MedCrave
Step into the World of Research
Journal of Historical Archaeology & Anthropological Sciences

Research Article
Open Access
CrossMark

From Iraq's Saddam to Saddam's Iraq: The question of legitimacy

Abstract

The idea of legitimacy has occupied a very important place in understanding how despots and authoritarian rulers win the popular support of their people. As a concept, Legitimacy encapsulates notions and beliefs that "bolster willing obedience".[1] The popular public support based on the ability of government to initiate, absorb and sustain change is termed as legitimacy, and various scholars have attempted to explain it in terms of "obligation or voluntary deference to the directives of authorities and rules", precisely because they are perceived as justifiable.[1–6]

Volume 3 Issue 4 - 2018

Divya Malhotra
Jawaharlal Nehru University, India

Correspondence: Divya Malhotra, Jawaharlal Nehru University, India, Email divyaidsa@gmail.com

Received: May 29, 2018 | **Published:** August 29, 2018

Introduction

In the study of authoritarian regimes, it is essential to note that when a new government comes into being, establishing legitimacy and willing obedience among its citizens remains a key concern of the regime. Gibson[7] labels it as the "endorphin of the democratic body politic". Weatherford[8] astutely underlines the conceptual complexities involved in the study of legitimacy and highlights the need to dissect the subject "into component parts" to enable a better understanding. There are two vantage points in the study of legitimacy which can be broadly classified into macro and micro perspectives. Formal system procedures and institutions fall can be classified as macro variables while citizen attitudes and actions constitute the micro level parameters. A study of welfare policies concerning socio-economic, military and political aspects of governance, and citizens' evaluation of governmental authority are also relevant to this discussion. Conceptual mapping of the subject necessitates study of typology of legitimacy, namely, value-based legitimacy and behavioral legitimacy. Levi and Tylor[9] define value-based legitimacy in terms of "trustworthiness of government", based on "favorable assessments of leadership motivations, administrative competence, and government performance", which eventually translates into actual compliance with governmental regulations and laws, labeled as behavioral legitimacy. Having familiarized oneself with the dichotomy and typology, the focal point of enquiry remains; how and to what extent does value-based legitimacy metamorphosis's into behavioral legitimacy within a country's socio-political fabric. Iraq is a valid case in point.

Broadly, this study will map the socio-political landscape of Iraq under Saddam Hussein from the lens of legitimacy. The main objective of the paper is to examine how the authoritarian ruler gained legitimacy as the unelected president of Iraq and how he sustained the legitimate control for almost twenty five years of his political career, punctuated by wars and conflicts. Macro and micro parameters of legitimacy, namely, formal system procedures/institutions and citizen attitudes/perceptions respectively (as discussed above) will be studied in detail to identify the means by Hussein legitimized his rule. Michael Schwartz's framework[10] based on three pillars of legitimacy will be used as the conceptual premise. According to Schwartz, first prerequisite is monopoly over use of force; second condition is economic and infrastructural resource based; and thirdly a strong and sustainable administrative apparatus. These three factors will lead to the fourth (micro) prerequisite for a lawfully recognized leadership: its citizens' belief in its legitimacy. Using the stated framework, the paper will attempt to estimate the degree to which Saddam Hussein gained legitimacy. It has been widely argued that while Saddam's welfare schemes helped him in gaining legitimacy, there was no scope for disagreement or defiance under Saddam Hussein's leadership. Thus one may deduce that while legitimacy was earned using welfare approach, it was sustained by supplementary use of forced allegiance. Unlike peace times, during wars there was a greater reliance on violence to suppress any opposition and thus there was a substitution between socio-economic reforms and coercion in order to ensure that the throne remains unthreatened.

Rise of Saddam Hussein on Iraq's political pedestal

Reports showcase Hussein's childhood riddled with instances of abuse.[11] From a child who would sell watermelons and cigarettes at the road-side to the highest authority of world's oldest civilization, Saddam Hussein wrote the script of Iraq for twenty five years of his leadership. Saddam first joined the Ba'th Party in 1956[12] and quickly rose through the ranks. The coup d-etat by Army Brigadier Abd al-Qaseem in 1958 led to ouster of King Faisal II's monarchy. However his journey in Iraqi politics was short-lived as his anti-Ba'th approach earned him many enemies. Bathists were desperate to take charge of the country, however their fate remained shaky. A failed military coup orchestrated by a team of five Ba'thists including 22-year old Saddam Hussein marked the first attempt to oust Qaseem.[13,14] Ramadan coup of 1963 led by General Ahmed Hassan al-Bakr finally culminated in Qaseem's departure from Iraqi politics, however the ecstasy was short lived and counter-coup once again threw out the Bath Party. Ba'thists struggle for power continued until 1968 Coup which finally put the Baathists at the helm of affairs under Hassan Al-Bakr, the new Iraqi president and chairman of the Revolutionary Council.[14,15]

Saddam Hussein was appointed as the Vice President and head of security services in the new regime. Impressed by Saddam Hussein's work holism defined by his 18-hour work routine and his organizational perfection, President Bakr made Saddam's profile was slowly expanded from the head of security to head of Peasants Department, Kurds relations committee, oil-control committee, Arab relations committee and workers syndicate.[16] Thus, pre-presidency

Saddam had expanded his political sway notably. After resignation of Al-Bakr in 1979 in face of his persistent bad health, Iraq officially came under its vice president, Saddam Hussein who was to hold the throne for next two and a half decades.[17] Though contentious, such potent was his sway over Iraq's socio-political dynamics that his name became synonymous with identity of the nation.

Saddam Hussein and the question of legitimacy

It is vital prerequisite to the rule of law that a government be viewed as legitimate and maintaining legitimate control of a diverse state fraught with internal conflict posed immense challenges for the Ba'ath party.[17,18] Two questions have occupied very important place in the discourse on Iraq under Saddam Hussein; how Hussein gained legitimacy and public acceptance as the unelected president of Iraq and how he sustained his rule. Said K. Aburish, a former Baa'thist member of Saddam Hussein's cabinet in an interview with Frontline magazine in January 2000 reportedly said, Saddam Hussein spent 20 years creating a personality, an image for him. And since the Gulf War, his opponents have done the same -- created a completely different personality, of course. So you have to sift through what Saddam created and what his opponents created to reach the real person. The real person has no ideology whatsoever. That is the most important thing to remember about Saddam Hussein. Saddam Hussein is into real politic. He wanted to take Iraq into the 20th century. But if that meant eliminating 50 percent of the population of Iraq, he was willing to do it. Evidently, his policies of oppressive rule to earn forced allegiance and loyalty were central to his quest for legitimacy, even though his welfare policies were equally important part of his legitimacy calculus.

Saddam's reformist approach to legitimacy

In the debate to establish Saddam's legitimacy, it would be wrong to state that coercion and force were the only tools used by Saddam Hussein to legitimise his rule. In fact, Saddam Hussein's government tried to win legitimacy by initiating a number of progressive social programs aimed at increasing people's satisfaction with their government, as highlighted by Sjoberg[17] in her book. Iraq's oil wealth (the biggest source of state revenue) was used by Saddam to initiate multifarious socio-economic reforms in the 1970s, which were carried forward in 1980s. Industrial modernization, increased access to education, better infrastructure and improvement in health facilities can be labeled as evident signals of Hussein's welfare orientation. Electrification of cities, nationwide distribution of free fridges and television sets, subsidies to soldier's families and farmers, free hospitalization scheme also won him the trust of his people, including those who were earlier opposed to his rule. In words of Iraqi economist Ghanim Hamdoun,[19] "by and large people overlooked their political deprivation and lack of participation; they only saw buildings sprouting here and there". Certain UN reports also underscore that Iraqi women's status improved significantly under Hussein's rule.[20] There was hardly any arena of social life left untouched by Hussein's welfare vision. Thus material progress and well being earned Saddam popularity and acceptance among masses. Within a decade, he raised the literacy rate from 30 per cent to 70 per cent, among the highest in the Arab world and these achievements won Saddam the UNESCO award.[21] however his welfare schemes had an element of imposition based on norms of conformity. For instance; anyone who avoided mandatory adult literacy classes in rural areas faced three years in jail. So, in order to check defiance or any form of resentment, strict punishments were imposed. Moreover, the use of collective punishment at the level of the extended family, tribe or village encouraged collective compliance to norms laid out by Hussein. Besides punishments, Saddam would make fascinating use of media. In one particular instance, he decided that his ministers were too fat and he demanded that they diet; publishing their real weights and their target weights in the news media.[22]

Personality Cult

The creation and promotion of a new Iraqi nationalism, more accurately described as "Saddamism," was the primary reason behind Saddam Hussein's popular cult's existence. Cultural discussions and events focusing on Saddam Hussein and distribution of Pro-Hussein literature in the form of copies of his books were common means of promoting "Saddamism".[23] Saddam Hussein's face was adorned on office buildings, schools, airports and shops, as well as on all denominations of Iraqi currency. In school, pupils learned songs with lyrics like "Saddam, oh Saddam, you carry the nation's dawn in your eyes."[24] Social praises of Saddam became common place and spoke volumes about his eccentric tendencies. By becoming the sole face of Iraqi political landscape and dominating the public spaces and minds of common Iraqis, he eliminated the scope of being replaced by any other leader.[23,25] According to Lieutenant Roches,[26] "This centralization of power, and the exclusion of others from the public sphere, made it impossible for any other figure to be known on the national level". To some Saddam was a hero, to others he was an oppressor.

Power structures and role of security forces in Saddam's legitimacy calculus

In the words of MacFarquhar,[24] "Iraq under Mr. Hussein had a stifled quality". "His opening act, in January 1969, was hanging around seventeen suspected spies for Israel in a downtown Baghdad square". Any signs of anti-Saddamism were met with utmost force. Imprisonment, torture, mutilation and execution were frequent occurrences and Hussein's Iraq had no scope for mercy for traitors. In keeping with a ruler who used violence to achieve and sustain power, Mr. Hussein's most widespread investments were in his military. Bath party members were mostly men of military background, which was both a strength and potential threat. Thus certain analysts like Sassoon (2011) argue that the military was kept weak deliberately as part of a strategy of "coup proofing. Compulsory military service, "Day of Pride" (Yaum al-Nakhwa), national training exercises etc exhibit how Saddam institutionalised his rule using indirect means of coercion. Reports signal that the intelligence agencies were integral to the Ba'th party's security apparatus known as Mukhabarat. According to al-Marashi,[27] "The security apparatus that emerged as a small unit under the guidance of Saddam Hussein during the 1960s emerged as a vast and complex network that has kept him in power by swiftly dealing with threats to his regime". Any threat of opposition - real or perceived - was checked, curbed and crushed with most extreme forms of abuse.

Saddam's security apparatus

The most important instrument of state control in Saddam's regime has been the elaborate security apparatus. The five primary agencies that make up the Iraqi security apparatus are al-Amn al-Khas (Special Security), al-Amn al-'Amm (General Security), al-Istikhbarat (Military Intelligence), al-Mukhabarat (General Intelligence), and al-Amn al-'Askari (Military Security). This complex maze of security organizations ensured the protection of the president and his regime.[28]

As a rule, each agency has an inner security unit that monitors any dissent in that agency. This complex and vast maze of security agencies, with multiple layers of intelligence for monitoring internal and external dissent, signals Hussein's hysteria and paranoia. The desire to control the people was so pronounced, that there was no scope of disagreement or dissent in Saddam's Iraq as he induced fear in the minds of people. Many instances corroborate the argument. The CSIS report (2003) revealed that several attempts to harm or oust Saddam were checked by the Special Security. Saddam's management of the Iran-Iraq War disappointed some army officers who reportedly plotted against him, but could not succeed. In 1990, another coup and assassination attempt by members of the Jubur tribe was checked by the Special Forces. In retaliation to the Kurdish support to Iranians in military raids against Iraqi government positions during Iran-Iraq war, Hussein ordered large scale torture and killings of Kurds in the late 1980s, popularly known as "crimes against humanity and the Anfal genocide".[29] The March 1991 crushing of Shia rebellion in Southern Iraq and 1996 Special Security agents' infiltration into the Kurdish enclave in Northern Iraq are instances of operations to systemically eliminate Iraqi opposition.

Interestingly, the reach and strength of General Intelligence was not limited to the borders of Iraq. In one instance, military officers connected with Iraqi National Accord; an opposition group based in Jordan, were arrested and executed in 1996.[30] An Iraqi Communist Party report (2000) indicated that General Intelligence opened offices in a number of countries, such as Russia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and Jordan to monitor the activities of Iraqi journalists abroad, with the purpose of inducing them to write sympathetic works for the Iraqi regime or silencing them if they refuse. Therefore Saddam's political sustainability relied heavily on various permutations and combinations of fear and force, control and coercion. Moreover there were large scale recruitments from among the clans owning their loyalty to Saddam Hussein".[31] Such clan-based loyalty helped Saddam Hussein initially to strengthen his sway in Iraqi politics, while his security agencies checked dissenting voices.

Wars, economic resources and legitimacy

1970s was an opportune time for Saddam Hussein to establish himself. 1973 Arab Israeli war and ensuing oil embargo had led to rise in global oil prices and thus increased flow of revenues. This gave Saddam the economic power to buy the hearts of Iraqis by investing in populist economic and social programs. But Iran-Iraq war of 1980 and Gulf war of 1990 had a very strong monetary repercussion. The reverberations could be felt domestically, however no one could voice their discontent. Kuwaiti invasion of August 1990 worsened Iraq's economic landscape. Iraq's staggering war debt, pegged around $100 billion, soon had wealthy Arab neighbors demanding repayment.[32] From welfare induced legitimacy in 1970s and 1980s to forceful and coercive allegiance, Saddam Hussein used various combinations of the two to retain his position. One may infer that as long as Saddam had the access to economic resources he had the popular public support, even though repressive measures were imposed to supplement his control. In peace times, reforms and repressive measures were complementary, that is, both would go hand-in-hand. However wars had a negative effect on the coffers, and there was a greater tilt towards use of force to crush any resentment. Thus in war times, force and coercion substituted reforms due to diversion of funds towards defense spending.

Media and legitimacy

There were institutional arrangements to ensure that dissenting voices didn't get an entry into Iraq's media structures. Newspapers were strictly controlled by the Iraqi government and the editorial policies ensured that only pro-Saddam content could be published in the papers. Reporters without Borders; a French organization which monitors press freedom worldwide, labels Saddam Hussein as a predator of press freedom and reports that the Iraqi regime uses every means to control the press and silence dissenting voices.[33] Radio and Television were also under strict state control, and many shows had a clearly pro-Saddam orientation. Internet was also highly censored and Iraqi government was the only service provider. Access was available in several cybercafés in Baghdad, but use was strictly controlled by the security police.[33] In October 2002, telephone dial tones were replaced in many areas with the campaign slogan "Naam, naam, Saddam" (Yes, yes, Saddam), followed by a recorded message: "Saddam is the pride of my country."[34] All possible resources at his disposal, including state and military institutions, literature, press and media were twisted, fabricated and manipulated to serve his personal agenda.

Conclusion

Different scholars and experts, in their description of Saddam Hussein have resorted to different metaphors to describe the persona of Saddam Hussein. Hussein has been popular as "the madman of the middle east". However Jerrold Post[35] very well encapsulates Hussein's personality as "judicious and politically calculative, who was by no means irrational but dangerous to the extreme". His rule over Iraq for over two decades left an indelible mark on the nation's identity and memories of his destructive charisma continue to haunt the Iraqi nation. Welfare mingled with social oppression was his recipe to rule. Despite his repeated repression against his own people, it took a falsely orchestrated and externally maneuvered coup to reduce the man to dust.[36,37]

Acknowledgements

None.

Conflict of interest

Author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

References

1. Levi M, Sacks A, Tyler T. Conceptualizing Legitimacy, Measuring Legitimating Beliefs. *American Behavioral Scientist.* 2009;53(3):354−375.
2. Ewick P, SS Sibley. *The Common Place of Law: Stories from Everyday Life*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; 1998.
3. Hopcroft RL. Maintaining the balance of power: Taxation and democracy in England and France, 1340-1688. *Sociological Perspectives.* 1999;42:69−95.
4. Hurd I. Legitimacy and Authority in International Politics. *International Organisation.* 1999;53(2):379-408.
5. Kelman HC, Hamilton VL. Crimes of obedience: Toward a social psychology of authority and responsibility New Haven. CT: Yale University Press; 1989.
6. Tyler TR. Psychological perspectives on legitimacy and legitimation. *Annual Review of Psychology.* 2006;57:375-400.

7. Gibson JL. *Overcoming apartheid: Can truth reconcile a divided nation*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation; 2004.

8. Weatherford MS. Measuring Political Legitimacy. *The American Political Science Review*. 1992;86(1):149−166.

9. Levi M, Tylor TR. The Reasons for Compliance with Law. Working Paper; 2012.

10. Schwartz M. *War without End: The Iraq War in Context,* Chicago: Haymarket Books; 2008.

11. Aburish S. House of Saddam shows the man and the monster. *The Times*. 2008.

12. Tucker S. *The Encyclopedia of Middle East Wars: The United States in the Persian Gulf*. Afghanistan and Iraq, California: ABC CLIO; 2010.

13. Post JM. Explaining Saddam Hussein: a Psychological Profile. *House Armed Services Committee.* 1990.

14. Karsh E, Inari R. *Saddam Hussein: A Political Biography*. London: Futura Publication; 1991.

15. Morris R. A Tyrant 40 Years in the Making. *New York Times*. 2003.

16. Aburish S. *Secrets of His Life and Leadership: An Interview with Said K. Aburish. PBS Frontline.* 2000.

17. Sjoberg L. *Gender, Justice, and the Wars in Iraq: A Feminist Reformulation of Just War.* Lanham (Maryand, US): Lexington books; 2006.

18. Mines M. Establishing Governmental Legitimacy in Iraq: The Path to Protecting Human Rights. 2013.

19. Hamdoun G. *Under Saddam's rule, Iraq flourished then foundered. Interview to Associated Press.* London: Salah Nasrawi, Ocala Star Banner; 2003.

20. Ferguson M, LJ Marso. *W Stands for Women: How the George W. Bush Presidency Shaped a New Politics of Gender.* USA: Duke University Press; 2007.

21. The Guardian. *A new history of Iraq*. 2003.

22. MacFarquhar N. Saddam Hussein, Defiant Dictator Who Ruled Iraq With Violence and Fear, Dies. *New York Times.* 2006.

23. Edwards A. Iraq under the Ba'ath. *Majalla Magazine.* 2012.

24. MacFarquhar N. Saddam Hussein Had Oppressed Iraq for More Than 30 Years. *New York Times.* 2003.

25. Sassoon J. *Saddam Hussein's Ba'th Party: Inside an Authoritarian Regime*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 2011.

26. Roches DB. Saddam Hussein and the uses of political power. School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London; 1990.

27. Al Marashi I. Iraq's Security and Intelligence Network; A Guide and Analysis. *Rubin Center.* 2002;6(3).

28. Al Marashi I. The Family, Clan and Tribal Dynamics of Saddam's Security and Intelligence Network. *International Journal of Intelligence and Counter Intelligence.* 2003;16(2):202−211.

29. Montgomery B. The Iraqi Secret Police Files: A Documentary Record of the Anfal Genocide. *National Archives Washinton.* 2003;52.

30. Ritter S. Endgame: Solving the Iraq Problem Once and For All. New York: Simon and Schuster; 1999.

31. Blaydes L. Compliance and Resistance in Iraq under Saddam Hussein: Evidence from the Files of the Ba'th Party. *Department of Political Science*. California: Stanford University; 2015.

32. Pasha AK. *Iraq: Sanctions and Wars.* New Delhi: Sterling publishers; 2003.

33. Tabor K. The press in Iraq. *Frontline World.* 2002.

34. Shewchuk B. Saddam or Mr Hussein? *CBS News Online;* 2003.

35. Post JM. **S**addam Hussein of Iraq: A Political Psychology Profile. *International Society of Political Psychology.* 1991.

36. Ibrahim al-Marashi. Iraqi Intelligence Operations and Objectives in Turkey. *Alternatives: Turkish Journal of International Relations.* 2000;2(1):78−94.

37. NBC. *Before bringing War, Saddam brought stability.* 2005.

Citation: Malhotra D. From Iraq's Saddam to Saddam's Iraq: The question of legitimacy. *J His Arch & Anthropol Sci* . 2018;3(4):617–620.
DOI: 10.15406/jhaas.2018.03.00140