

Saddam Hussein execution: A sectarian lynching

Patrick Martin
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A video of the final minutes of Saddam Hussein, released to the Arab media late Saturday and widely broadcast around the world, demonstrates that the execution of the former Iraqi president was an act of sectarian vengeance by the Shiite Muslim groups placed in power by the US invasion of the country.

The video, apparently made using the cell phone of one of the guards or official witnesses in the death chamber, records the last fragments of conversation between Hussein and his hooded executioners, who were apparently loyal to the Shiite radical clergyman Moqtada al-Sadr, head of the most powerful militia force in Iraq, the Mahdi Army.

Several of the executioners and witnesses began chanting the name of the Shiite leader, “Moqtada, Moqtada, Moqtada,” as the noose was slipped around Hussein’s neck. He responded with surprise, and then a scornful retort, “Moqtada? Is this how real men behave?”

Other onlookers chanted the name of Moqtada al-Sadr’s father—a co-founder of the Dawa Party, one of the backers of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki—and one shouted, “Go to hell,” to which Hussein responded that those responsible for his execution had erected a “gallows of shame.”

Even the judge who had ratified the death sentence, Munir Haddad, reproached the sectarian outburst by the Shiite guards, telling them, “Please no! The man is about to die.” The video then concludes with grisly footage of the trapdoor opening and Hussein plunging to his death, his neck broken and his body swinging.

Beyond the events recorded on the video, the very fact that Mahdi Army loyalists were among the guards in the death chamber and could record the proceedings without hindrance has enormous political significance. It demonstrates the extent to which the US-backed Iraqi

regime has become the instrument of factions in the sectarian conflict raging throughout much of Iraq.

For nearly a year, Sunni Muslims, Christians, secular Iraqis and others targeted by Shiite death squads have been hunted down, tortured and murdered. Most of these atrocities have begun with the seizure of the victims by armed members of the Iraqi police and military—the very forces the Bush administration claims it has been training to fight “terrorism.”

By Monday, with the digital recording circulating throughout Iraq and the entire Arab and Muslim world, it was clear that for the Maliki government and the US occupation regime the execution had become a political debacle. Thousands of Sunnis marched in protest demonstrations in Tikrit, Mosul and cities and towns throughout Anbar province. In Samarra, where the bombing of the Shiite Golden Mosque last February touched off the sectarian warfare, Sunnis marched through the shattered structure with a coffin representing Saddam Hussein’s.

The Maliki government, in a belated effort to distance itself from the images of Shiite triumphalism, ordered an investigation into how the video was shot in the death chamber and how it was distributed. But at least one eyewitness, one of the prosecutors in Hussein’s trial, said that the cell phone was brought in by a top government official, whom he would not name, not by a guard, and that the recording of the final altercation between the guards and Hussein was done quite openly.

Detailed reports in the US media conceded that the execution had backfired on the Bush administration. An account published in the *New York Times* Monday observed that it would be difficult for the White House to disassociate itself from the rushed execution of the former president, since the hanging took place at a US-controlled military facility in Baghdad, and Hussein

remained in US custody until he was handed over to the executioners.

The article, co-authored by John Burns, the *Times* bureau chief in Baghdad and one of the most avid apologists for the war, noted that “Iraq’s new Shiite rulers . . . seemed bent on turning the execution and its aftermath into a new nightmare for the Sunni minority privileged under Mr. Hussein.”

The *Times* reported that US officials in Iraq were “privately incensed at the dead-of-night rush to the gallows,” and had repeatedly urged the Maliki government to delay the execution by a few weeks in order to conform to provisions in the Iraqi constitution and legal code, requiring approval of the hanging by the three-member Iraqi presidency, and barring executions during the celebration of Id al-Adha, a Muslim religious holiday.

The timing was perhaps the most brazenly sectarian aspect of the execution, since Saturday is the first day of Id al-Adha, according to the Sunni practice, while the holiday begins on Sunday for Shiites. One official effectively declared the Shiite observance to be the law of the land, and, as the *Times* revealed, the Shiite clergy were given final decision-making power, not the elected government.

The *Times* reported that the Maliki government had debated objections from US officials and Sunni politicians over conducting the execution on Saturday, then decided to refer the decision to the marjaiyah, the council of ayatollahs in the Shiite holy city of Najaf, which is the highest body of the Shiite clergy. According to the *Times*, “The ayatollahs approved. Mr. Maliki, at a few minutes before midnight on Friday, then signed a letter to the justice minister, ‘to carry out the hanging until death.’”

The *Times* concluded with the remarkable admission, “None of the Iraqi officials were able to explain why Mr. Maliki had been unwilling to allow the execution to wait. Nor would any explain why those who conducted it had allowed it to deteriorate into a sectarian free-for-all that had the effect, on the video recordings, of making Mr. Hussein, a mass murderer, appear dignified and restrained, and his executioners, representing Shiites who were his principal victims, seem like bullying street thugs.”

A second article in Monday’s *Times* reinforced this picture by reporting the reaction among Sunni Arabs in

Baghdad: “the grainy recording of the execution’s cruel theater summed up what has become increasingly clear on the streets of the capital: that the Shiite-led government that assumed power in the American effort here is running the state under an undisguised sectarian banner.”

The Associated Press, in a report on the Sunni response to the execution, noted that the hanging was followed by a US military raid on the Baghdad offices of a prominent Sunni politician, in which six Iraqis were killed, and warned, “The current Sunni protests, which appear to be building, could signal a spreading militancy.”

Rizgar Mohammed Amin, the Kurdish judge who presided over the first trial of Saddam Hussein until he was forced to resign by official pressure from the ruling Shiite bloc, condemned the timing and manner of the execution. The hanging violated a clear legal prohibition (enacted under Hussein’s rule and still in force) stating that “no verdict should be implemented during the official holidays or religious festivals,” Amin told Associated Press.

The cell phone video of the execution of Hussein demonstrates the reality of the “democracy” which the US invasion has brought to Iraq. The invasion has destroyed the framework of the Iraqi state, exacerbated social tensions, and provoked an explosion of sectarian violence at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. The continuing US occupation—in which American and British troops continue to kill thousands of Iraqis even as murder squads operate on both sides of the Sunni/Shiite divide—has brought about not the flowering of “freedom,” but the virtual dissolution of Iraqi society.



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