

The Results of Saddam Husain's trial and execution

Probably no one in the Western world would dispute that Saddam Husain deserved to be executed for grave offenses against humanity. He was a figure comparable to Lenin, Stalin, Hitler and Mao Tse-tung. Of course, he killed far fewer people but he operated on a smaller stage. Iraq could not offer human resources comparable with the Soviet Union, Europe or China.

We can argue that justice was done, but what are the long-term results likely to be in the Middle East? Will Iraqis agree with the Western view? What have they learned from watching the trial and the execution?

We must start with the trial. When it began, most Iraqis felt that Saddam was guilty, indeed that he was a despicable monster, and that everyone could breathe more freely with him behind bars. But as the trial proceeded, and as Saddam appeared hour after hour on television, a change in attitudes emerged. Saddam conducted himself with dignity and intelligence – those of us who remember the Nuremberg trials will recall that Herman Goring similarly became almost a sympathetic figure there. Like Goring, Saddam aimed, in effect, to put the court itself on trial.

In large part, many western observers confirmed, he succeeded. He maintained throughout the proceedings that the court was illegal and that he was the legal president of Iraq. The charges, he maintained, were irrelevant: any government had the right to defend itself. With Iraq under occupation by the Americans, the court was not Iraqi but was the tool of foreigners.

Faced with this defense, the court fumbled. Instead of providing the Iraqi people with a grand lesson in civics – how the rule of law should operate – which Iraq desperately needs if it is to heal its society and move toward a more peaceful future, it produced little more than a “show trial” in the Soviet tradition. Saddam was deprived of adequate counsel, his lawyers were harassed, occasionally excluded from the court, and three were even killed. Judges were intemperate even if occasionally provoked. The government improperly intervened to influence the judge. And everyone knew what the verdict would be before the first words were spoken. Thus, what could have been a major contribution appeared to many, even those who wanted its verdict, a farce.

Saddam's execution, similarly, was a mistake. Had he received a sentence of life imprisonment, the Iraqi people could have been exposed to the full record of his misdeeds as other, even more serious, charges were brought forth, could have been shown how a system of law and justice should work, and would not risk falling into the nostalgia comparable to what many Russians already feel for Stalin.

This may surprise many westerners, but when I visited Russia a few years after Stalin's

death, I found many Russians, even those who were educated and knew the history of his rule, nostalgic for his firm hand. As a man I hired as my translator put it, when I challenged him that he could not possibly yearn for the times when a knock on the door at midnight might mean a one-way trip to the *Gulag*, “I didn’t know anyone who had that experience. But in those days, I had a secure job, I could walk the streets in safety. And I could afford a reasonable apartment. Now, my life is insecure.”

Voices out of Iraq are already beginning to sound some of the same notes.

Thus, Saddam’s trial and execution will be weighed in the scales of what now happens in Iraq. That scale is heavily weighted. There is no security, death squads including uniformed policemen roam the streets, an estimated 600,000 Iraqis have died, millions of people have fled the country, unemployment hovers around 50%, the government is complicit in crimes that closely resemble those for which Saddam was condemned, and the country remains under a foreign occupation so resented that, according to independent polls, at least eight in ten Iraqis believe the insurgency -- including assassination of Americans -- is justified.

It is likely that many Iraqis will come to venerate Saddam – as many Russians actually venerate Stalin – and it is even more probable that the circumstances of his death will be used by future demagogues. He was rushed to the gallows, was not allowed even the customary visits of family, was taunted and heckled by his Shia guards and, perhaps above all, was executed in the midst of his prayer on the eve of the Islamic feast *Id al-Abha* which has some of the meaning for Muslims that Christmas has for Christians. The photograph of him, standing apparently stoically as a massive rope was being fitted around his neck could become a nationalist talisman. His grave will almost certainly become a place of pilgrimage.

Like so much of the invasion and occupation of Iraq, of which Saddam’s capture, trial and execution are the symbolic embodiments, these events will plague Iraq – and all of us – for decades to come.

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