



**Hussain Al-Mozany**

## Democracy dictated

*Iraq's experiences with democratization*

For all its contemporary troubles, Iraq has its own experiences with democracy, writes Hussain Al-Mozany. The period of British occupation saw major changes in people's lives, as well as a new set of economic, social, cultural, and political values. However, after the expulsion of the British in 1958, power became concentrated in the hands of a small group of individuals and civil society was crushed. Under the new political constellation, Iraq will need massive support from Western democracies if it is to overcome Saddam's legacy.

The Roman orator Cicero wrote that "not to know history is to be always a child". But are those who know history necessarily more grown-up? Cicero doesn't say. In truth, very few of us, if any, use history to guide our decisions. We rely instead on things that affect us personally and directly. The more recent and pressing such experience is, the more zealous our courses of action. For the vast majority, history and its lessons fall by the wayside.

Another problem with direct experience is the fact that it is non-transferable. The experience of others can be at most a mirror we hold up to our own experience to broaden our perspective. This concerns the experience of Iraq as well as that of Germany. At most one can copy this model or that model, something which, in the case of Iraq, has its own story.

In the mid-1930s, several Arab nationalists developed a political programme whose goal was to fulfil the "eternal mission" of "unity, freedom, and socialism". As formulated by the chief ideologue of the Baath party, Michel Aflaq, unity was the natural law, the moral and historical necessity that all Arabs live in a single nation state. To lend support to their concept, Arab nationalists drew on Johann Gottfried von Herder's statements about the mind and body of a nation. The mind of the Arab nation is Islam, and its body is Pan Arabism, both coming together to produce continuous revolution.

How this mind and body were ultimately put into practice in Iraq is shown by the nationalist coup led by Rashid 'Ali al-Qilani in May 1941. Supported militarily by the Nazis, the coup resulted in a nationalist mob storming the Jewish quarters of Baghdad and killing dozens of Jewish citizens -- a wild pogrom patterned after the 1938 *Reichskristallnacht*, the "Night of Broken Glass". This tragic event was subsequently known in modern Iraqi history by the notorious term *Farhud al-Yahud*, the looting of the Jews.

The pogrom brutally demonstrated the close ties between Nazi Germany and Arab Nationalists. From the meeting between Amin al-Hussaini, the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, and Adolf Hitler to the ultra-national regime of Saddam Hussein, one sees repeated examples of a German-Arab pact. However much the nationalist systems in Germany and Iraq differed due to societal structures,

they were perfectly identical in their battle against political heterogeneity. Each imposed a *Gleichschaltung* leading to ethnic and religious persecution of minorities, the dissolution of leftwing parties and liberal forces, rigid cultural control, the militarization of society, and, in the end, wars of extermination.

Yet compared with Germany's impressive postwar development, the situation in Iraq post Saddam Hussein seems bleak. Successful reconstruction, the critical treatment of a Nazi past, the introduction of a social market economy, the democratization of political institutions, the constitutional safeguarding of civil liberties, the peaceful negotiation of geographical borders, a confidence-inspiring cooperation with neighbouring countries, inner stability, the protection of equal rights, and the recognition of the rights of minorities — all these achievements represent the new Germany, a model for the modern democratic and pluralistic constitutional state that couldn't be more different from the developments in Iraq over the last fifty years.

Iraq is a country rich in history and culture, a country that continuously sought and found new forms of expression, a country that laid the basic principles of the Western and Eastern worlds. It was the country of trade that invented the written language; it was the country where poetry, storytelling, numbers, mathematics, astronomy, medicine, art, music, laws, and myth began; it was the origin of religious scripture, the cradle of the prophet. But despite these material and intellectual riches, Iraq has become a country of chronic suffering. Its people lack basic resources; massive human rights violations and matchless repressions abound; armed conflict, sanctions, looting, and environmental destruction are the order of the day; its people have been traumatized through terror, forced into flight, and killed in senseless static warfare. Though Iraq can boast of a great diversity of identities and languages, it has remained a place of bloody ethnic and nationalist confrontation.

For all of its modern troubles, however, Iraq has had its own experiences with democracy. And as it happens, these experiences occurred at nearly the same time as Germany's first attempts to establish a democracy, during the Weimar Republic.

### **Democratic tendencies in modern Iraq**

On 11 March 1917, the British army, under the command of General Frederick Maude, marched into Baghdad and cleared out the remaining Ottoman garrisons, thus ending four centuries of rule in the name of Islam. After Turkey's capitulation in 1918, the British declared that a freely elected national government in Iraq was one of its objectives. Though General Maude announced emphatically that he had come to liberate, not to conquer, most Iraqis remained sceptical. The British colonialists attempted to garner support from those Iraqi groups that were willing to cooperate, promising them high positions in the military administration. But the rural populations and the religious clergy were not persuaded by these conciliatory offerings and adamantly rejected the occupation. Their bitter resistance to the British army culminated in the major revolt of 1920, which led the British to appoint an Arab king, create a provisional parliament, and hold general elections.

The coronation of Faisal I on 23 August 1921 — in which the British played a decisive role — marked the start of democratization in Iraq. Faisal was received enthusiastically by the people of Baghdad and the Iraqi elite, and the British regarded it as a veritable coup. But very quickly a strange political constellation emerged. On the one hand were idealistic British government

officials interested in questions of human rights; on the other hand were corrupt colonial administrators in cahoots with similarly corrupt Iraqis. The gradually disillusioned Iraqi political elite decided to give their support to the latter.

The fact there was corruption ought not to overshadow the achievements of the time. The British occupation brought with it major changes in people's lives as well as a new set of economic, social, and political values. One of the greatest accomplishments was the abolishment of the veil, brought about by noted politicians and intellectuals, as well as (most importantly) women themselves. Also during this time, the first parties, unions, and associations were established; Iraqi literature, the so-called New Classicism, reached its high point; and music, theatre, and visual arts experienced an impressive renaissance after a long period of prohibition under Ottoman rule.

Despite these improvements, popular distrust of the colonial power continued to simmer beneath the surface. It was widely feared that Britain would not make good on its promise to grant Iraq its independence. Many suspected that former Iraqi officers close to King Faisal and on friendly terms with the Mandate forces were receiving preferential treatment so as to secure treaties and contracts favourable to the British. In 1929, in protest of this practice, Prime Minister Abdulmuhsin as-Sadun took his own life. Four years later, King Faisal, the founder of modern Iraq, died and was succeeded by his twenty-one-year-old son, Gazi. Consumed by a deep hatred toward the British — they had betrayed his grandfather Scharif Hussain of Mekka and had disappointed his own father, Faisal — Gazi lacked a clear political vision, and the situation in Iraq under his rule became increasingly instable. Rumours circulated that Communists and subversive forces had infiltrated the army. In 1936, the Chief of Staff of the Iraqi army, Bakr Sudqi — a person already notorious for his brutal military campaigns against the Assyrians in the North and the Arab tribes in the South — responded with a coup d'etat. Three years later, the young King Gazi was killed in a car accident, and the Iraqis immediately blamed the English for his murder. Thinking that these developments could threaten their own interests, the British pressured their Iraqi allies to renew the Treaty of 1930, the Anglo-Iraqi agreement that provided supposed independence for the Iraqis. The new treaty, signed in Portsmouth in 1948, triggered a large protest, which the British violently put down.

Instead of carefully establishing democratic measures, the powers that be in Iraq did the exact opposite: parliament was suspended, opposition parties were outlawed, their papers banned, and martial law was imposed. In this climate, volatile military officers, including Abdul Karim Qassim and Abdul Salam Muhammad Arif, became national heroes. On 14 July 1958, these free officers seized power, expelled the British army, and deposed the monarchy. Nearly the entire family of the king was executed in their Palace of Roses and the most powerful ally of the British, Nuri as-Said, was dragged through the streets of Baghdad, after which his body was dismembered and set on fire.

### **Democracy's failure and its prospects**

As a whole, it is correct to claim that democracy is a decisive and necessary form of government for a developed industrial society. Democracy can find a basis consensus among the antagonistic and diverse interests of varying groups, peacefully resolving conflicts and promoting society's continued development. Yet this Western political system has failed to take hold in

numerous Islamic nations. It is not that the people in these countries can't think or act democratically. And it is not that Islam is incompatible with the idea of democracy. The problem has to do with the absence of democratic cornerstones. Countries such as Bangladesh, Indonesia, or Pakistan — places where even secular women have held power — are in great danger due to the enormous economic problems faced by their ancient and nomadic societies.

Democracy is a large undertaking. One must be prepared to invest much and receive little in return. A decisive factor for practicing democracy is the degree to which a nation is organized or can be organized. Without firm organization, no decisions or checks can be carried out. The more technically advanced a society is, the higher its degree of organization.

In his *Book of Evidence*, the Arab historiographer Ibn Khaldun describes the shock of the Persian general Rustan when he saw the Islamic army in Iraq praying before the decisive battle that would bring an end to the Sassanid Dynasty. "Umar, the Islamic Caliph, will now destroy me", Rustan is reported to have said, "for he is teaching the dogs how to behave." Today, of course, this organizational potential is not being utilized for technical revolutions, but for brutal Islamic terror.

The most important components of a democracy — the constitutional state, free elections, and freedom of the press — remained empty ideas in Iraq. Although Iraq never lacked proponents of democracy, the anti-democratic forces were always a step ahead. With organized opposition weak and plagued by in-fighting, its members could easily be side-stepped, intimidated, exiled, or, as in the case of communist leaders in 1949, executed without trial.

A decisive point ignored in most discussions of Iraq is the absence of the concept of "citizen". In Iraq, the citizen was replaced by the subject on whom the will of the state imposed itself. Everything that the state gave was a mere donation; everything that the state took was its fair toll. The concentration of power in the hands of a small group of individuals inevitably led to the expansion of the state security apparatus and prevented the development of a free civil society with equal rights for all.

And what about the new wave of democracy in Iraq today? It hardly needs to be said that the current situation in Iraq is enormously depressing. For the prevailing model in Iraq is not democratic at all, but absolutely anti-democratic, with its lining of orthodox religion from both the Shiite and Sunni camps dividing power nearly perfectly along confessional lines. It does not suffice to replace Saddam's state by one less bad and less corrupt. One needs to do significantly more to take into account the interests of the Iraqi population, to establish a basis from which the legacy of Saddam Hussein's regime — the confessional and ethnic rifts between Sunni and Shiite, Arab and Kurd — can be overcome.

Though Saddam is no longer in power, his legacy will continue to cast a long shadow, for he systematically destroyed everything on whose basis a democratic Iraq could be built. Iraqis do not have the strength — in case they have any left at all — to rebuild their country. More urgently than ever, they need massive support from Western democracies in every area of life: safeguarding the national borders, building infrastructure, fighting terror, reducing unemployment, finding internal answers to the nationality question. In addition, the country needs a competent, experienced government to carry

out the reconstruction and a diplomatic control apparatus to oversee its implementation. It needs a basic framework for the organized return of Iraqi exiles and refugees. It needs general amnesty for all those in Saddam's regime who did not grossly violate human rights or commit war crimes. And, finally, it is imperative that the idea of a confederation be considered that has Shiite support.

Fortunately, some of these demands have been adopted by Iraqi political parties and included in the new constitution, but Iraq will not become a model of democracy for the Arab and Islamic world overnight. (It took forty years for the Federal Republic of Germany to convince the East Germans to follow suit.) Iraq is a country whose people have long suffered under harsh sanctions and an unprecedented and merciless reign of terror. To envisage a free, peaceful, and strong Iraq, one must know how to dream. It might provide a certain ironic comfort to regard Iraqis, if not all Arabs and Muslims, from the perspective of the Islamic calendar. According to its counting system, the year is now 1427. The span of more than 500 years that separates the Islamic and Gregorian calendars shows most clearly the difference between their world and Western civilization.

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