

Addressing Iraqi Repression and the Need for a Change of Regime

By Stephen Zunes

As the administration's rationales for invading Iraq—such as Baghdad's alleged ties to al Qaeda and claims of an imminent nuclear threat—have crumbled under closer scrutiny, the administration and its allies in Congress and the media are increasingly emphasizing a point that cannot be disputed: the repressive nature of the Iraqi regime.

While the threat from Iraq has been greatly exaggerated, the nature of the Iraqi regime has not. President Ronald Reagan's claim that Sandinista Nicaragua was a "totalitarian dungeon" was hyperbole in the extreme, but it is not an inaccurate description of Baathist Iraq.

Comparisons put forward by proponents of a U.S. invasion of Iraq between Saddam Hussein and Adolph Hitler are misleading for several reasons: Germany was the most advanced industrialized country in the world during Hitler's reign and was part of an axis of other major military powers. Iraq, by contrast, is an internationally isolated Third World country whose military and civilian infrastructure was severely damaged in a devastating six-week U.S.-led bombing campaign in 1991 and has been under the toughest international sanctions in world history ever since. Unlike Nazi Germany, the ability of Iraq to do much damage beyond its borders in the foreseeable future is extremely limited.

At the same time, Iraq under Saddam Hussein is arguably the closest approximation in the world today of a genuine fascist state. The level of repression, militarization, cult of personality, forced mass political mobilizations, and ethnic chauvinism are all hallmarks of a fascist system.

The level of brutality of the Iraqi regime has declined markedly since the 1980s, not due to

any lessened ruthlessness of the regime, but because the ability of the government to oppress opponents—particularly those in Kurdish regions—has been significantly reduced. In addition to impact of war damage, sanctions, and inspections on lessening the machinery of repression, the internationally backed autonomy for the Kurdish regions has also limited Saddam's bloody reach. It is noteworthy, however, that at the height of Iraq's repression during the 1980s, the United States not only refused to call for Saddam Hussein's overthrow but provided the regime with military and economic assistance that supported the repression. Furthermore, when Saddam Hussein used chemical weapons to massacre thousands of Kurdish civilians in Halabja and elsewhere during this period, the U.S. government tried to cover it up by falsely claiming that it was the Iranians—then the preferred enemy—who were responsible. Therefore, Bush administration claims that a U.S. invasion of Iraq is necessary because Saddam Hussein "gassed his own people" cannot be taken seriously.

In addition, the United States has no credibility as a proponent of democracy in the Middle East. For decades, both Democratic and Republican administrations have supported authoritarian regimes throughout the region. Yet despite the U.S. role as the primary backer of the Mubarak government in Egypt, Israeli occupation forces in the West Bank, Moroccan occupation forces in Western Sahara, the family dictatorship in Saudi Arabia, the medieval sultanate of Oman, the military regime of Pakistan, and the crypto-communist rulers of Uzbekistan, the Bush administration self-righteously claims that it has the right to invade a sovereign nation and overthrow its government

because the Iraqi people, in President Bush's words, "have the right to choose their own leadership," the very right the U.S. government has helped deny to hundreds of millions of others in the region.

Furthermore, the leading candidates the Bush administration has put forward as possible replacements for Saddam Hussein in a U.S.-installed Iraqi government are former generals of the dictator who have been implicated in war crimes during the 1980s.

Saddam Hussein's government does not hold the record of modern dictatorships in terms of massacres of civilians. That dubious honor belongs to the Khmer Rouge regime that ruled Cambodia in the late 1970s, which was responsible for up to two million deaths. When Vietnam invaded Cambodia in early 1979 and overthrew that genocidal regime, the United States denounced the Vietnamese as aggressors and successfully led international efforts to impose sanctions on Vietnam. For more than a decade, both Democratic and Republican administrations insisted that the Khmer Rouge thugs, whose control had been reduced to remote jungle hideouts near the Thai border, were the sole legitimate rulers of Cambodia and blocked the recognition of the Vietnamese-installed government. The reason, according to U.S. officials, was that no matter how repressive a regime may be, it does not give another country the right to invade that country, topple its government, and install one of its own choosing. Clearly, the U.S. government does not believe such rules apply when it is the one doing the invading and regime changing.

Another government whose body count far surpasses that of Saddam's Iraq was that of the Suharto regime in Indonesia, responsible for at least a

half million deaths of suspected leftists in the aftermath of the general's seizure of power in a 1965 coup and of another 200,000 East Timorese following his invasion of that island nation in 1975. Suharto's primary military and economic backer during his 34-year reign of terror was the United States. At the height of the repression in the mid-1960s, the *New York Times* referred to Indonesia as "the bright spot in Asia" while, as late as the mid-1990s when the scale of atrocities in Indonesian-occupied East Timor became widely known, a top Clinton administration official referred to Suharto as "our kind of guy."

In short, until the United States ceases its current military, economic, and diplomatic support for repressive regimes and formally apologizes for its support of such regimes in the past, it has no right to unilaterally launch a devastating war in the name of liberating a people from repressive rule.

So-called "humanitarian intervention"—where outside military force is utilized to end particularly egregious cases of repression by ousting repressive regime—may, under certain extreme circumstances, be justifiable. Such interventions, however, will have little credibility unless they are done through the United Nations or some other legally sanctioned international mechanism. If it is instead led by a government like the United States, with its record of supporting repressive regimes around the world and growing dependence on imported natural resources located within the country in question, it will be seen—rightly or wrongly—not as an act of humanitarianism but an act of imperialism.

Still, Saddam Hussein's regime—like all such repressive regimes—must not

remain in power. The growth of democratic rule that has swept Eastern Europe, Latin America, and parts of Asia and Africa over the past two decades must come to include Iraq as well.

How has the downfall of scores of such autocratic regimes in the past twenty years been accomplished? In no case was it done through foreign invasion. In only a handful of cases was it done through internal armed revolution. In the vast major of cases, dictatorships were toppled through massive nonviolent action, "people power" movements that faced down the tanks and guns and swept these regimes aside. Some succeeded in a dramatic contestation of public space that toppled dictators in a matter of days or weeks, such as those that brought down the Communist regimes in East Germany and Czechoslovakia, overthrew Southeast Asian strongmen like Marcos and Suharto, and ousted military juntas from Bangladesh to Bolivia. Other pro-democracy movements engaged in more protracted struggles that eventually forced dramatic democratic reforms in such countries as Poland, South Korea, South Africa, Kenya, Brazil, and Chile. In the fall of 2000, nonviolent action by the people of Serbia did in a matter of days what eleven weeks of NATO bombing a year and half earlier could not: oust the regime of Slobodan Milosevic.

Why hasn't this been successful in the case of Iraq? Most of these successful nonviolent pro-democracy movements have been centered in the urban middle class. In Iraq, however, thanks to the devastation to the country's civilian infrastructure during the U.S. bombing campaign twelve years ago and the resulting sanctions, the once-burgeoning middle class has

been reduced to penury or forced to emigrate. It has been replaced by a new class of black marketeers who have a stake in preserving the status quo. Furthermore, with sanctions forcing the Iraqi people to become dependent on the regime for rations of badly needed food, medicine, and other necessities, people are even less likely to take the already extraordinary risks of challenging it.

Many Iraqis believe that if United States had pursued a more rational policy over the past two decades, regime change would have taken place years ago as a result of initiatives of the Iraqi people themselves. The sanctions have not only had serious

humanitarian consequences—resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi children from malnutrition and preventable diseases—but have actually strengthened Saddam Hussein's grip on power.

The key to regime change without the horrific consequences of war, then, rests in the United States allowing the United Nations to lift the economic sanctions that primarily impact ordinary Iraqis while maintaining military sanctions and strict monitoring of dual-use technologies that strengthen the hand of the regime.

The bottom line is this: While the repressive nature of the Iraqi govern-

ment is all too real, it must not be used to justify increasing the suffering of the Iraqi people through war.

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