

Cause for Celebration, Cause for Concern

By Stephen Zunes | April 10, 2003

The Iraqi people certainly have reason to celebrate the ouster of Saddam Hussein's regime. But it's premature for the Bush administration to join in.

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The problem is that, despite all the death and destruction since the U.S. launched the invasion, this phase of the conquest may have been the easy part.

While the celebration of the dictatorship's overthrow is undoubtedly heartfelt by many, a number of observers on the ground noted that quite a few of the celebrants are young people who had been cheering for the regime just a few weeks earlier. Furthermore, the crowds were neither as large nor as enthusiastic as those that greeted the downfall of the Communist dictatorships in eastern Europe in 1989 or the Marcos regime in the Philippines in 1986. This is not because Saddam's regime was any more popular than these other dictatorships, but rather is a reflection of the real difference between throwing out the tyrant and tearing down his statues yourselves and having it done by an invading army. This is particularly true when the invading army is from a government that backed the dictatorship through its most powerful and oppressive period in the 1980s.

Moreover, the conquering government is responsible for the ongoing deaths of many hundreds of Iraqi civilians and many thousands of unwilling conscripts in the course of its conquest. The U.S. government has contributed to the deaths of hundreds of thou-

sands from malnutrition and preventable diseases through the destruction of much of Iraq's civilian infrastructure in its 1991 bombing campaign and the subsequent sanctions regime, which impacted ordinary citizens more than it did the hated regime.

Prospects for the United States establishing a quick and benign transition to democratic governance are not looking promising. First, the United States has never previously supported democracy anywhere else in the Arab world and it remains the primary backer of autocratic Arab regimes from Oman, to Saudi Arabia and Egypt, as well as Moroccan and Israeli occupation forces. Second, the Bush administration has ruled out any role for the United Nations in Iraq other than humanitarian relief, insisting that the political future of the country will be decided by the United States alone.

Early indications are that the American viceroy who will rule Iraq initially will be military contractor and retired Lieutenant General Jay Garner, who does not speak any Arabic. More problematic, he seems to have little regard for human rights. Following a series of reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and other reputable groups condemning the widespread and systematic human rights violations by the Israeli government in the occupied West Bank in the fall of 2000, Garner signed a statement praising the "remarkable restraint" of Israeli occupation forces and blaming the violence exclusively on the Palestinians.

The candidate that Vice President Dick Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and other top administration officials favor to succeed Saddam Hussein as the Iraqi leader is Ahmad Chalabi, a corrupt Iraqi-born businessman who has been out of the country for more than forty years. Chalabi has been convicted in neighboring Jordan for embezzling hundreds of millions of dollars. He has announced that



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his government would be unabashedly pro-American, implement a neoliberal economic agenda (including the denationalizing of the Iraqi oil industry, presumably into the hands of U.S. companies), and unconditionally recognize Israel. It is extremely doubtful that such a regime will have much legitimacy in the eyes of many Iraqis, even those who adamantly opposed Saddam's dictatorship.

Establishing a workable democracy will be extremely difficult if the country is not secure. Stopping the looting and general chaos that has engulfed parts of Iraq since the collapse of central authority is only the first step. Although most of Iraq's conventional forces have been defeated and the major thoroughfares and public squares of the capital are under U.S. control, there may be fedayeen elements loyal to the Baath Party ready to fight for control of Baghdad's neighborhoods in the labyrinth of narrow alleyways where many of the city's five million inhabitants reside. There also may be continued resistance in parts of north-central Iraq not yet under the control of allied forces.

More problematic is the prospects of nationalist or Islamist forces unaffiliated with the old regime rising up against American forces. This threat does not just come from Iraqis resentful of a foreign occupation, but from radicals from throughout the Arab and Islamic world who are likely to regard the U.S. invasion of Iraq like the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan--a quasi-colonialist affront that needs to be vanquished.

Unfortunately, this may be an Osama bin Laden dream come true: tens of thousands of Americans patrolling urban areas in the heart of the Middle East, easy prey for ambushes, assassins, and suicide bombings.

Despite all, we can celebrate with those Iraqis who revel in Saddam's downfall. But this may be the last chance for Americans or Iraqis to celebrate for some time to come.

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