

The road map to democratic governance in post-Saddam Iraq

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LONDON: With a US attack calculated to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein in Iraq imminent, it might be useful to reiterate the following practical steps that can ensure that Saddam would be replaced by a democratic government.

The actual process of unseating Saddam might be the easy part of the enterprise compared with the task of establishing democracy in Iraq. Democracy in Iraq has been in decline since the monarchy was overthrown in 1958, hitting rock bottom under Saddam.

Iraqi opposition parties, forced by Saddam's regime to operate either underground or in exile, have been deprived of opportunities to consolidate democratic principles through practice.

Opposition parties in exile fell under the influence of host countries (Iraq's neighbors especially), which dealt with them as political pawns depriving them of freedom of action and thus opportunities to establish democratic traditions.

The adage that says "there is no democracy without democrats" was proven right by the events that took place in liberated Iraqi Kurdistan back in 1996, as well as by the failure of the Iraqi National Congress (INC) that regressed from being an umbrella for all opposition movements to being a party in conflict with other movements.

The independence of the Iraqi opposition was undermined by the way successive US administrations dealt with it as a propaganda tool. The fact that different American officials "adopted" certain opposition factions did not enhance the opposition's independence, and neither did the reliance of the opposition itself on financial help from America and/or regional states. Opposition factions thus lost the ability to deal democratically with each other. Instead of opposition leaderships being accountable to their grassroots, the latter became financially dependent on the former. Forming a new opposition party became the method of choice for some dissidents to gain financial backing.

In the absence of solid democratic traditions in political life, inconsequential differences of opinion became reason enough for parties to break up. The lack of democracy also led to the rise of personality cults, so much so that some opposition parties have no grassroots to mention: All they have are leaders with personal computers on which statements are written. This style of politics is as detrimental to

democracy as dictatorship is, and consequently there appears to be no way democracy can be established in Iraq without outside help.

However, regional states, lacking democracy themselves, cannot give what they do not have. In fact, the United States is the only outside power that is willing and able to extend this sort of help. Unfortunately, by adopting a policy of containment, the Americans abrogated this role.

However, the recent American espousal of regime change as a new policy for Iraq has returned the problems of the Iraqi opposition to the political limelight, not only because Washington needs Iraqi dissidents to aid its military operation, but also to help set up an alternative to the Saddam regime that ensures stability, thus providing the Americans with a suitable exit strategy.

Had the US been able to effect change in Iraq through a military coup, it would have done so years ago. But the reality of the situation has convinced the Americans that the only way to achieve political change in the country is through military intervention.

However, American military intervention does not mean that a new dictatorship will not be the only way to ensure that Iraq does not slide into chaos and civil war. If the Americans go down that route and install a new dictator in Saddam's place, however, they would be admitting failure. Moreover, they would be introducing a new element of instability in a region that is already seething with anger at the United States.

The Americans can of course undertake to carry out change on their own. But in that case, they would have to keep their forces in Iraq for many years to come an option unlikely to be accepted by American, not to mention Arab, public opinion.

That is why Washington decided to involve the UN and the Iraqi opposition in its plans for the future of Iraq. US Vice-President Dick Cheney expressed American thinking on the shape of the regime to replace Saddam's on Aug. 26, when he declared: "The US is determined to establish a unified Iraq under a pluralist democracy in which the human rights of all ethnic groups will be respected." Cheney had earlier said: "We are not about to overthrow one dictator just to replace him with another."

The State Department invited 32 Iraqi dissidents to a two-day meeting in London on Sept. 4-5 to discuss democratic change in Iraq after the overthrow of the current regime. Besides the INC, the Kurdistan Democratic Party, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, the Supreme Assembly of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq, and the Iraqi National Accord, representatives from most Iraqi opposition factions took part in the

conference, including Islamists and independents. Kurds, Turcomans, Assyrians, and Arabs were all represented. However, some parties, such as the communists, the Islamist Daawa, and Arab nationalists, were not invited.

Participants did not project themselves as future rulers of Iraq, or as trustees for the opposition. The meeting was nothing more than a forum for inter-Iraqi and Iraqi-American debates.

The London gathering marked a qualitative leap in American thinking that could become the basis for a new Iraqi-American partnership built on cooperation towards the establishment of a model democracy in Iraq that could provide stability and ward off fundamentalism.

Iraq, a country rich in natural and human resources, can certainly provide the necessary foundation for such a democracy, while America is more than capable of defending it both from itself and from its neighbors. Moreover, it will not be in the interests of a post-Saddam Iraq, busy rebuilding itself, to threaten Western interests. A new Iraq, allied to Washington, would be well placed to help solve many problems in the Middle East, such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the issue of regional economic development.

In the London meeting, discussions revolved around the democratic and federal formulae appropriate for post-Saddam Iraq; the period of transition; and the requirements for setting up a civil society under the rule of law.

Participants adopted the principles decided on at the 1992 Salaheddin opposition conference as a basis for their deliberations. After thorough discussions, several committees were set up and were entrusted with contacting various opposition factions (whether they were represented at the meeting or not) in order to gauge their positions with a view towards arriving at compromises.

It was agreed that the participants would meet again next month in order to come up with recommendations, which they would then refer to a general meeting of the Iraqi opposition to be held at a later date.

The success of this endeavor will pave the way for success in that meeting, which will present an opportunity for the opposition to come up with a charter that will lay down rules for settling any disputes or at least will spell out mechanisms for solving such intractable issues as federalism, the future status of Kirkuk and the nature of the transitional period.

For the upcoming general meeting of the Iraqi opposition to succeed, it must accurately diagnose the Iraqi crisis and specify the best ways for solving it. To do so

requires a readiness by all parties to make concessions and understand each others' points of view. The recent announcement by the two Kurdish parties that they have succeeded in patching up their differences was a good beginning.

Creative thinking and a readiness to compromise is essential for the opposition to succeed. The United States can play a constructive role, not by imposing solutions, but by acting as a catalyst and guarantor.

If the upcoming opposition meeting is to succeed, it must become neither a talking shop nor an arena for various parties to compete for positions in an illusory government. It must be an opportunity to lay down the foundations for the Iraq of the future, which necessitates the participation of all parties. Participants must gauge their success by what they contribute to the meeting rather than by what they hope to get out of it.

The upcoming meeting might be the opposition's last chance to win the respect and trust of Iraqis especially those inside Iraq. This can only be realized if opposition factions are seen to be serving their constituents rather than themselves.

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