

Iraq's democratic dilemmas: from entrenched dictatorship to fragile democracy

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Abstract

The US-led allied invasion of Iraq in 2003 toppled Iraq's long ruling dictator, Saddam Hussein, promising to import democracy to a country whose history had been shaped by both religious and secular totalitarianism. Lack of deep-understanding of the Iraq's culture had led to the former US administration to equate the demise of Saddam with the demise of totalitarianism. The presence of Saddam was a great obstacle of democracy, but his removal changed little. Saddam and his former like-minded people created a culture capable of producing as many dictators as it wants. This essay argues that Iraq's political culture is highly undemocratic; and thus the future of democracy in the country is bleak. It proves so by highlighting the most important incompatible elements of Iraq's culture with democracy.

Keyword

Democracy, oligarchy, political elites, authoritarianism, power, globalization, Islam, ethno-nationalism, Iraq

Introduction

This paper examines the dilemmas of democratic development in Iraq, particularly in the aftermaths of US and allied invasion of the country (2003 to present). Iraqi is often described as a country where democracy does not work: "Iraq has never had a genuine democracy in its modern history' (Basham, 2004: 2). Why? Is it because democracy is a foreign concept to Iraq's culture and society? If so, is there the problem with the concept 'democracy' as a child of the West, which cannot suit every culture or the vice-versa? To what extent does the diversity of the Iraqi society make it difficult for democracy to take root? Is Islam, as a religion of an overwhelming majority of the Iraqis, to be blamed for the incapability of Iraq to boast democracy? If so, then how? This essay tries to provide

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answers for all these questions which are a number of extrinsic problems of Iraq's democracy.

This paper will try firstly offer a brief definition of democracy. Secondly, the paper will take a critical look at the literature to find out what other writers have to say on the dilemmas of democracy. For instance, what has Samuel Huntington said about the compatibility of religion and democracy.

Literature review: the substance and dilemmas of democracy

By definition, "democracy aims to provide representation and protection for the rights of everyone in society" (Brancati, 2004: 2). For clarity, this definition has to be deconstructed. How can people have a representation by "free and fair" elections? By 'free' it is meant that "practically all adults have the right to vote in the election of officials" and "have the right to run for elective offices in the government" (Whitehead, 2003: 10). By fair, it can be best meant as "uncertain results" which are defined by Political scientist Valerie Bunce as not simply referring to "whether politics is competitive, but also whether competition is institutionalized through political parties that offer ideological choice and have the incentives and capacity to connect government and governed; whether elections are regularly held, and select those elites who actually shape public policy; and whether governing mandates are provisional" (Bunce, 2001: 46).

When it comes to 'protection', it is not only about the protection of individuals from both outside and inside threats, but it also refers to the ban of any sorts of discrimination based on the grounds of gender, race, religion, ideology, social status and so forth against minorities. Not only that, but everybody has to be equally provided subsistence.

Since there is a universal agreement that democracy is clearly preferable to any of several forms of autocracy, instead of refusing the system and seeking an alternative we have no other choice other than finding solutions to the problems our democratic institutions have. There are a number of classifications of democratic dilemmas put forward by political scientists. But the best and easiest one is probably that of Philippe C. Schmitter (1994). Schmitter in his article titled "Dangers and Dilemmas of Democracy" classifies the dilemmas into two-fold. The first one is called "intrinsic" dilemmas and the second called "extrinsic" dilemmas. By intrinsic, he meant those problems which exist with democracy no matter where "it exists or when it came into existence," (Schmitter, 1994). But the problems that are extrinsic call into question "the compatibility of democratic rules with existing social, cultural and economic circumstances," (ibid).

Schmitter names four intrinsic dilemmas. First is *Oligarchy*. That is to mean even in the most democratic institutions, leaders tend to possess certain advantages of incumbency. The second one is *Free-riding* meaning "much of what is produced by democracy consists of public goods to which individuals have no rational incentive to contribute voluntarily," (ibid). Thirdly, *Policy-cycling* which can be best explained by giving the United States of America as an exemplar in which very few can distinguish the political platforms, say at least in foreign policy, of the two major parties (ibid). The fourth problem intrinsic to modern democracy is *Functional autonomy*. That is to mean "specialized institutions that cannot themselves be democratic – the armed forces and central bank," (ibid). The final one is *interdependence*. All contemporary democracies are entangled in complex webs of interdependence with other countries. "How much sovereign are the leaders of such democracies as Estonia or Georgia?" (ibid).

This research paper is not going to do much about the intrinsic problems of a country still war-torn. The reason why I had mentioned them here was just to remind you with some problems which exist even in the advanced democracies. However, it is important sometimes to keep these intrinsic dilemmas in mind when looking at the overall democratization process of Iraq, i.e. it is pivotal to see how Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, for instance, was taking advantage of his incumbency in the latest elections held in March 2010.

Thus, this research paper is more concerned with the extrinsic problems. For example, I will explain the extent to which Islam, as the religion of most of the Iraqis, is compatible to democracy. Here I will depend on prominent US thinker Samuel Huntington (1993) who has well pointed out the compatibility of religion with democracy. Though, his case study is Confucianism, the incompatible points he mentioned are pretty much the same with those of Islam.

Huntington identifies five incompatibilities of Confucianism with democracy. Firstly, just like Islam, Confucianism is a collectivist religion. It puts emphasis on the group over the individuals, something at odds with liberal democracy which prioritizes individuals as the foundations of the society. Secondly, since it is a more collective religion, Confucianism considers authority to be more important than liberty. Thirdly, Confucianism, similarly to Islam, emphasizes on responsibility over rights. The individuals, according to this religion, should be responsible individuals before they ask for any right. But the idea of democracy is to protect the rights of the people rather than to tell the people what to do and not to do. White says that "philosophers of the Enlightenment age produced a common idea about government. They believed that government should exist to protect individual rights and that the best form of government was democracy. Citizens had the rights and government's duty was to protect those rights," (White, 2009, p.120).

The fourth contradiction between Confucianism and democracy is that it focuses on harmony and cooperation. But Democracy itself is about disagreement and competition. In this point however, Islam is not much like Confucianism. Quran encourages competition as clearly said in this verse: "are those equal, those who know and those who do not know? It is those who are endued with understanding that receive admonition,"(39:9). This gives an extra point to Islam to be more compatible to democracy since liberal democracy is about competition. Despite encouraging economic competition, Islam is more a socialist and illiberal religion since it takes money, under the name of *Zakat* and *Fidyaa*, from people according to their "ability and wealth" to the ones according to their "needs."

Iraq's democratic dilemmas

Iraq's culture is the first dilemma of democracy or democratization. This dilemma can apparently be seen in two aspects. First is Iraq's main religion, which is, Islam. As Islam is the religion of the majority of the Iraqi people, it has heavily influenced and shaped Iraq's culture. However, the centuries long rule of the Sunni-based Ottoman Empire has led to an irony, that is, the domination of the Sunni version of religion over Iraqi society whose people are mostly Shiites.

Inglehart notes that "the prospects for democracy in any Islamic country are particularly poor" (Basham, 2004: 3). "Today, 1.3 billion people live in the 46 countries where Islam

is the dominant or state religion. Freedom House estimates that a non-Islamic country is three times more likely than an Islamic country to be democratic" (Basham, 2004: 2). Albeit the Iraqi constitution, which was voted on in 2005, emphasizes that "no law that contradicts the principles of democracy may be established" (Iraq's constitution), its article 2 in the first part says "Islam is the official religion of the State and it is a fundamental source of legislation. No law that contradicts the established provisions of Islam may be established" (Ibid). There is a contradiction here between the two articles. How can you organize things like sexual freedom which is strictly banned by Islam but allowed and protected by democracy? Or how do you solve the problem of polygamy which is supported by the Iraq's culture, people and Islam but democracy considers it a violation of women's rights? "No law contradicts Islam" is really flexible and subject to all interpretations. The more the government Islamic, the more pro-Muslims and severe the system will be to followers of other religions.

In addition, Islam has many other incompatibilities with democracy as it was pointed out earlier when Huntington's view on Confucianism and democracy was discussed. But there are writers disagreeing with this argument. Some argue that the fact that none of the Islamic countries have a genuine democracy is not due to Islam, as an ideal religion, but rather it is due to several other factors. It may be due the historical culture of the political elites supported by colonial powers to come to and remain in power. Basham argues that "in most Muslim countries a high level of popular support exists for the concept of democracy" (Basham, 2004: 1). Political elites regardless to what the ordinary Muslims want may impose their own personal views through coercion. Supported by oil and the superpowers like the United States and Russia, some of the authoritarian elites of have become really unbreakable acting beyond human rights with impunity. Saudi Arabia and Iran are two exemplars here.

Nevertheless, democracy still does not have few enemies among Muslims. Democracy is a product of Western culture and due to globalization is increasingly becoming the global system of governance. The spread of democracy is considered a threat by many conservatives who fear disappearing their culture and traditional customs. Furthermore, the threat may become bigger as democracy is imposed by a certain country like the United States. Invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq were considered Americanization by many Muslims. Noam Chomsky, a prominent American thinker, concerning the Iraq's invasion doubts that the US invaded the country in order to democratize Iraq and argues "the [US] goal has always been to establish a reliable client regime that will serve as a base for US power in what has long been recognized to be "the most strategically important area of the world" (President Eisenhower) and "one of the greatest material prizes in world history"(State Department), and that will open its resources to Western (primarily US) exploitation" (Abdulla, 2008).

The second dilemma of Iraq's democracy is the absence of a true political culture. "Building blocks of democracy are supportive cultural values—the long-term survival of democratic institutions requires a particular political culture" (Basham, 2004: 1). "Iraq lacks virtually every possible precondition for democracy" (Basham, 2004: 5). Iraqi culture has several characteristics that are at odds with democratic values. Firstly, "Eighteen million (of 25 million) Iraqis belong to tribes whose decisionmaking is dominated by tribal elders" (Basham, 2004: 9). Another feature is nepotism. "Most Iraqis view political nepotism as a moral duty rather than a civic problem" (Tierney, 2003:1).

Furthermore, Iraqi culture is a culture where losers do not easily accept the result of the elections. For example, in 1992 the Kurds for the first time had a democratic election, but the result led to a 4-year civil war between the two main Kurdish parties. This might be because of the lack of trust among Iraqis. Tribal societies, in general, usually lack trust, therefore they prefer to marry among themselves and inhabit close to each other. According to anthropologist Robin Fox, author of *Kinship and Marriage*, "Americans just don't understand what a different world Iraq is because of these highly unusual cousin marriages" (Basham, 2004: 5). Fox explains that "liberal democracy is based on the Western idea of autonomous individuals committed to a public good, but that's not how members of these tight and bounded kin groups see the world. Their world is divided into two groups: kin and strangers" (Ibid).

As Iraq's post-2003 democratization is top-down, the prospect of having a genuine democracy in Iraq is really poor. History gives us no successful example of top-down democratization. The top-down democratization is indeed problematic if you do not have a democratic culture in place. "Political culture shapes democracy far more than democracy shapes political culture," (Basham, 2004: 1). "Therefore, the American government may need to compromise its democratic ideals with a healthy dose of pragmatism. Democracy is an evolutionary development rather than an overnight phenomenon," (ibid).

The fabric of Iraqi society as a mosaic of ethnic and religious factions is another obstacle to democracy in Iraq. This has made it extremely difficult, if not impossible, for all Iraq's people to be accommodated in one state, under one identity and one flag. More than 95 percent of the Kurds prefer secession and do not consider themselves Iraqis (Barkey, 2009: 14) and the Shiites and the Sunnis as well are more loyal to their distinctive sectarian identity. Yet, some positively see these divisions and believe "the innate interest of each community to limit the power of the other could in fact provide the checks and balances that are so essential to the promotion of democracy at the expense of rigid communal particularism" (Dawisha, 2005: 5). But, indeed, due to a historical rift which has been widened by decades of authoritarian rule, "the Sunnis, Shiites, Kurds, and several smaller groups have different demands, fears, and agendas" (Ottaway, 2005: 2). Marina Ottaway(2005), a University professor of Democracy, says that "disturbingly, the experience of many states shows that democracy is not always the solution and can become part of the problem"(Ottaway, 2005: 2). In the case of Iraq she argues that "unless Iraqis succeed in creating a new state on the basis of consensus rather than coercion, there is no point in talking about democracy" (Ibid).

Meanwhile, Michel Mann, in his book *The Dark Side of Democracy*, argues that ethnic cleansing is the dark side of democracy and "starts when two ethnonational movements each claims 'its own' state over the same territory" (Mann, 2006: 2). Mann says further that "conflict escalates where either the weaker side fights rather than submit because of aid from outside or the stronger side believes it can deploy sudden, overwhelming force" (Ibid).

In Iraq each group claims 'its own' state over the same Iraq. Iraq's people actually need to have several Iraqs. Current Iraq's constitution defines Iraq as a federal state that each province can democratically through referendums decide whom to be belonged, yet many create obstacles. This is what Waterbury argues that you cannot have a democracy without democrats (Salame, 1996). In Iraq there is a lack of what some scholars refer to

as “democratic spirit”. Democratic spirit helps people to accept the outcome of elections even if it were in their disadvantage.

The Kurds as a minority who have suffered dictatorship for so long, want no more than controlling those areas where they constitute majority, therefore they are largely a pro-democracy force of the country. But, the Sunnis, whom they have almost always ruled Iraq since the Ottoman Empire hitherto the demise of Hussein's regime (Tripp, 2007), seems to not be a pro-democratic group for two reasons. Firstly, they are certain that they will never run the country again. Finally, a democratic distribution of lands will weaken them as the areas, where the Sunnis make up the majority of the population, lack oil fields.

Regarding the Shiites, their view is paradoxical. At the first place, as their-being-majority gives them the advantage to outmaneuver the Sunnis and all other small groups, they are a pro-democracy. But, when it comes to their view to the Kurds and the issue of land, their pan-Arabist view makes them be an antidemocratic force. The struggle between the Shiites and the Kurds is over the oil-rich city of Kirkuk and its surroundings. The pan-Arabist view has the fear of Kurd's secession from Iraq if they had Kirkuk back. This has become apparent as the Shiite ruling government created obstacles so as to prevent Iraqi Constitution's article 140 from implementation. The article calls for a plebiscite to be held in the city in order to be clear whether people of Kirkuk prefer to be part of the other three provinces of Duhok, Irbil, and Sulaimani which are administered by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) or remain as part of the central Shiite-dominated government. The Kurds have always demanded a constitutional solution, yet the other ethnic groups (Arabs and Turcomans) are strongly opposed.

Iraq is unlikely to be democratic if it does not incorporate a political system based on an ethnically divided federalism. If the country is not an ethnically based federalism, the main concern of individuals would be their ethnic divide rather than their individual well-being. Elections in Iraq are not a struggle of individuals for their well-being and to have a better government to give them more freedom and a better life. But it is rather a fight between some ethnic and religious groups, dominated by tribal leaders, who want to have more seats in the parliament not to be tyrannized by the majority. A Kurdish citizen stated that “although I know my government is corrupted, my leaders have monopolized everything and are conservatives who strict the freedom of individuals, I am still going to vote for them, because I believe there is a bigger enemy, that is, the Arabs”. In such elections, individuals are overlooked by the illusive sentiment of ethnonationalism or religious factionalism.

Iraqi citizens largely voted their identity in these elections. Kurds voted for Kurdish parties, Shias [Shiites] for Shia parties, and Sunnis voted very little. Few voted for parties that could be considered in any sense nondenominational. It should not come as a surprise that Iraqis voted this way. This happens regularly in divided countries where communal identities have become highly politicized, heightening tensions and even undermining the state (Ottaway, 2005: 2).

Iraq should not remain like this not only for the sake of the Iraqi people but also for the sake of democracy as well. Decades of totalitarianism made Iraqi people dream about democracy, therefore as the US announced the democratization of Iraq, many people whom had become marginalized by the former dictator Saddam Hussein, such as the

Kurds and the Shiites, became extremely delighted. However, the chaos, which has emerged after the demise of the Ba'ath regime, has spread corruption, inequality and terror; this in turn has made many ordinary people hate democracy and consider it to be the cause for the chaos. It is much worse while this situation has often been praised by the US government as democratic. People want democracy to have life, and democracy, as the name implies, should do that. Following the US invasion of Iraq, a Baghdad shop owner told a Time correspondent that, under Saddam Hussein, "at least we had power and security. Democracy is not feeding us" (Basham, 2004: 8).

Corruption and misdistribution of resources are another dilemma of democracy that has made the majority of the Iraqi people remain disadvantaged and economically poor. Iraq has so much oil which is unequally divided. The Shiites dominate about 60 percent of Iraq's oil and the Kurds about 40 percent. But, the Sunnis control very little (Eland, 2008). If the oil is left to be the responsibility and possession of the local governments, the Sunnis would lose out. Therefore, as Adeed Dawisha, a political scientist, argues "the distribution of revenues has to be the responsibility of both center and periphery. Central revenues would be used to redistribute resources from rich to poor regions, whereas local revenues would support local economic and cultural initiatives" (Dawisha, 2005).

By doing so, you may save the Sunnis from their misfortune which has put them into oil-poor areas. But, it does nothing about the real problem, which is, how the average people can benefit from these oil fields. Because of the corrupted leaders, according to a report compiled by Oxfam and the NGO Co-ordination Committee in Iraq (NCCI) in July 2007, half (43 %) of the population are living in "absolute poverty"(Oxfam International, 2007: 3).

When it comes to the Kurdistan region in the north of Iraq, it has been a much safer and more secure place than the rest of Iraq. It has often been referred to as "the other Iraq". This region was freed in 1991 by the Kurds themselves and did not go through the 2003-war. There is more freedom of expression and press. But, corruption is a very big problem here too (Abdulla, 2008) and "ordinary Kurds are struggling to survive, while state money gets siphoned off into private pockets" (Clark, 2008). The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) are two major political secular parties which have controlled almost everything in the region. The annual budget of these parties has been unknown. The two parties after 2003 came together and created Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). The KRG does also include other mini-parties in the region which are considered to be the opposition parties, including Gorran movement both Islamic and communist parties. The KRG administers the three provinces of Duhok, Sulaimani and Irbil where 4 million people are inhabited. Regardless to the money it makes in the region and oil fields drilled by its own, KRG's share of Iraq's oil revenues is 6 billion US dollar (Clark, 2008). "But there is a growing gap between ordinary Kurds and the political elite" (Ibid).

Neoliberal democracy demands free market, generally meaning the absence of the intervention of the state in the markets. This might not work in Iraq as Iraq's money is mostly in the hands of politicians. The business men are those who are in the power. Denis Natali, author of the Kurds and the State, says that in Kurdistan "the political parties and leading families monopolize certain sectors, such as telecommunications and lucrative projects" (Natali, 2008). Furthermore, having years of the implementation of socialist principles by Hussein's regimes, free market has many antagonists. It is not easy for the Iraqis to accept having an elite controlling the markets and exploiting the masses.

Thomas Riggins, in an article entitled Democracy in China: Fact or Fiction, argues that democracy "is a system designed to maintain the capitalist class's political domination and economic control to ensure that state power does not fall into the hands of the working class." (Riggins, 2007. p.1) He further continues that this model is an inappropriate model for a communist government which represents the interests of classes antagonistic to the bourgeois.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from all what have been discussed in this essay that democracy in Iraq has several extrinsic dilemmas which are not easy to be overcome. One of them is Iraq's culture. Iraq's culture, shaped by years of authoritarian rule, lacks several requirements of democracy. Cultural dilemmas are two-fold: the first one lies in Islam, as the religion of the majority of Iraq's people. The second cultural dilemma is the lack of a political culture that must have autonomous individuals. Most of the Iraq's individuals are dependent on their tribal leaders in the decision-making process. This dependency has shaped political decisions to be ones based on the interest of a specific group rather than Iraqis as a whole. As you do not have a democratic culture in place, it would be unreasonable to assume Iraq becomes a genuine democracy by a top-down decision from the White House anytime soon. Furthermore, the nature of the Iraq's society as a multi-religious and multiethnic mosaic may suggest having an ethnically based federalism or three independent states for the Kurds, Sunnis and Shiites. There seems to be no way but to keep these groups separate. By doing so, individuals may benefit a lot and focus on their individual well-being when they go to elections rather than their ethnonationalism. Finally, the phenomenon of corruption of Iraq's officials has made many Iraqis lack the very basic needs of life, though their country is listed as the second oil-richest country of the world after Saudi Arabia.

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