

Iraqi leaders fear for future after their past missteps

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Iraq's political elite, empowered by the American invasion and entrusted with the country's future, has begun to deliver a damning critique of itself, a grim harbinger for a country rife with fears of more crises, conflicts and even coups as the American military withdraws.

"We should be ashamed of the way we led the country," said Vice President Adel Abdul Mahdi, a former exile and one of the country's most prominent politicians.

The verdict by Mr. Abdul Mahdi, echoed often by his peers among the exiled opposition that followed American troops into Baghdad in 2003 and has led Iraq since, is a remarkable window on the apprehension that has seized the country today, still without leadership five months after Iraqis voted in an election meant to enshrine a new government.

As with so much here, the consequences are unpredictable. At least publicly, American officials had hoped for a power-sharing deal that would avert a more dangerous predicament, but those negotiations broke down this week. Even they have begun to worry about the implications of the impasse. "My sense is that there is impatience among the public with their politicians," said Christopher R. Hill, the departing United States ambassador to Iraq, who had pushed for the deal before his departure last week.

For many Iraqis, especially those with memories of the four coups in the decade after the fall of the monarchy in 1958, the apprehension underlines a dangerous combination of forces here that long bedeviled the Middle East: an unpredictable, fractured military and rising popular frustration with an isolated political class that has at times seemed rudderless, even helpless.

In the end, many officials expect an eventual agreement on some sort of consensus government so inclusive as to be woefully weak, unable to assert itself and beset by stalemate over the laws necessary to shape post-American Iraq. But the failure of the elite that the United States helped to choose may serve as a lasting American legacy here, raising fundamental questions about the body politic it leaves behind as the American military departs by 2012.

"I think it's a valid question to ask: Is this system going to work for Iraq, given its history, its peculiarities and so on?" asked Ryan C. Crocker, who preceded Mr. Hill as the American ambassador to Iraq. "I don't have an answer. But it's a question that's going to need to be dealt with."

To a remarkable degree, Iraq remains haunted by the decisions of the earliest days of the occupation in 2003, when expediency trumped foresight.

Debates still rage in Iraq over the choices the United States made: disbanding the Iraqi military, the purge of members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party and the decision to occupy Iraq rather than create a transitional Iraqi government. But perhaps the most far-reaching bequest was the power the exiled opposition and Kurdish parties have held in Iraq since 2003, filling a vacuum left by Mr. Hussein's withering assault on any dissent.

Despite expectations that a more grass-roots leadership might emerge, only the followers of Moktada al-Sadr, a populist cleric, have done so. Otherwise the names in 2003, with the exception of Prime Minister Nuri Kamal al-Maliki, remain much the same: two former prime ministers, Ayad Allawi and Ibrahim al-Jaafari; Ahmad Chalabi, an American ally turned critic; Mr. Abdul Mahdi; the Kurdish leaders; and two generations of Hakims, a prominent Shiite religious family.

Asked if the Americans bore blame for their prominence, Mr. Crocker said, "I don't think so. You can ask the question, was the whole bloody thing a mistake? I don't spend a lot of time on that. But if not them, then who?"

Palace intrigue only begins to describe the style of the political elite here since taking power, many of the players still imbued with a sepia-tinted recollection of a Baghdad only rarely mirrored in today's rough-and-tumble streets. Most remain friends, at least in public. But the clandestine secrecy of exile, with its endless plotting and duplicitous maneuvering, still shapes their interaction. Then, survival was the goal; in many ways, it remains the same.

"Most of them, in my understanding, are still acting as if they're in the opposition rather than trying to build a state," Mr. Abdul Mahdi said. "I'm not excepting myself or any other."

Between a flurry of meetings, another leading politician called his colleagues ineffective, overly impressed with the trappings of power and so greedy as to "border on being kleptocrats." He added, "They put the immediate above the important and tactical issues above strategic matters."

He was reluctant to speak on the record; to do so might upset potential allies.

"The same people, coming and going," lamented Mahmoud Othman, a Kurdish lawmaker who served on the American-appointed Governing Council in 2003. "If someone died, he's no longer around, but that's it."

As he spoke, his generator failed, plunging his house into the claustrophobic heat of a Baghdad summer. For a few hours, he suffered as does much of the rest of Baghdad, where electricity lasts for but a few hours, water is sometimes contaminated, trash piles up in the streets and the infrastructure is crumbling.

"We have failed for the past seven years," he said.

In a hopeful irony, the very acknowledgment of that failure says something about a country still wrestling with the end of dictatorship; the ossified elite of Egypt and Syria would never do the same. Indeed, some politicians and analysts say that the political class faces an impossible task, beset by feeble and corrupt institutions, the vagaries of Mr. Hussein's rule and a political culture that celebrates the spoils of victory.

Iraq's neighbors, in particular Turkey and Iran, often unhelpful, have taken to playing politics here like a parlor game. To break the deadlock, American officials were pushing for a power-sharing agreement that would keep Mr. Maliki as prime minister, and Mr. Allawi in charge of security. But, Iraqi officials say, the Iranians are opposed to Mr. Allawi, while the Turks have lingering reservations about Mr. Maliki. Syria, Jordan, plus Saudi Arabia and the other Arab states of the Persian Gulf are sure to want a say.

"We should blame ourselves as politicians because we allowed such countries to have so much influence in Iraq," said Mithal al-Alusi, a former lawmaker.

The disenchantment is so pronounced, in fact, that many leaders see less a threat in the flagging but resilient insurgency and more in something unpredictable, what Mr. Abdul Mahdi termed "an adventurer" seeking to exploit chronic crises.

A leading politician related a recent conversation he had with a top Iraqi general. The politician asked about the possibility of a coup. The general, he said, deeming the talk serious, pulled out a map of the capital and provided a disconcertingly elaborate plan to execute one:

overturning trucks to block the route from the main American base to the Green Zone, seizing television stations, besieging Parliament, and so on.

"When you're president," he quoted the general as asking, in utter seriousness, "can you make me minister of defense?"

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