Why the Democratization Process may Increase the Possibility of Conflict

Why the Democratization Process may Increase the Possibility of Conflict – A Case Study of Iraq after Regime Change in 2003

This essay intends to find an answer to the question why the democratization process may increase the possibility of conflict. It will be reasoned that the three following conditions have to be fulfilled to actually decrease the possibility of conflict in a democratizing society. First, security has to be guaranteed throughout the process to gain people's initial support for democracy. Second, the people have to be convinced that the democratic state is credible in providing services, in general administering, and in promoting economic development. Lastly, the democratic state has to be legitimate to prevent anti-democratic elements from attracting support from the wider population in their struggle against the emerging democratic state. To illustrate these points, this essay will look at the US invasion of Iraq in 2003 as a specific case study regarding the imposition of democracy by an external actor through the use of military force. It will be shown that the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA) and the rebuilt Iraqi state failed to establish security, and to gain credibility and legitimacy in the early period following the invasion which subsequently increased the possibility of conflict within Iraqi society.

What is meant by 'democratization' in IR? In the *International Encyclopedia of Political Science* democratization is defined as the transition period or transformation from a previously non-democratic regime or partial democracy to a full or consolidated democracy. This process can either be limited to the building of democratic institutions (shallow democratization), or involve civil society as well to gain the populations support for democratic institutions and values (deep democratization). Shallow democratization is less likely than deep democratization to create a consolidated democracy as a population's support is vital to uphold democracy. Moreover, democratization can either be promoted by domestic actors or imposed by external intervention and regime change.[1]

In the following sections the partly overlapping findings of Dahl, Dodge, Enterline and Greig, as well as Linz and Stepan on conditions influencing democratization will be combined in the three categories of security, credibility, and legitimacy. The conditions identified by these scholars are particularly important in the early phase of the democratization process to prevent democracy from failing which is often accompanied by the outbreak of internal conflict. These conditions are of particular concern when democracy is imposed on a people after external intervention as will be shown using the example of the US invasion of Iraq.

First, according to Dodge, the prevention of the emergence of a security vacuum by restoring law and order is paramount to initially gain the support and trust of the local population.[2] As Diamond has rightfully observed, a "minimum level of security is needed for people to trade, organize to rebuild their communities, and participate meaningfully in politics" in post-conflict situations or state collapse.[3] Diamond, and also Dodge, further argue that people are more likely to form or join militias in an attempt of self-help if there is no overarching authority capable of enforcing law and order in the aftermath of a defeat in war.[4] In other words, once people turn to militias to ensure their survival, the state has failed in its core responsibility, and the fragmentation of the state's monopoly on the use of force is likely to increase the possibility of internal conflict.

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This was certainly the case after the US-led regime change in Iraq when the initial security situation worsened dramatically and a security vacuum emerged which led the Iraqi people to turn to other bonds that promised better protection.[5] Two interrelated factors are crucial to understanding why the inability of the US to enforce law and order in Iraq during the transition process to democracy increased the likelihood of conflict to a significant degree. Firstly, the insufficient number of only 150 000 deployed US troops in Iraq made it impossible to ensure the security of the population as the forces were overstretched in the attempt to secure all of Iraq.[6] This led to widespread looting, and an initial upsurge in crime causing a further disruption of the already weak economy, and the destruction of ministerial property.[7]

Secondly, the CPA's decision to disband the Iraqi Army exacerbated the already poor security situation as capable security forces needed for the restoration of security were not only dismissed but lost everything from their salaries to their honor.[8] The CPA managed to antagonize with one swift strike hundreds of thousands of armed soldiers whose support was essentially lost from the very start of the democratization process. In the following months many of them took up arms to form local militias based on their religious, ethnic, family, or kinship affiliation, to fight an insurgency against the US occupation, and later the new Iraqi state, which had deprived them of their jobs and prestige.[9] This shows that the disbanding of the armed forces in the process of the democratization of a country can increase the possibility of conflict by alienating battle hardened elements of society against the new government. Both, the insufficient number of troops and the disbanding of the Iraqi Army, confirm Dodge's claim that security has to be restored immediately after regime change to gain the initial support of the local population for the new form of government. Moreover, it shows that the absence of an overarching power providing security is likely to lead to the emergence of local actors willing and able to provide security on a local level which, in turn, increases the likelihood of internal conflict as it contributes to the fragmentation of society.

Second, Enterline and Greig, and Linz and Stepan agree that the administrative capacity of the state has to be rebuild, and economic development promoted. From their standpoint, both are necessary to accord credibility to the state to prevent the alienation of the population.[10] The promotion of rapid economic development was not possible in the aftermath of regime change as the sanctions regime imposed at the end of the First Gulf War had effectively crippled the Iraqi economy.[11] Furthermore, the de-Ba'athification policy of the CPA was the final straw for the Iraqi state.[12] The civil service was purged of all former Ba'ath Party members in an attempt to build a new administration from scratch. Accordingly, the new bureaucracy was run by inexperienced personnel not capable of delivering the most basic services to the Iraqi people.[13]

The slow reconstruction process by the US, and the inability of the state to provide services, promote economic growth, and reduce unemployment further convinced the Iraqi people that democracy would not bring about a significant change in their lives.[14] Moreover, Sunnis felt especially targeted by the purge as they had formed the majority of Saddam's bureaucracy which strengthened their belief that they would be politically marginalized in a democratic Iraq ruled by a Shi'a majority.[15] Therefore, the credibility problem of the state not only led to the alienation of society but of the Sunnis in particular, which laid the foundation for future conflict between the different sects.

Third, Dahl, Enterline and Greig, and Linz and Stepan argue that the government has to be legitimate in the eyes of the public to gain support for the democratization process. If the government is not perceived to be legitimate by the people, the possibility of conflict increases. Accordingly, a new government should be elected by the people, avoiding composition based on identity to prevent the alienation of parts of society from the emerging democratic system.[16]

In Iraq the US made early on the mistake to build democratic institutions around sectarianism which the US believed to be the best way to include all the sects, especially Sunnis, Shi'a and Kurds representing the majority of the population. The division along sectarian lines, however, split Iraqi society, something the Ba'ath Party had kept at bay with the creation of an Iraqi nationalism.[17] Sunnis initially rejected the American approach by boycotting any kind of political participation in the imposed democratic institutions as sectarian division not only split society but also marginalized them politically as the majority of Iraqis are Shiite.[18]

Apart from alienating the Sunnis, the US also managed to delegitimize the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) as a newly

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established provisional government representing the Iraqi people. The members of the IGC were hand-picked by the US which convinced many Iraqis that they were effectively puppets of the US.[19] Furthermore, they were mainly former exiles who had no stand in Iraqi society.[20] Unsurprisingly, the US, and the democratic institutions created by the US, therefore, had little support of the people from the start, especially from the Sunni community. Hence, a lack of legitimacy in the eyes of a large section of society towards its government increases the possibility of conflict during the democratization process in a country.

This essay demonstrated with the example of the imposition of democracy in Iraq by the US that the democratization process may increase the possibility of conflict. It has been argued that factors contributing to the triggering of conflict during the democratization process can be broadly classed with three categories: security, credibility, and legitimacy. Security implies that law and order are reestablished early on in the democratization process to gain the support of the population. In Iraq the US clearly failed to deliver security following the toppling of Saddam due to the insufficient size of their occupation force, and their decision to disband the security forces of the former regime. This eroded support for the democratization process early on as people turned to local militias for their protection. Credibility implies that democratic transition has to be accompanied by the creation of a public administration that is capable of delivering services to the people, capable of promoting economic growth, and capable of reducing unemployment. The sanctions regime imposed after the First Gulf War as well as the purge of the Iraqi bureaucracy made it impossible for the state to fulfill these tasks, which alienated Iraqis further after regime change. Lastly, legitimacy implies that the public accepts the democratic state as the rightful representative of the people. From the start, the democratization process lost its legitimacy in Iraq as the US introduced sectarian divisions into politics, and hand-picked the first democratic representatives of the Iraqi people.

These findings show that the democratization process may indeed increase the possibility of conflict if security is not reestablished immediately, the democratic institutions fail to deliver services early on, and the people do not feel to be represented by their new government. However, as this research has been limited to the imposition of democracy by foreign military force, further research is necessary regarding the democratization of a state from within to learn if the same holds true.

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Footnotes

[1] Andrew J. Enterline and J. Michael Greig, "Against All Odds? The History of Imposed Democracy and the Future of Iraq and Afghanistan," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 4, no. 4 (2008): 323.

[2] Toby Dodge, "What is at Stake in Iraq?," *The Adelphi Papers* 45, no. 372 (2006): 58.

[3] Larry Diamond, "What Went Wrong in Iraq," *Foreign Affairs* 83, no. 5 (2004): 37.

[4] Dodge, "What is at Stake in Iraq?,": 19.

[5] Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq*, C. Hurst & Co.: London (2006): 189.

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[6] Charles Tripp, "The United States and State-Building in Iraq," *Review of International Studies* 30, no. 4 (2004):

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[7] Diamond, "What Went Wrong in Iraq,": 36.

[8] Oren Barak, "Dilemmas of Security in Iraq," *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 4 (2007): 460-461.

[9] Victoria Fontan, *Voices from Post-Saddam Iraq – Living with Terrorism, Insurgency, and New Forms of Tyranny*, Praeger Security International: CT, USA (2009): 32.

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[10] Enterline and J. Michael Greig: 344. Juan J. Linz and Alfred Stepan, "Problems of Democratic Transition and Consolidation," The John Hopkins University Press: Baltimore (1996): 7-13.

[11] Sultan Barakat, "Post-Saddam Iraq: Deconstructing a Regime, Reconstructing a Nation,"

  Third World Quarterly, 26:4-5 (2005): 574.

[12] Barak: 460.

[13] Hashim: 247.

[14] Barakat: 576.

[15] Ali A. Allawi, *The Occupation of Iraq – Winning the War, Losing the Peace* , Yale University Press, New Haven, CT (2007). David L. Phillips, *Losing Iraq – Inside the Postwar Reconstruction Fiasco* . Westview Press: USA (2005): 144-145.

[16] Robert A. Dahl, *On Democracy*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press (2000): 147.

[17] Fontan: 154. Allawi: 133.

[18] Hashim: 55. Allawi: 135-136.

[19] Tripp: 548. Phillips: 172.

[20] Hashim: 31. Phillips: 173.

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Date written: October 2014