An Analysis of Iraqi Politics

In his book *A History of Iraq*, Charles Tripp argues that there are three main factors that have resulted in the political status of Iraq. He states that throughout history different governments in Iraq have used these factors to control the state. In Iraq, the belief of most governments has been that politics and government policy is to maintain social order. Tripp’s essential argument is that governments are allowed too much power and turn that power into inescapable force. Conflict arises because of the measures governments will take to use the three factors to gain control. The factors are patrimonialism, the economy based on the demand for oil, and the use of violence. Conflicts due to these factors existed in Iraq’s history and continue to exist even in Iraq’s current state.

The future of Iraq depends largely on the policies of the next president of the United States, Barack Obama. There has been a gradual shift towards stability in Iraq and this could facilitate troop withdrawals within the region. Obama’s plan entails immediate withdrawal of many troops, and analysts such as Biddle, O’ Hanlan, and Pollack believe that this is possible without causing chaos in Iraq. However, given the history of Iraq and its current state, withdrawing troops so quickly will most likely cause more chaos. Waterbury and Bellin would argue that democracy is unlikely in Iraq because patrimonialism corrupts government, and the government is too free with their use of the coercive apparatus. With the guiding hand of the United States Iraq has finally showed signs of stability, but it is unlikely that this stability can survive without the U.S.’s presence. This is because the troop surge has given the false appearance of political stability according to Lynch, Katulis, and Juul. The surge was a military success and decreased violence in Iraq, but it does not guarantee political stability. It cannot guarantee stability largely because of the history of patrimonialism, oil conflicts, and violence that still exists to some extents today.

Sadam Hussein’s regime had extensive patrimonialism which led to corruption within the government. Important members of Hussein’s government owed their loyalty to Hussein and there were close ties between all of them. This made it very hard for dissenters to penetrate the government. Hussein essentially created a “shadow state” by linking clients, officials, and associates and by excluding those who could possibly go against his regime. His means of exclusion could be violent and served the purpose of scaring people into following his orders. This authoritarian rule does not allow freedom in government or in society which is essentially the backbone of a democratic or rational bureaucratic state. The U.S. now is trying to prevent patrimonialism and corruption in the current state of Iraq but because the efforts to prevent corruption are costly they are not priority to the new government. Also, many higher officials have made themselves immune to the screening of the anti-corruption laws that are being followed. Corruption still pervades most of the government in Iraq and in time this corruption will only increase if proper measures are not taken.

Historically in Iraq, whoever controls oil in the state has the most power in the government. For example, during the British Mandate negotiations took place over the shares in the Turkish Petroleum Company (later the Iraq Petroleum Company). In the end Iraq conceded to the British demands and received no shares in the petroleum company proving that British had the real control in the state. This weakness in Iraqi demands created sentiments of dissent and those who rejected British control realized that power lies in the institution that controls the economy. This established a tendency to authoritarian rule in order to have sole power over the state’s economy. In the current state of Iraq (under the scrutiny of the United States instead of the British) shares over oil is still a major issue. Obviously, the U.S. would like to have shares in the oil company to benefit the country and to also make sure that Iraq cannot completely control the economy.

Violence is a pervading issue throughout the Middle East and Iraq is no exception, past and present. The military has played a significant role in putting the government into power. Military coups, sectarian violence, and terrorism all exemplify the amount of violence that exists in Iraq. For example, during the Ba’thist coup of 1963 the Ba’thists used the military to eliminate (through any means necessary) supporters of the previous regime. During Sadam’s regime, violence was used to do put down any thoughts of dissent. To citizens of Iraq, this violence shows them what happens to dissenters and ultimately their fear of the government outweighs their hatred of it. This of course, allows the authoritarian governments to continue to rule and oppress without question. More recently, the troop surge in 2007 helped to curb the violence and improve the internal security within Iraq, but the continued presence of U.S. troops is causing underlying resentment. Conflicts between sectarian groups and individual militias have been growing and the troops are trying to crack down on them, but once the U.S. leaves, Iraq’s own military may not be able to curb the violence as easily. The U.S. wants to establish a government in Iraq that cannot use the means of coercion to discipline and keep their citizens in line.

Tripp says that with the fall of Sadam Hussein’s regime, a myriad of groups and factions emerged to take the place of his authoritarian rule. This in turn caused more conflict within Iraq. Not enough time has passed for these groups to fully emerge and develop and when they do, they will cause a lot of instability. The problem with securing political security in Iraq is simply that there is no precedence of democracy historically and those who live and want to rule the state only know that he who has control over institutions, the economy, and the military has power.