

The execution of Saddam Hussein

The Editorial Board
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The execution of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein serves not justice, but the political purposes of the Bush administration and its Iraqi stooges. The manner in which the execution was carried out—hurriedly, secretly, in the dark of night, in a mockery of any semblance of legal process—only underscores the lawless and reactionary character of the entire American enterprise in Iraq.

There were conflicting statements throughout Friday about how and under what circumstances the death sentence against Hussein, confirmed by an Iraqi government tribunal December 26, would be carried out. There were continual communications back and forth between the government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, which nominally controlled the judicial proceedings, and the American military authorities who had physical control of the prisoner and delivered him to the execution site in the US-controlled Green Zone.

The decision to send Hussein to the gallows was not a judicial but a political one. It was signaled by al-Maliki himself after the death sentence was pronounced by a special tribunal on November 5, when the Iraqi prime minister declared that Hussein would be executed before the New Year. In the rush to impose the penalty on that timeline, Iraqi officials ignored both elementary principles of judicial fairness and even their own constitution, which requires confirmation of a death sentence by the current Iraqi president, Jalal Talabani.

As Richard Dicker, international justice director of Human Rights Watch, explained in a column Friday in the *Guardian*, the legal procedure was a travesty.

“The trial judgment,” he wrote, “was not finished when the verdict and sentence were announced on November 5. The record only became available to defense lawyers on November 22. According to the tribunal’s statute, the defense attorneys had to file their appeals on December 5, which gave them less than two weeks to respond to the 300-page trial decision. The appeals chamber never held a hearing to consider the legal arguments presented as allowed by Iraqi law. It defies belief that the appeals chamber could fairly review a 300-page decision together with written submissions by the defense and consider all the relevant

issues in less than three weeks.”

Rather than a tribunal modeled on Nuremberg, where the surviving Nazi leaders received far more extensive due process rights than were accorded Hussein, the proceedings in Baghdad resembled a Stalinist or Nazi show trial, with a puppet judge, a predetermined verdict and a sentence carried out in the dead of night.

The political motives

The most fundamental political motive of the Bush administration is its desire to kill a major opponent, openly, before the eyes of the world, simply to demonstrate its ability and will to do so. In the view of the White House, Saddam is an object lesson to any future opponent of American imperialism: defy the will of Washington, and his bloody fate could be yours.

The execution also provides the Bush administration with an event it can claim as proof of US “success” in Iraq, a diversion from the grisly daily toll of Iraqi and American deaths. The media coverage of the execution has largely overshadowed reports on the death toll among US soldiers, which hit 100 in December and will likely top the 3,000 mark for the war as a whole before the month is out.

The state killing is intended to give at least a short-term political boost to the beleaguered regime of al-Maliki, which is increasingly unpopular and unstable. The Bush administration has been pressing al-Maliki to break with the radical Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, one of his principal political allies, and endorse a US-led military crackdown on the Mahdi Army, the Shiite militia loyal to al-Sadr.

Executing Hussein provides a means for Maliki to burnish his credentials with the Shiite majority, who suffered most from Hussein’s rule, while going ahead with plans for intensified violence against the predominantly working class eastern suburbs of Baghdad (Sadr City), a center of Shiite opposition to the US occupation.

Another important political consideration is that the

execution of Hussein brings the legal proceedings against the former Iraqi leader to an end before any detailed examination of those crimes in which successive US governments played a major role. The case of the execution of 148 Shiite men at Dujail in 1982 was selected to be tried first because the victims were linked to Dawa, the party of Maliki and the preceding US-backed prime minister, Ibrahim Jafari, and because there was no direct US involvement.

This was not the case for most of the other, far bloodier, episodes in the career of Saddam Hussein. The second case, the so-called Anfal campaign of mass killing of Kurds in 1987-88, towards the end of the Iran-Iraq war, was scheduled to resume January 8. Any serious investigation of those atrocities, culminating in the gassing of Kurds at Halabja, would shed light on the role of successive US administrations.

Hussein launched the war on Iran in September 1980 with the tacit backing of the Carter administration, which was then locked in a confrontation with Iran over the student seizure of the US embassy in Tehran and the taking of US officials as hostages. The Reagan administration subsequently provided significant aid to Hussein throughout the eight years of war, supplying tactical military intelligence used to target Iranian forces for chemical weapons attacks, and backing arms sales to Iraq by European allies of the United States such as Britain, France and Germany. On two occasions, in 1983 and 1984, Donald Rumsfeld was sent to Iraq as a special US envoy to reassure Hussein that despite occasional noises about human rights violations, the US would maintain its allegiance to Baghdad in the war.

The other major case against Hussein, over the bloody suppression of revolts by Kurds and Shiites in 1991, threatened to be even more problematic for the Bush administration, since Bush's own father, the first president Bush, first encouraged the uprisings at the end of the Persian Gulf War, then came to the cold-blooded decision that the continuance of Hussein's dictatorship was preferable to a collapse of the Iraqi state, which might benefit Iran, the principal concern of US war planners.

Opposition to Saddam Hussein's show trial and condemnation of his execution in no way imply political support for the former ruler or his policies. Hussein was a typical representative of the national bourgeoisie in a backward and oppressed country—occasionally coming into conflict with imperialism, but implacably committed to the defense of the privileges and property of the Iraqi bourgeoisie against the Iraqi working class.

Hussein's first major act of mass repression came at the culmination of his rise to power in the late 1970s, when the

Baath Party massacred the leadership of the Iraqi Communist Party and suppressed the large and militant working class movement centered in Baghdad and the oil fields. The present disintegration of Iraq along religious/sectarian lines is one of the long-term consequences of this savage repression of the working class, applauded at the time by the United States.

The Iraqi leader was not, however, tried and sentenced under the auspices of a working class tribunal. He was the subject of a kangaroo court established by an occupation regime after the invasion and conquest of Iraq by the United States. In other words, his crimes were judged and the penalty imposed by those guilty of even greater crimes than his own.

An editorial Friday in the *Washington Post* perfectly captures the hypocrisy with which the Bush administration, the congressional Democrats and Republicans, and the American media approached the case against Saddam Hussein. The *Post* sententiously declared its general opposition to the death penalty, before declaring that if it was appropriate for anyone it should be applied to "Saddam Hussein—a man who, with the possible exception of Kim Jong Il, has more blood on his hands than anyone else alive."

We beg to differ. George W. Bush has already caused the deaths of more Iraqis than Saddam Hussein—some 655,000 since the US invasion in March 2003, according to a study by the Johns Hopkins school of public health—and his term in office still has two years to run. This is to say nothing of the still living US accomplices of Hussein in the Iran-Iraq War, and the successive US presidents—Bush's father, Clinton, Bush himself—who backed the US-led embargo on Iraq that caused the death of an estimated 1.5 million Iraqis from 1991 to 2003.

True justice for the tortured and oppressed people of Iraq, as well as the American, British and other victims of the US-led war, will come only when those responsible for the invasion and occupation—Bush, Cheney and their acolytes—face their own trials for waging an illegal war of aggression.



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