterate: historically, democracy is the product of protracted political struggles, of subordinate groups and classes for participation and inclusion. It is rarely, if ever, "given" by power-holders who willingly forego their control and privileges. Yet, that is precisely what the "international community" demands from entrenched regimes consisting of families and cliques who benefit greatly from corrupt economic arrangements, and who would lose all that if there were democracy.

This is clearly evident in Iran at the present time [11]. There was a struggle, an unequal one, between rival centres of power. The incumbent clerics and their supporters cannot let go, for if they do they lose not only political control but lucrative sources of wealth that enrich them and their families as well as funding their institutions of patronage and influence. Oil revenues are always crucial assets for these regimes. The reformist (democracy) camp lost out against their antagonists who, after the presidential election that brought Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to power, are increasing their control [12] over the levers of government and the military.

Iran, however, remains more hopeful than much of the Arab world because it retains a political culture of interest groups and ideologies and struggles, the heritage of a popular revolution [12]. A crucial condition in the struggle for democracy is that it cannot be just that of rival cliques and tribes who want to displace current incumbents. At least some of the combatants must be classes and groups based on common interests and ideologies and organised as such. As Barnett & Hilton state, democracy requires "a community that experiences itself as such, most commonly the nation-state". One of the many tragedies of Iraq is that precisely such an imagination of nation and its political field emerged between the 1940s and 1970s [13], to be thoroughly suppressed thereafter and replaced by the ascendancy of religion and tribe.

The colonial regimes which ruled middle-eastern lands after the first world war [13] bequeathed a mixed heritage. They left the forms of the modern state and its institutions, including "democratic" ones. Capitalism, print, state education and military conscription helped to break down traditional formations and create the frame of the nation, in itself a potential for democratisation. At the same time they created the security state and the repressive apparatus. They often resorted to the backward elements of society, notably tribal and religious formations, to prop their control and combat nationalist and modern political forces. The aftermath of colonial rule had potentials for different outcomes. So what happened?

The middle east: a subordinated politics

Egypt and Iraq [14] in the first half of the 20th century were ruled by semi-colonial regimes; that is to say, they were technically independent but actually under British tutelage. Many older educated inhabitants of these lands today look back on that period with a nostalgic glow. Government was, of course, repressive and corrupt. At the same time, however, there was a degree of pluralism, both of social centres of power and influence and of political forces with organised constituencies.

An essential ingredient in this mix was a vibrant middle class, with both entrepreneurial and salaried components. At the upper levels there were an "aristocracy" of notables, mostly based on land, and a modern bourgeoisie of finance and trade and even industry. Even though these latter classes were parties to the corruption of government and did not have democratic instincts, they did constitute rival centres of power with a degree of autonomy from the ruling cliques. That set-up was not democracy, but it provided the conditions for the struggle for democracy in a lively political field.

Crucially, a budding capitalism gave rise to class formation and class struggles, with labour movements and communist parties in many countries, notably Iraq. All that ended with the

military coups ushering in cliques of “free officers” instituting “socialist” regimes. Socialist meant statist, inspired by the Soviet model. The initial enthusiasm which greeted Nasser’s triumphs [15], notably after getting away with the nationalisation of the Suez Canal and surviving the “tripartite aggression” of the British-French-Israeli attack in 1956, was that of nationalist and left sentiments. The suppression of all political parties, including the communists and leftists, did not blunt that enthusiasm. Many on the left acquiesced in their demise for the cause of the “national bourgeoisie”, especially when friendly to the Soviet Union. In the parlance of the old Marxist left, “democracy” was a bourgeois illusion masking the class struggle.

The Nasserist and Ba’athist regimes [16] which followed had the common features of eliminating open and plural political fields, all repressed and subsumed under the regime and its party. The statisation of the economy under these regimes seriously weakened, if not eliminated, property as a basis of autonomous social power. Land reforms and nationalisations were applauded all round, especially by the left, for obvious reasons. But, in fact, they were insidious contributors to a totalitarian control.

The middle classes were subordinated, economically and politically, to dependence on the state. The army was in the ascendancy, and military spending (initially for arms from Soviet sources) took the lion’s share of budgets. The confrontation with Israel was, and continues to be, the main ideological prop for these policies and repressions. In all these processes of dictatorship, oil revenues (where they accrued) and their derivatives played a crucial role in supplying the regimes with abundant resources, and, crucially, making them economically independent from their societies and taxation.

These elements were common to the regimes in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, as well as in Algeria and Yemen. However, these are very different countries, each with its own historical trajectory. A study of oil-rich Iraq is an instructive case of this broader evolution.

Iraq: the old social classes and politics

The modern history of Iraq [16] witnessed the physical expulsion of vital sectors of the middle class and the confiscation of their property, twice. The first was the departure of the Jews in 1951. They constituted the bulk of the middle class – commercial, professional and bureaucratic – in Baghdad. In the first half of the 20th century the Baghdad markets were largely closed on Saturdays. Jews were prominent in government employment, the railways, education, medicine, banking, music, art and literature. This is a history [17] which has been unwritten by both Arab and Israeli interests.

The vacuum created by the departure of the Jews, at least in the markets, was filled by the *Shi’a*. Urban and wealthy *Shi’a* families shared with the Jews exclusion from many areas of official life and pursued their fortunes in trade and finance. It was precisely these wealthy *Shi’a*, the new propertied middle class who were then targeted in the second episode of the elimination of that class: the expulsion of large numbers of *Shi’a*, on the pretext of Iranian affiliation, which started in 1970 and continued in waves through the 1980s. Most of the deportees were poor Fayli (*Shi’a*) Kurds, but thousands were wealthy urban *Shi’a*, targeted for their wealth, which was then expropriated to the benefit of the denizens of the regime.

The “capitalism” which developed subsequently was a classic case of “crony” capitalism. Opportunities, loans, licenses and contracts were distributed in accordance with a logic of allegiance, kinship and patronage, with the regime clans and regions benefiting greatly. At the same time, the powerful men of the regime were free to expropriate any land or business they found desirable, in particular Saddam’s [18] uncle Khayrallah Tulfah, for a time governor of Baghdad, nicknamed “the thief of Baghdad”, and his thuggish son Uday who imposed his

“partnership” on any business he fancied. Property as a source of social power was eliminated and subordinated to the whims of the regime. This is an extreme example of what has happened elsewhere, especially in Egypt, where the ruling family and its associates have enjoyed wide business and partnership opportunities.

The middle classes of public service, professionals and bureaucrats were strictly controlled and disciplined by the Ba’ath party, to which they had to belong. In the 1970s and early 1980s these classes enjoyed a fair degree of prosperity and privilege, funded by the plentiful oil resources. The wars and sanctions of the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the drastic impoverishment of these strata and their subordination to Ba’ath discipline.

Political repression under the Ba’ath [19] eliminated any kind of independent political field in which struggles could be waged. This neutralisation was aided by the elimination of property and capitalism as sources of social powers and struggles, and the subordination and humiliation of the educated middle classes as the main source of social and political activism. These are powerful sources of the present malaise in which religious authorities and tribal leaders appear to be the only effective players in post-Saddam Iraqi politics. It wasn’t always like that [20].

The culmination of Iraq’s social and political plurality and vital political field came in the Qasim years [20], 1958-63. Qasim’s was a military coup, like Nasser’s in Egypt. However, for a variety of reasons, it did not close off political pluralism but stimulated it. These were the years in which the Iraqi Communist Party (ICP [21]) came into its own (and followed a misguided strategy which ultimately led to its demise). Quite apart from being communist, the ICP was the main *national* party of Iraq, which included Kurds and Arabs, *Sunni* and *Shi’a*, Christians and Jews. Another was the National Democratic Party, a much smaller party of modern bourgeois elites.

Opposite them were the pan-Arab nationalist parties, primarily the Ba’ath and the Nasserists, with much smaller and narrower constituencies in sectors of the *Sunni* Arab population. Most other parties in the history of Iraq were transparently vehicles of support for particular personalities, with constituencies of kinship and patronage, much like political parties in most of the Arab world where they are allowed. What distinguished that Iraqi political scene [22] was precisely the salience of *ideological* struggles, waged between forces formed on the basis of social interests and political objectives, and not loyalty to tribe and community.

These latter were, of course, present, but mostly subordinated to the parties and often forced to pursue their objectives through the ideological ranks. That episode in Iraqi history had its share of violence and disorder, and of government repression. It was not “democratic”. At the same time it provided the conditions for the kind of political struggle which can lead to the pluralist and democratic settlement.

Also by Sami Zubaida [23] in openDemocracy:

“The rise and fall of civil society in Iraq” (February 2003 [23])

“The next Iraqi state: secular or religious?” (February 2004 [23])

“Understanding the insurgencies in Iraq” (April 2004 [23])

“The London bombs: Iraq or the ‘rage of Islam’?” (August 2005 [23])

“Iraq’s constitution on the edge” (August 2005 [23])

“In search of British Muslim identity…” (October 2005 [23])

Iraq: the new generations

The eventual ascendancy of the Ba'ath [24], through further military coups, led to the gradual suppression of these forces and fields with savage violence, precisely because the communists and the left had entrenched constituencies of support and the Ba'ath lacked them. But clearly violence was not enough. Saddam's brilliant strategy [24] in the 1970s was to draw the still vibrant Communist Party into a National Front coalition. By 1979 he was able to subsume or suppress all the Communists' popular bases and organisations, and to wage another campaign of savage violence against their remnants, now fully exposed thanks to the forced openness under the "front".

The 1970s coincided with the hike in oil prices and the great riches they bestowed on regimes which controlled them. This was an essential element in the ability of the regime to reinforce the security state of repression and to co-opt many elements of the middle class and the intelligentsia, and to colonise the formations of civil society.

The years of wars and sanctions in the 1980s and up to the demise of the regime in 2003 witnessed the increased localisation and communalisation of Iraqi society. Poverty and violence drove most Iraqis to fall back on their local and communal resources and leaderships. A whole generation grew up under these conditions with no memory of the previous history or politics. Local society and communal organisation tends to be "traditional", religious and tribal [24]. These forces were actually encouraged and fostered by the Saddam regime as means of social control when the reach of the Ba'ath Party contracted.

The present sorry state of Iraqi politics [24], dominated by religious authority and sectarian interests, is not the natural state of Iraqi society without authoritarian discipline. It is the product precisely of that authoritarian regime and the social forces that engendered it, greatly aided by the oil wealth that accrued directly to the regime. The new Iraqi constitution [24] divides that wealth between regions, transparently to the advantage of communally based regional governments with undefined powers. It is not so much orderly and defined decentralisation, but more the setting up of regional mini-states with the potential for new authoritarian regimes.

This is especially the case with the envisaged *Shi'a* region in the south, under the tutelage of religious parties and the prospects of clerical power. It is difficult to identify sources or forces for democracy in the present situation. The educated, secular middle class is still there (but many are trying to leave, and who is to blame them?). But they have no organisation, leadership or voice.

Can the pillars of civil society and its political fields [25] be raised again from chaos and ruin left by the Ba'ath regime and the invasion? It is difficult to give clear answers at this point, because there are so many imponderables. A whole generation has grown up under the Ba'ath, then the poverty and destruction of war, then the sanctions regime. Alienated and impoverished, what allegiances and outlooks can this young generation have? Hopefully, the life-force of ambition and desire, the aspiration for stability, career, fun and love will succeed in pushing this generation to a civil life. But for that they will need resources and security, the lack of which is the foremost problem of the Iraqi present.

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