

Saddam Hussein turns the tables at US-run show trial

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The farcical trial of Saddam Hussein staged by the Bush administration and its Iraqi puppets was thrown into chaos when the deposed Iraqi president took the witness stand Wednesday.

He used his intervention not to answer the charges laid against him in the court—whose legitimacy he has rejected from the beginning—but to speak directly to the Iraqi people, urging an end to sectarian bloodshed and a continuation of armed resistance to the US occupation of their country.

“My conscience tells me that the great people of Iraq have nothing to do with these strange and horrid acts, the bombing of the shrine of Imam Ali al-Hadi and Hassan al-Askari ... which led to the burning of mosques in Baghdad, which are the houses of God, and the burning of other mosques in other cities of Iraq,” Hussein said.

He continued his address, brushing aside attempts by the tribunal’s chief judge, Raouf Abdel-Rahman to silence him:

“The bloodshed that they (the US occupation authorities) have caused to the Iraqi people only made them more intent and strong to evict the foreigners from their land and liberate their country ... Let the people resist the invaders and their supporters rather than kill each other ... Oh Iraqis, men and women... those who blew up the shrine are shameful criminals.”

By this time, Abdel-Rahman was shouting hysterically. “No more political speeches. We are a criminal court, a judicial court, we don’t have anything to do with political issues or anything like this. Testify,” he demanded.

Hussein replied, “Political issues are what brought you and me here,” and continued with his prepared remarks, which faded in and out as the agitated judge repeatedly cut off his microphone. He denounced the US government as “criminals who came under the pretext of weapons of mass destruction and the pretext of democracy.”

Again the judge cut him off, demanding: “You are a defendant in a major criminal case, concerning the killing of innocents. You have to respond to this charge.”

In a sharp rejoinder, Hussein asked, “What about those who are dying in Baghdad? Are they not innocents? Are

they not Iraqis? ... Just yesterday, 80 bodies of Iraqis were discovered in Baghdad. Aren’t they innocent?”

It was at this point that the judge ordered sound and video cut off entirely, blackening the screens of televisions tuned to the trial all over Iraq. “The court has decided to turn this into a secret and closed session,” he announced, ordering reporters to leave the chamber inside Baghdad’s heavily fortified, US-controlled “Green Zone.”

The trial had to be closed because the points made by Hussein are unassailable. The proceedings unquestionably represent a political show trial, staged by Washington in an effort to legitimize its invasion and occupation of Iraq. The court is the creation of an illegal act of aggression and its very existence constitutes a serious violation of international law, which explicitly bars occupying powers from imposing their own judicial bodies in the territories they occupy.

The court is itself merely a façade for US military control over Iraq and the continuing abrogation of the sovereignty of its people. Behind the hand-picked judges, there is a battalion of US officials and lawyers who have orchestrated the entire affair. Even the television feed that the judge ordered shut down was set up by the US cable broadcasting company, Court TV, under a contract worked out by Washington.

The more fundamental question posed by Hussein’s intervention, of course is: what gives Washington the right to judge anyone for the crime of killing innocent Iraqis?

There is no doubt that Saddam Hussein, whose Baathist regime defended the interests of the Iraqi ruling elite, carried out grave crimes against the Iraqi people. But the fact remains that at the time they were committed, his actions enjoyed the backing of Washington itself, which saw Iraq as a bulwark against Iran and far preferred Hussein over a revolutionary uprising of the oppressed Iraqi masses.

Moreover, when it comes to the deaths of innocent Iraqis, those who set the policies of the US government have far eclipsed Saddam Hussein. By conservative estimates, over 100,000 Iraqis have died since the US invasion three years ago—more probable assessments put the figure at closer to a

half a million.

Since the first US war against Iraq 15 years ago, the death toll from US military action and the effects of punishing economic sanctions imposed at Washington's demand numbers well into the millions. The lives of millions more have been turned into a living hell by the US military occupation.

Under these conditions, for those who carried out these policies to try the former Iraqi president on charges that he orchestrated the execution of 148 people in the wake of an assassination attempt is nothing short of obscene.

Moreover, the immediate context of the ongoing trial, as Hussein referred to, is that of an unfolding bloodbath in the streets of Baghdad and in cities and towns throughout the country. Every day sees scores if not hundreds more killed. Thousands of bodies have filled the Baghdad morgue, many of them with their hands bound and showing signs of torture and summary execution, carried out by Iraqi police-military death squads, trained and financed by the US. Other lives are claimed daily by suicide bombings and mounting sectarian violence that has brought the country to the brink of civil war. The pretense that Iraq today is a country of laws is patently absurd.

Having destroyed what remained of Iraq's shattered social infrastructure in a criminal scheme to assert its own domination over the country and its strategic oil reserves, Washington bears full responsibility for all of this carnage.

Meanwhile, the US military's own war against the Iraqi people continues unabated, as witnessed Thursday in what the Pentagon boasted was the largest air assault since the invasion three years ago. Some 1,500 airborne troops were helicoptered into several villages outside the city of Samarra. While the operation has been carried out under intense secrecy, witnesses in the city said that large explosions could be heard in the distance. Both Washington and the Iraqi regime have compared the operation to the bloody US siege of Fallujah last year.

An indication of the grim human toll exacted by such operations came Wednesday, when US forces called in tank fire and air strikes against a house near the town of Ishaqi, about 55 miles north of Baghdad. A Pentagon spokesman said that the house was believed to be harboring a "foreign fighter facilitator." According to local police, 13 people were killed in the attack, including five children between the ages of six months and 11 years, and four women.

"The killed family was not part of the resistance; they were women and children," Ahmed Khalaf, the brother of one of the victims told the Associated Press. "The Americans have promised us a better life, but we get only death."

Meanwhile, a report in the Knight-Ridder newspapers in

the US, citing Pentagon data, concluded that "daily bombing runs and jet-missile launches have increased by more than 50 percent in the past five months, compared with the same period last year"—a conclusion that was confirmed by US Air Force officials. It added that, while most of the air strikes last year were carried out in the siege of Fallujah, this year has seen such bombardments in 18 Iraqi cities.

Bombs and missiles rained down on Iraqi towns and cities on at least 76 days between October 2005 and last month, according to the report. How many innocent victims have been claimed by this brutal and intense air war against a largely defenseless civilian population is unknown.

Saddam Hussein's intervention in the "Green Zone" courtroom provoked anger and discomfort within the US media, reflecting the reaction within the American ruling establishment itself. In its news account, the *New York Times* described the speech as an "incendiary political diatribe."

The displeasure voiced by the *Times* editorial Thursday was even more explicit: "The trial of Saddam Hussein should be a showcase for a better Iraq. It should clearly demonstrate that decades of secret trials and summary verdicts are giving way to a new era of transparency and the rule of law. It should be showing these things, but thus far it has fallen disappointingly short."

It described the judge's decision to shut down television broadcast, throw reporters out and go into secret session as a "self-inflicted black eye."

Instead, the newspaper declared, "Judge Abdel-Rahman should simply have gavelled him down when he refused to address the charges, and left the cameras rolling." Saddam Hussein, the editorial indicated, should be "ordered to sit down and keep his mouth shut."

Such is the fine distinction between a democratic "showcase" and an ugly imperialist show trial.

In the end, however, there is good reason to want Hussein—or anyone else who invokes the criminality of those judging him—shut up. The obvious issue raised by such charges, and implicitly by the US-orchestrated trial itself, is when will those in Washington, who have carried out a war of aggression that has cost countless thousands of Iraqi lives, be held criminally accountable?



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