

Iraq beacons Middle East's quest for democracy

By Mohammed A. Abdulqadir
The Globe

IRBIL- More than thirty months after the invasion of Iraq, the country still suffers from lack of security and stability, the very two prerequisites for establishing a democratic system in the country.

"The current violence and bloodshed in Iraq is a humiliating aftermath of the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, ... and plays into the hand of those regimes who don't want a democratic Middle East," says Bas Belder, a Dutch politician and a member of the Strasbourg-based European parliament. Belder, who participated in a conference on democracy in Middle East, held in Irbil last week, considers "security and the will to share power" and the

non-imposition of Sharia rule as "essential for having a democratic rule in Iraq."

Kurdish part of Iraq has been spared much of the bloodshed that plagues its Arab part. This is regarded as an encouraging factor to start the democratization of Iraq from north. "If there is a European hope for democratizing Iraq, it shall begin here in Kurdistan," adds Belder.

Apart from the importance of security and stability, Khalid Salih, a Kurdish academic who lives in Denmark argues that the burden of democratizing a country is on the elites' shoulder. "If the elites want to apply democracy they can prepare the ground for it," says Salih. He rejects the argument that the establishment of democracy in a certain society has to do with the readiness and ability of

that culture to adopt democracy. "Democracy is a matter of political agreement and once it comes to power then it becomes a culture," adds Salih. He also says that every culture has democratic and undemocratic aspects and the fact that there is a long tradition of democracy in Europe, didn't prevent the emergence of ideas such as racism, fascism and Nazism there.

A democratization process has started in Kurdistan, mainly after 1998, and only when the political leaders of the region reached the conclusion they can not settle anything through war and conflict, Salih claims.

But to the ordinary people, the current political process in the country and efforts to establish democracy doesn't appeal that much. "Democracy is not nice when people are hun-

gry and suffer from poverty. What should the poor do with democracy if they are hungry," says Nazim Sabir, a taxi driver from Dohuk.

In 1970s and 1980s Iraq had a relatively high level of prosperity and one of the best health-care and education systems in the region while it didn't have democracy. The situation is now quite the reverse and while Iraq enjoys a political democracy, it lacks strong infrastructure and basic services.

Despite the political and elites' rhetoric about democracy, some critics contend that talking about it without implementing basic principles of it, is inappropriate. Dr. Afram Issa Yusef, a Paris-based university professor and writer of Arab origin, says that after a tour of Iraq he found out that democracy, in Basra and Baghdad, for

example, is just dealt with as a means to gain power and impose one's ideology on others.

"Democracy has a philosophical dimension and if you used it without that dimension, it would be incorrect," argues Yusef who participated in Irbil's conference on democracy. He admits that in Kurdistan, in comparison with the rest of Iraq, the readiness to accept the philosophical dimension of democracy is more tangible.

The driving force of democracy in Kurdistan is secularism.

Mark Cravetz, a French journalist who spoke at Irbil conference rejects the idea of the popularity of religious extremism in the long-run. "[The majority of people] want to make a life and want good things for their children and not an Islamic monarchy or republic." He also says that theories like that of the clash of civilizations, propounded by the American academic Samuel Huntington, is "stupidity" but "very useful for fundamentalist Muslims since they exactly think the same way" as well.

Observers say Iraqis' voting three times in a year is a sign of the growing democracy in this country.

However, more than just elections is needed for the foundation of a long-standing democratic system in Iraq. One of the solutions offered for Iraq and Middle East is reestablishing state institutions, reshaping the political order and empowering the governance of the country's regions, to strengthen democracy in Iraq, Salih tells Globe.

Despite all the challenges and shortcomings that democracy faces in Iraq, the country is believed to be the launching pad for democracy in the Middle East.



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Kurdish music festival - Kurdish national identity

Zakariya Abdullah who is a well-known Kurdish singer originally from

Irbil attended the stage amid the loud wave of clapping, whistling, and shouting his name. Although he was not even scheduled for the festival, he was allowed to present his fans with two of his most beautiful songs while the crowd sang the refrains along.

"The festival provided me with joy and very pleasant time especially as it enabled me to see Zakariya in person," said Rebaz Noori, a 25-year-old admirer who missed important appointments to attend the festival.

Shouting "Dubara! Dubara!", dubara,

meaning to repeat, Zakariya's fans made him come back and sing the third one. Song called "Natbinm²", means "I don't see you", yielded even more shouts of approval. Amid ovations, Zakariya used a moment to promote political cause and urged his fans to vote for the Kurdistan coalition list, No. 730, in upcoming Iraqi national elections.

Despite the fact that the festival was made for Kurdish artists from all parts of Kurdistan, not all of musicians received the same welcome.

Najmaddin Ghulami, originally from Iranian part but based in Europe, sung on the first day. His songs

composed in celebration of Kurdistan saw many of the audience simply leaving. It seems they came only to see Zakariya and Irbil bands.

"The program was good, yet I was disappointed that people's reception was not fair, they didn't welcome the great Kurdish singer Ghulami as they did Zakariya," complained Arazoo, 25, a young Kurdish Iranian woman, "for me, the all parts of Kurdistan are the same," she added.

Voices of participants were as diverse as their music. Some were critical; others noted positive developments for this second gathering of Kurdish artists from all over the world.

"Our participation in the festival is to observe the current level of music and to criticize each other rather than showing a national message when the music, singers, instruments are all Kurdish," said Sherzad Sarsipee, leader of Rasasan Band which took part in the festival with some traditional Kurdish songs.

"Congratulations to the Kurdish people for this festival. I hope that it could build friendly relationships relaxing the tough competition among the Kurdish artists," said Aras Koyee, a Kurdish young singer loved by teens for his famous song, Khapagiyani.

Despite imperfectness and doubtful response by the au-

dience, Kurdish

Music festival brought desperately needed entertainment and cultural impulse.

For the end we decided to use hopeful words of Sami Shorish, the KRG minister

of culture, who said at the opening of the festival "Nations all over the world have annual traditional music festivals presenting their arts and cultures. Our intention is to create habits like those."



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