

Iraqi government seeks criminal prosecution of anti-Bush protestor

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Muntadhar al-Zaidi, the 29-year-old journalist who, in an act of protest, hurled his shoes at George Bush during a press conference on Sunday, was hauled before an investigating judge of the Central Criminal Court in Baghdad yesterday.

Zaidi was remanded in custody until the judge determines whether a prosecution should proceed. An Iraqi interior ministry spokesman, Abdel Karim Khalaf, told Reporters Without Borders that Zaidi may face prosecution under three articles of the country's criminal code that make it an offence to "insult a foreign head of state". He could be prosecuted also for insulting Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who was standing beside Bush when the incident took place.

As a result, the journalist may face up to seven years' imprisonment. If, however, he is charged with the more serious offence of attempting to "assault" Bush, the potential prison term is 15 years.

Zaidi may appear before the court again today. If he is presented in public, it will enable independent observers to confirm allegations that he was severely beaten by US secret service agents and Iraqi interior ministry operatives after his protest.

His brother, Maitham al-Zaidi, told Reuters on Tuesday: "All that we know is we were contacted yesterday by a person—we know him—and he told us that Muntadhar was taken on Sunday to Ibn-Sina hospital. He was wounded in the head because he was hit by a rifle butt and one of his arms was broken."

has a broken arm, cracked ribs, some injuries under his eye and his leg is also hurting him."

Iraqi journalists present at the press conference reported that security personnel had assaulted Zaidi until "he was crying like a woman" and that a trail of blood could be seen leading into the room where they had dragged him.

Zaidi's protest has been lauded across Iraq, the Middle East and the world as a symbolic demonstration of the true feelings of hundreds of millions of people toward the Bush administration and its criminal invasion and occupation of Iraq.

In Arab culture, to throw ones' shoes at someone is a sign of contempt and disgust which words alone cannot express. As Zaidi hurled his footwear one after another at the US president, he yelled: "This is a goodbye kiss from the Iraqi people, you dog. This is from the widows, the orphans, and those who were killed in Iraq."

Since the illegal invasion in March 2003, well over one million people have lost their lives, four million have been forced from their homes and every aspect of economic and social infrastructure has been devastated. Like hundreds of thousands of other Iraqis, Zaidi had endured the humiliation, terror and trauma of being detained by US troops. As a journalist in the working class district of Sadr City reporting on a US offensive earlier this year, he witnessed the mass killings of both resistance fighters and civilians caught up in the crossfire.

Another brother, Dargham al-Zaidi, said: "Muntadhar

The plight of the population is grim. The reality for

most people this winter is a day-to-day struggle to acquire sufficient food and to stay warm. Surveys have found that close to 70 percent of families survive on less than 250,000 dinars (\$210) per month. Nearly a quarter of children under five-years-old—that is, born under US occupation—have suffered stunted growth due to malnutrition.

Claims that the invasion has established democracy carry little weight among Iraqis. The Bush administration has promoted sectarian, ethnic and tribal cliques whose only perspective is to use state power to enrich themselves. A Shiite fundamentalist apparatus controls the south as well as dominating Maliki's federal government. Kurdish nationalists have established an autonomous region in the north, while Sunni tribal chieftains are establishing virtual fiefdoms in the country's west and other Sunni-populated areas. In their spheres of influence, each of the factions is accused of systemic corruption, intimidation and repression.

The unbridgeable chasm between the pro-occupation Iraqi political elite and the mass of ordinary Iraqis is reflected in their reaction to Zaidi's protest.

While Iraqis hailed the journalist, Maliki's cabinet issued a statement that denounced throwing shoes at Bush—the man who authorised the destruction of much of Iraq—as a "barbaric and ignominious act". The interior ministry moved rapidly to bring the case into the courts.

Tariq Harb, a high-profile Iraqi lawyer who pushed for the death penalty against Saddam Hussein for crimes against humanity, declared that the insult of George Bush was "just too humiliating and unbelievable" and called for Zaidi's prosecution.

Kurdish legislator Abdullah al-Alayawi denounced the protest as "irresponsible conduct" and an "affront" to the Iraqi people. The Kurdistan Press Syndicate, a media association that has said nothing while press freedoms were curtailed in northern Iraq by the ruling nationalist parties, issued a statement denouncing "the uncivilised assault".

The head of the Sunni tribal Awakening Council in the western province of Anbar, Ahmad Abu Risha, joined the condemnations. He and other tribal leaders have been paid huge sums of money and placed in de-facto control of Anbar for recruiting militias that assisted US forces during the "surge" that began last year. Risha declared that "the American president is the guest of all Iraqis" and had to be treated with respect.

The political venom directed against Zaidi by these American puppets for his act of defiance is an indication of just how fragile their rule remains. His two shoes punctured the surreal and sycophantic praise that was being heaped on Bush by the representatives of the small minority of Iraqis who have benefited since 2003.

Just hours before the incident, Kurdish nationalist leader and Iraqi president, Jalal Talibani, had welcomed the US president on his last visit to Iraq as a man "who helped us liberate our country and to reach this day in which we have democracy, human rights and prosperity gradually in our country." Maliki lauded him as someone who "had stood by Iraq and the Iraqi people for a very long time".

Zaidi's protest served as a reminder that the occupation has brought nothing but death, destruction and misery, and engendered the hatred of the vast majority of the Iraqi population. His subsequent treatment underscores the anti-democratic methods on which the Bush administration and its client regime continue to rely in order to maintain their neo-colonial rule.



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