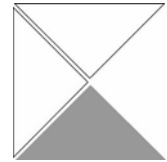
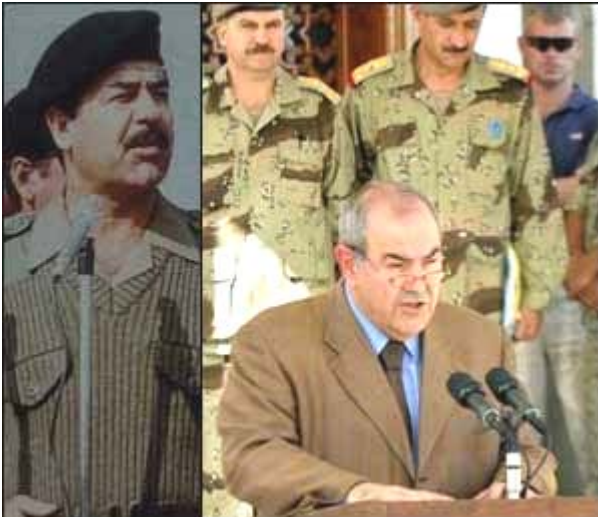


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WILL THE 'NEW IRAQ' BE ANY DIFFERENT? ALLAWI SOWS SEEDS FOR EMERGING POLICE STATE



By Farish A. Noor

One of the many frustrations of academics like myself who teach politics and history is having to deal with insolent students who raise the irritating question: "What is the relevance of all this, since everything you have taught us has passed and is no longer relevant in the present?" On a bad day I would be inclined to pick up a hefty classical text and try my best to aim it at the head of the ingrate in question, hoping that upon its landing on the hard skull across the room the victim's IQ level would have risen by a point or two. But these days, thanks to the 'benevolent imperialism' of the United States of America, I can say that what I teach does make sense and is indeed relevant for the sad times we live in.

I no longer have to refer to the cases of India, Pakistan, Burma, Malaysia or the countries of Africa and the Arab world when I teach about the history of colonialism and the politics of neo-imperialism. For now we have a neo-colonial puppet state in the making, complete with all the fancy accoutrements of a typical dependent state: Iraq.

The news that the new 'democratic' Iraq will have all the institutions and laws of a police state should not surprise anyone above the age of 40. We have all seen this before.

But for the young ones who grew up on a steady diet of Michael Jackson, Madonna and MTV, the realities of Iraq read like a crash course in realpolitik 101. Iraq's new 'leader' Prime Minister Iyad Allawi has signed the country's first National Safety Law which allows, among other things, the Prime Minister to assign governors to take over the running of certain 'problem areas'; the declaration of a state of national emergency; the imposition of curfews; the arrest of suspected terrorists and the tapping of phones and other modes of communication.

If this had happened in another country like Sudan, Nigeria, Iran or even Malaysia or Indonesia, the governments of the West, notably the USA, would predictably cry foul and accuse them of infringing the human rights of their citizens. (Which would, of course, be true.) But this is happening in Iraq, which is 'lucky' enough to come under the protective arms of Big Brother USA and which is—as we have been told by George W. Bush Junior two days before the expected handover of power—in need for 'special laws and special powers' in order to deal with the menace of terrorism and to make the transition to democracy.

At this point one feels inclined to read aloud the numerous speeches of ex-US President Jimmy Carter, who was the first to bring the discourse of democracy and human rights to the global arena in the 1970s, at a time when the Americans were locked in mortal combat with the Soviet bloc at the height of the Cold

War. Carter, like other US presidents from Nixon to Reagan, counseled that democracy and human rights could never be spread or preached by the gun or rammed down the throats of a society in crisis by force. They piously claimed that democracy and human rights can only thrive if and when democratic institutions were put in place and when a democratic civic culture was allowed to thrive and prosper.

But what kind of democratic Iraq, pray tell, can possible emerge when the most powerful man in the country (who is by the way supported by a foreign superpower) is allowed to have such overwhelming sweeping powers and authority to shape and guide the country's future? What kind of democratic civil society might emerge from an Iraq under Emergency Laws and where phone-tapping, curfews, arrest and detention without proper trials, take place?

Iraq doesn't have to look far to see where this will all lead to. Malaysia's fledgling democracy was stunted for good when the powers-that-be swept away the last constitutional safeguards during the time of the National Operations Council (NOC) and the Emergency that was declared in 1969. Likewise Indonesia's fledgling democracy was shattered when Sukarno declared that representative democracy was dangerous for the new nation and that 'guided democracy' would be the order of the day henceforth. Burma's superficial democracy was likewise bulldozed when the army took over in 1963 and the tanks smashed their way into the campus of Rangoon University. India and Pakistan's democratic culture was eroded by a succession of leaders who toyed with religion and communitarian sentiments – and then evoked the specter of the Emergency state in order to put the genie back in the box.

Allawi would not be wasting his time if he spent an evening or two reading some history books and studying the decline and fall of democracy in the third world. (If we wants, he can fly me there and I will give a private tutorial for free.) In nearly all the cases previously mentioned, the ruling elite and the western colonial patrons of the countries in question failed to note a simple fact: Democracy cannot be controlled, guided or limited. It thrives in a climate of openness and pluralism and where institutions and constitutional safeguards are in place to ensure that there is a system of checks and balances, representation and transparency. A free society is not created by tapping phones, closing down newspapers or denying the people their freedom of assembly, association and/or expression.

Instead it would appear that Allawi has taken more than a page out of the 'Democracy for Under-Achievers' book that has to be bedtime reading at the White House. To claim that Iraq needs a National Safety Law that allows for curfews, phone-tapping and arrests; and then to base this claim on the spurious grounds that the US has a similar law—the notorious Patriot Act—strikes one as a case of a leadership bankrupt of ideas and imagination. This is not to deny that Iraq is in crisis and that serious measures have to be taken to tackle the breakdown of law and order in the country. But more importantly the new leaders of Iraq have to address the needs, wants and aspirations of their own people and allow them to have a say in the birth of their new nation-state.

Countries like India, Pakistan, Burma, Malaysia and Indonesia have already lost much of their democratic veneer, but at least they began as constitutional democracies where the rule of law and the separation of powers were regarded as sacrosanct. Even as democracy takes a beating in these countries, there remains the lingering memory of a better, more open and honest past that keeps the struggle for democracy alive. The new Iraq and the people of that country cannot claim to have the same luxury: barely days after the so-called 'transfer of power,' the seeds of authoritarianism have already been sown. Historians like myself often talk about history repeating itself. For once I sincerely hope that I am wrong.

Dr. Farish A Noor is a Malaysian political scientist and human rights activist.

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