

Never Underestimate the Power of Ethnicity in Iraq

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S ick to death of “identity politics” at home, Americans ironically find themselves dealing with a tinderbox of ethnic division in Iraq. We may be the least well-equipped nation in the world to manage the kinds of group hatreds that threaten Iraqi society today. Because of our beliefs in the “melting pot” and the United States’ own relatively successful—though halting and incomplete—history of assimilation, Americans don’t always understand the significance of ethnicity, both at home and especially abroad. In Iraq, our obliviousness to the realities of group hatred was on display from the first days of the occupation, when U.S. officials appointed former members of the almost-exclusively-Sunni Baath Party to the highest government and police positions, apparently unaware that these appointments would provoke the fury of Iraq’s Shiites, Kurds and others, who make up more than 80 percent of the population. The outraged reactions forced the Americans to rescind the appointments.

British colonial governments, by contrast, were fastidiously conscious of ethnic divisions. But their policies are a dangerous model. When it was the British Empire’s turn to deal with nation-building and ethnicity, the British engaged in divide-and-conquer policies, not only protecting but favoring minorities, and simultaneously aggravating ethnic resentments. As a result, when the British decamped, time bombs often exploded, from Africa to India to Southeast Asia.

The U.S. government’s ethnic policy for Iraq has essentially been to have no policy. The Bush administration’s overriding goal is the transfer of power by the end of next June from the U.S.-led coalition to a new Iraqi government selected, in theory, through some kind of democratic process. The administration seems strangely confident that Iraq’s ethnic, religious and tribal divisions will dissipate in the face of rapid democratization and market-generated wealth. In President Bush’s words, “freedom and democracy will always and everywhere have greater appeal than the slogans of hatred.”

Unfortunately, recent history suggests just the opposite. Rapid democratization has been attempted in many poor, ethnically divided societies in the last two decades, and the results are sobering. Democratic elections in the former Yugoslavia produced landslide victories for the hate-mongering Franjo Tudjman in Croatia and the genocidal Slobodan Milosevic in Serbia. In

Rwanda in the early 1990s, democratization fomented ethnic extremism, yielding the majority-supported Hutu Power movement and the ensuing ethnic slaughter of Tutsis. In Indonesia in 1998, sudden democratization after the fall of Suharto’s 30-year dictatorship produced a wave of anti-Chinese demagoguery and confiscations, leading to the devastating flight of more than \$40 billion in Chinese-controlled capital.

It is impossible to predict who would win free and fair elections in Iraq, but given the demographic and economic conditions, it is extremely unlikely that such elections in the near future would produce a secular, pro-American outcome.

Iraq’s ethnic and religious dynamics involve conflicts that cut across and among Kurds, Turkmens, Shiites, Christians and Sunnis; many horrendous massacres; wholesale confiscations; and deep feelings of hatred and the need for revenge. Iraq’s Shiites represent a 60 percent majority, which has suffered cruel oppression at the hands of the Sunni minority. While Iraq’s Shiites are far from homogeneous, liberation has already fueled religious demagoguery among vying Islamic clerics and unleashed powerful fundamentalist movements throughout the country. Needless to say, these extremist movements are intensely anti-American, anti-secular, anti-women’s rights and illiberal. Meanwhile, Iraq’s 20 percent Kurdish minority in the north, mistrustful of Arab rule, represents another source of profound instability. Finally, as many have pointed out, Iraq’s oil could prove a curse, leading to massive corruption and a destructive battle between groups to capture the nation’s oil, its main source of wealth.

None of this is democracy’s fault. The blame for Iraq’s current group hatreds rests largely with the fascistic regime of Saddam Hussein, which systematically terrorized and murdered Shiites and Kurds. In addition, Hussein’s sadistic secularism spurred the growing fundamentalism among Iraq’s Shiites.

Blaming Saddam, however, does not alter the facts. Given the conditions today in Iraq—conditions created by colonialism, autocracy and brutality, not to mention the historical schism between Shiite and Sunni Muslims—hasty national elections could very well produce renewed ethnic radicalism and violence; an illiberal, Islamist regime in which women are murdered by their relatives for the crime of being raped (already happening in Shiite Baghdad); and an anti-American government

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determined to oust U.S. firms from Iraq's oil fields. Any of these results would create, at best, an awkward moment for the Bush administration. Combined, they could be catastrophic for American interests, for the Middle East and for Iraq.

Perhaps for these reasons the Bush administration is trying to create a "democratic" government by June without popular elections.

What is to be done? Retreating from democracy is not an option. Unfortunately, few good models exist to guide U.S. ethnic policy in Iraq. The British strategy might have been to pit Shiites against Sunnis, and perhaps Kurds against both. But if we want an Iraq not divided and conquered, but united and self-governing, the way forward will be considerably harder.

The polar opposite of no ethnic policy would be a plan for explicit ethnic and religious power-sharing. For example, a new Iraqi constitution could contain a Dayton-style formula guaranteeing Sunnis and Kurds major government posts. Such a plan might have salutary short-term effects, but enshrining ethnicity and religious division in the constitution would be a perilous strategy. It could harden group identity at the cost of national unity. The one thing potentially worse than rushing to national Iraqi elections might be rushing to such elections while clumsily manipulating combustible ethnic dynamics that few in the United States even understand.

All this suggests a very different alternative: Put the brakes on national democracy, and focus much more energy and resources on local democracy. To date, astonishingly, there have been virtually no city or town elections anywhere in Iraq. Apparently, U.S. policy calls for implementing national self-government first and worrying about local self-government later. The order of priority should be exactly the opposite.

Democracy at the national level will essentially pit the Shiite majority against the hated Sunni minority and autonomy-seeking Kurds in a battle for control over the country's destiny and oil wealth. By contrast, many Iraqi towns and cities are relatively less divided along ethnic and religious lines, and the electoral stakes there would be much lower. In elections for city councils and other municipal positions, the competing candidates and parties would have much less incentive to define themselves along sectarian lines or to engage in ethnic demagoguery.

To sow the seeds of democracy, better to think locally.

Local democracy is the best instruction for national democracy. British and American democracy started locally, not

nationally. The message of the U.S.-led coalition to Iraqis should be: We are turning over governance to you, right now, in every one of your neighborhoods, towns and cities. Although oil and certain other national policy matters would be taken off the table—they could not possibly be decided at the town level—local self-government would still represent an enormous transfer of sovereignty. Most of the Iraqi reconstruction effort will be local: providing water; restoring electricity; building and staffing schools; fostering commerce; establishing town courts; and of course policing. Billions of dollars will be spent on these things over the coming years; crucial policy decisions will be made about priorities, jobs for women, and the distribution of goods and services.

To its credit, after the war, the U.S. military created district and town councils to assist in local governance all over Iraq. Coalition officials refer to these councils as "inclusive" and "democratically selected," but there is a big difference between selected and elected. In fact, the councils appear to have been selected by U.S. military authorities. As one U.S. official candidly acknowledged, "In terms of actual elections, we are not focused on that in our assistance at this point." An October poll indicated that half of all Iraqis did not even know the councils existed.

To be sure, some Iraqi towns might elect fundamentalist clerics as their lawmakers. The coalition must not try to suppress such results. Let Iraqis see their decisions respected. Let them see some towns where fundamentalism reigns and some where it does not. The hopes of a democratic Middle East may depend on it.

Local self-government will not be easy to achieve. Ethnically diverse cities such as Baghdad and Kirkuk could present special challenges. But local governance is a far more realistic goal than trying in the next six months to establish national, democratic government. Instead of premature national elections, the coalition should pursue an interim Iraqi constitution establishing the framework for immediate local self-government. During the ensuing period, coalition authorities would have the job of ensuring fair elections, a free press and freedom of movement (so that Iraqis can also "vote with their feet"). Because they would also retain control over Iraq's oil for an additional year or so, coalition forces must credibly demonstrate that they are keeping the country's oil wealth in trust for the Iraqi people. National elections would be postponed until Iraqis agreed on a permanent constitution, a process that would profit enormously from actual experience with local democracy.

Before she was assassinated, Iraqi Governing Council member Akila Hashimi warned against top-down efforts to remake her country. "Culture creates laws, not the other way around," she said. If democracy is to flourish in Iraq—and elsewhere in the Middle East—it must spread from the bottom up.

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