

Middle East

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Iraq: Give democracy a real chance

By Akhilesh Upadhyay

NEW YORK - Instead of pushing war as the only option to regime change in Iraq, the United States and the international community should immediately call on Iraqis to form a broad-based transitional government in exile, then demand that President Saddam Hussein step down, suggests a think tank in New York.

Such a move is not without precedent. Starting in 2000, the United Nations brought together thousands of citizens of Somalia in neighboring Djibouti to elect a 245-member parliament and a president, who was later welcomed in Mogadishu by tens of thousands of Somalis.

A similar process for Iraqi would carry legitimacy, unlike the proposed US-led military intervention, argues the World Citizen Foundation. A transitional government would also engage the Iraqi people in a democratic process well before the fall of the Saddam regime, while the dictator's ouster through military intervention would in no way guarantee popular participation, it adds.

Foundation president Troy Davis, who has been furiously lobbying diplomatic communities and world leaders for the "preemptive democracy" plan, acknowledges that war could only be weeks away but believes there is enough time for his the idea to catch on.

"It needs just one country to support the idea publicly," he says, or the mass media to grab hold of the proposal. "If [actor] Sean Penn hears about it, or any celebrity, then that will do it," he adds. Should the idea capture public imagination, it would be very difficult for US President George W Bush to dismiss, adds Davis. "We are more 'Bush-ite' than Bush. He says, 'I want to create democracy in Iraq' but the way he is doing it is not democratic."

The foundation plan would work in three steps. *First*, a constitutional convention open to all Iraqi groups and the world media would be formed in exile, much like the Djibouti peace initiative. *Second*, the newly-created constitutional assembly would form a provisional government of Iraq and "order" Saddam to step down. The international community could then throw its weight behind the new government by giving the provisional government Iraq's seat in all international bodies, publicly siding with this more legitimate authority. And *thirdly*, a free and fair election for a more representative government could be held.

According to Davis, who calls the foundation a "democracy engineer", within a matter of months preemptive democracy could remove what is today Saddam's greatest strength: his perceived legitimacy as the head of a sovereign nation, which also explains the reluctance of much of the world to create the dangerous precedent of a pre-emptive military attack, even against a regime that most countries abhor.

In recent weeks, Davis has tried to sell the idea to diplomats at United Nations headquarters, including those from large European democracies, who favor a democratic regime change that would avoid war. He is disheartened by their reaction. "Diplomats know about this idea but they don't have the courage to say 'Here's an idea. Let's talk about it,'" says Davis. But some experts believe that preemptive democracy is compatible with the fundamental principles of the world community, including the US, and as long as it was carried out openly and transparently would turn public opinion - including that of the Arab world - against Saddam.

Buoyed by support from such world powers as China, Russia and the United States, and armed with a UN Security Council mandate, Djibouti, in 2000, started a grass-roots process to form a Somali government in exile. In a transparent election, thousands of Somali delegates voted for parliament, a move that received immediate support from a number of African and Middle Eastern countries, besides France, Italy and the US.

Taking lessons from that process, the Security Council should immediately pass a resolution to pave the way for a transitional Iraqi government, says John W McDonald a conflict specialist at the Washington-based Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy. "The UN was deeply involved in Djibouti. Time's very short but here's a mechanism that's been successfully tried before."

Davis told IPS that UN assistant secretary general for political affairs, Danilo Turk, acknowledged in a private conversation that that the idea was "worth trying". The official apparently also told him that the world body had no mandate to initiate Iraqis change, but that the UN might get involved at a later date if Iraqis themselves initiated the process. "It is important that the process be as representative as possible," Davis quotes Turk as saying.

The foundation believes that the international community could in a matter of weeks help Iraqis convene a constitutional assembly and produce a democratic constitution and a new government. The fact that drafts for such a constitution already exist, and that the country's constitution of 1925 was never formally repealed would shorten the process, it adds.

"A broad-based transitional administration made up of Iraqis or a government-in-exile would constitute a powerful alternative to the current regime in Iraq," says Necla Tschirgi of the New York-based International Peace Academy. But she believes that the UN is not the right vehicle for the initiative.

What is required, according to Tschirgi, is a global mass movement that, while working to stop the march to war, would pressure the Iraqi regime to step down in order to spare the country from war, she says. "Unfortunately, the clock is ticking very fast and the war machine is steadily moving on."

Davis adds that the plan provides a viable alternative to countries like France and Germany who are desperate to avoid war. "They could thumb their noses at the Bush administration [saying], 'Look, you say you want to bring democracy to Iraq. We are bringing democracy to Iraq!'"

He says that the foundation has invited former world leaders Jimmy Carter, Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel and Mikhail Gorbachev to join the Iraq peace process as independent advisors. Former UN human rights chief Mary Robinson is among others invited on the panel.

(Inter Press Service)

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