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OPINION: GLOBAL VIEW | MARCH 9, 2010

Iraqis Embrace Democracy. Do We?

Seven years after liberation, Western critics have been proven wrong.

By BRET STEPHENS



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In 2002, a presidential election was held in Iraq. Saddam Hussein won it by a margin of 11,445,638 to zero. "Whether that's because they love their leader—as many people said they do—or for other reasons, was hard to tell," reported CBS News's Tom Fenton from Baghdad.

You can't say they aren't fair and balanced over at CBS.

Another election has now been held in Iraq, this time involving 19 million voters, 50,000 polling stations, 6,200 candidates, 325 parliamentary seats and 86 parties. In the run-up to the vote, the general view among Iraqis and foreign observers alike was that the outcome was "too close to call." Linger over the words: "Too close to call" has never before been part of the Arab political lexicon.

But democracy has finally arrived, first by force of American arms, next by dint of Iraqi will. It's a remarkable thing, not just in the context of the past seven years of U.S. involvement, or the eight decades of Iraq's sovereign existence, but in the much longer sweep of Arab civilization. Paleontologists have described similar moments in evolution, when some natural cataclysm permits a nimbler class of animals to take the place of the planet's former masters.



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Peace, victory and hope: An Iraqi emerges from the voting booth.

Just so in Iraq: the Cretaceous period of the T Rex and the pterosaur is at last drawing to a close. George W. Bush, in all his subtlety, was their mass-extinction event.

In the West it's a different story. Among the most remarkable trends of recent years has been the disenchantment with the very idea of democracy.

It's a trend that expresses itself in various ways: the admiration for authoritarian (typically Chinese) efficiencies; the sense that democracies are incapable of rising to

the "challenges" of health care and global warming; the distaste for the tea parties in the U.S. But nowhere has it been more consistent than in the West's commentary about Iraq.

It began nearly on the day that Saddam's statue in central Baghdad was brought down by American soldiers as jubilant Iraqis looked on. "This war was not worth a child's finger," wrote the English novelist Julian Barnes in a Guardian op-ed. That was published fully a year

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About Bret Stephens

Mr. Stephens writes the Journal's "Global View" column on foreign affairs, which runs every Tuesday in the U.S. and is also published in the European and Asian editions of the paper. He is a deputy editorial page editor, responsible for the editorial pages of the Asian and European editions of the paper, the columnists on

before the insurgency got underway, when the argument could not be made—as it was later made—that democracy is all well and good but that order of any kind, even tyrannical order, is much to be preferred.

For the next seven years, the insurgents murdered coalition soldiers and Iraqi civilians with equal abandon, right up to the morning of the election. Yet somehow the killing sprees (grotesquely replete with the cutting off of children’s fingers) were treated by the world’s great opiners not as the acts of evil men to be confronted and stopped, but purely as a function of the American presence in Iraq.

In this strange moral calculus, all the blood that was shed—including American blood—was on America’s hands. It was also, by implication, a stain on America’s “experiment” of “imposing” democracy on so obviously unwilling a people.

In the midst of those bloodbaths, the U.S. ceded civilian control to Iraqi authorities, who then conducted four democratic elections. I still remember the incredulity among the war’s opponents, bordering on open dismay, when the parliamentary elections five years ago proved an inspiring success.

But the critics could relax, at least for a few years: The killing in Iraq did not abate. Successive Iraqi prime ministers were treated with none of the deference Western diplomats would routinely accord the masters of Egypt or Vietnam or even Syria. The division of Iraq was a respectable topic of conversation.

And yet throughout all of this, Iraqis somehow held fast to their idea of a democratic country. How was that possible? How could they not behave according to type, as inveterate sectarians and anti-Americans? Didn’t they perhaps miss the political clarity that dictatorship uniquely provides?

The late Michael Kelly knew the answer, and the answer was that Iraqis, unlike most of us in the West, knew tyranny, and therefore also knew what it meant to thirst for freedom. Writing just before his untimely death on the road to Baghdad, he observed:

“Tyranny truly is a horror: an immense, endlessly bloody, endlessly painful, endlessly varied, endless crime against not humanity in the abstract but a lot of humans in the flesh. It is, as Orwell wrote, a jackboot forever stomping on a human face.

“I understand why some dislike the idea, and fear the ramifications of, America as a liberator. But I do not understand why they do not see that anything is better than life with your face under the boot. And that any rescue of a people under the boot (be they Afghan, Kuwaiti or Iraqi) is something to be desired. Even if the rescue is less than perfectly realized. Even if the rescuer is a great, overmuscled, bossy, selfish oaf. Or would you, for yourself, choose the boot?”

I still miss Kelly. Sunday’s election was his vindication, too.

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foreign affairs, and the Far Eastern Economic Review. He previously worked for the paper as an op-ed editor in New York and as an editorial writer in Brussels for The Wall Street Journal Europe.

From March 2002 to October 2004 Mr. Stephens was editor-in-chief of The Jerusalem Post, a position he assumed at age 28. At the Post, he was responsible for the paper’s news and editorial divisions. He also wrote a weekly column.

In 2004, Mr. Stephens was named a Young Global Leader by the World Economic Forum, where he is also a media fellow.

Raised in Mexico City and educated at The University of Chicago and the London School of Economics, Mr. Stephens is married and has three children.

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