

Saddam Verdict Could Tear Iraqis Apart

Many Iraqis say judgment was hastened for the benefit of the Republican Party

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BAGHDAD, Nov 6 (IPS) – The death sentence for former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein could deepen a divide that threatens to tear Iraqis apart.

The signs on the street are dangerous already. Several reports have come in of celebrations in Kurdish and Shia areas, with strong protests in Sunni-dominated cities in central Iraq.

Iraq is being ripped apart by sectarian violence between Sunnis and Shias, and many fear that if Saddam Hussein is executed Iraq could slide into civil war.

On Sunday the High Tribunal in Iraq held Saddam Hussein guilty of ordering the killing of 148 Shias in 1982. The verdict threatens stability because Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Muslim, is seen by non-Sunnis to have run policies to the advantage of Sunnis and the disadvantage of others.

Many Iraqis in Baghdad say the judgment was hastened for the benefit of the Republican Party in the United States, which faces congressional elections Tuesday. The party is expected to do badly primarily as a result of a widely perceived failure of the Republican Administration's Iraq policy.

The sectarian split under U.S.-led occupation has spiralled high enough to lead to fears that Iraq is in a state of civil war already. The oil-rich nation of 25 million comprises mainly Shias, Sunnis and Kurds, with the Shias an estimated majority of 60 percent.

In the Shia dominated Sadr City in Baghdad, and in other Shia cities like Najaf, Kerbala and Basra, large numbers came out on the streets to celebrate. Much of the Shia population suffered great repression during the rule of Saddam Hussein.

Celebrations have been reported also across Kurdish regions of northern Iraq. Like the Shias, the Kurdish population was also heavily repressed under the reign of the former dictator.

A day before the verdict was announced, Shia Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki asked Iraqis not to "celebrate too much" when the announcement came.

Other Shia leaders have been trying to sober down such celebrations, and even oppose the death sentence. They say that execution of the former leader would make a martyr of him, and give him a higher status than he deserves.

The picture of a split society was completed by protests and anger in Sunni-dominated areas of Iraq, particularly in Baghdad and in al-Anbar province to its west. Facing repression now

from a Shia-dominated government under U.S. influence, Sunnis have adopted the former leader as one of their own.

In Baghdad's predominantly Sunni neighbourhood al-Adhamiya, Iraqi police battled resistance members armed with machine guns. In Saddam Hussein's hometown Tikrit, thousands defied a curfew to carry pictures of Saddam through the streets.

The divisions were deepened further when Iraqi army units attacked pro-Saddam demonstrators in many areas. Sunni television channels Zawra and Salahedin that aired pro-Saddam demonstrations were immediately shut down and raided by Iraqi security forces.

The closure of the two networks has infuriated Sunnis further. The move appeared similar to the U.S.-ordered closure of the newspaper al-Hawza of Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, which sparked his first uprising against occupation forces two years back.

In a country where sectarian death squads are killing on average more than 100 people a day in the capital city alone, another polarising event is the last thing Iraq needs at this time.

One potential flashpoint everyone is watching is the northern oil-rich city Kirkuk. The city has a mixed population, including Sunni ethnic Arabs who were settled there under Saddam's regime. Kurdish leaders want Kirkuk, and its wealth, within an autonomous Kurdistan.

In the Shia-dominated south, more than 100,000 Iraqis are fleeing their homes each week as Shia leaders push for federalism, under which each ethnic group would take substantial control of a region it dominates.

Execution of Saddam Hussein, if it takes place, could worsen a pattern under which every 'success' of the government under occupation has led to increasing attacks on U.S. and Iraqi security forces.

This happened after Saddam Hussein was captured by U.S. forces in December 2003 after they were tipped off by Kurdish militia members. The attacks against security forces rose dramatically after that. A similar pattern followed the killing of suspected al-Qaeda leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi by occupation forces.

It is not yet certain that execution will be carried out. The verdict on Saddam now goes before a nine-judge panel that has indefinite time to review the case. But if the sentence is upheld, the execution must be carried out within 30 days.

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