

Iraqi journalist jailed for throwing shoes at Bush

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Muntadar al-Zaidi, the 29-year-old Iraqi journalist who threw his shoes at former US President George Bush during a Baghdad press conference in December, was sentenced to three years imprisonment on Thursday.

The verdict is an outrage, though thoroughly predictable from a court in what is nothing more than a US client state. Zaidi's actions were not a crime. They were a reflection of the anger and contempt felt by millions of Iraqis and tens of millions of people around the world toward a true criminal—Bush.

George Bush headed the US administration that fabricated lies that Iraq possessed "weapons of mass destruction" and was working with Al Qaeda. He ordered an illegal invasion for the sole purpose of imposing neo-colonial control over Iraq's energy resources and territory. For five-and-a-half years, he presided over a brutal occupation that resulted in the deaths of over one million Iraqis and the destruction of the country's economic and social fabric.

Zaidi's lawyers made appeals to the presiding judge to weigh the journalist's protest against the horror unleashed on Iraq by the US invasion. The head of his legal team, Dhia Saadi, stated: "There is an honourable motive behind what he [Zaidi] has done. This is a shoe thrown toward the president of the occupying state and not the tonnes of rockets and bombs that the Americans hit the Iraqis with."

When Bush appeared at his final press conference in Iraq, Muntadar al-Zaidi was aware that the American president was getting away his crimes. During his trial,

Zaidi testified that he was provoked into throwing the shoes by Bush's words and demeanor. Bush spoke of "progress" in Iraq, referred to an enjoyable dinner he planned to have with Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and then gave one of his trademark smirking grins.

Zaidi told the court last month that when he saw Bush's smirk, he was overcome with anger:

"While he was talking I was looking at all his 'achievements' in my mind. More than a million killed, the destruction and humiliation of mosques, violations against Iraqi women, attacking Iraqis every day and every hour.

"A whole people are saddened because of his policy, and he was talking with a smile on his face—and he was joking with the prime minister and saying he was going to have dinner with him after the press conference.

"Believe me, I didn't see anything around me except Bush. I was blind to anything else. I felt the blood of the innocent people bleeding from beneath his feet and he was smiling in that way.

"And then he was going to have a dinner, after he destroyed one million martyrs, after he destroyed the country. So I reacted to this feeling by throwing my shoes. I couldn't stop the reaction inside me. It was spontaneous." (Translated quote published in the British *Guardian*, March 12, 2009.)

Zaidi pleaded not guilty to the charge of "assaulting a foreign head of state," saying his act of protest was a "natural response to the occupation". As he threw his

shoes, he shouted: "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."

It is an indictment of the US and international legal system that the harshest penalty Bush has had to face is Zaidi's flying shoes. No government, and certainly no one in the Obama White House or the Democratic Party, has called for the prosecution of Bush and other US officials. His partners in crime—the British government headed by Tony Blair and the Australian government led by John Howard—have also escaped being brought to account. They have literally been allowed to get away with mass murder.

The sentence handed down against Muntadar al-Zaidi provoked anger among his family and supporters who were present in the court.

As he was taken away to prison, shouts of "Hero" and "Down with Bush" spontaneously erupted. Others shouted "Down with the American court". Bitter condemnations were made of the Iraqi government and Prime Minister Maliki. One of Zaidi's sisters told journalists: "Maliki is ready to give his wife to Bush just to keep him happy."

Zaidi's family has raised concerns that the young man will suffer mistreatment and possibly even death in prison. His actions have transformed him into a symbol of Iraqi and broader Arab opposition to US imperialism and its puppet government in Baghdad.

The pro-US Iraqi state has gone so far as to claim that police tests destroyed the pair of shoes he threw at Bush. The fear is that if the shoes were returned to Zaidi or his family, they would become an icon for rallying anti-US demonstrations in Iraq.

The 20-man legal team representing Muntadar al-Zaidi has announced that it will be appealing the verdict. Small protests against the sentence have taken place in Iraq and other parts of the Middle East. Students in Jordan rallied outside the US embassy.

Zaidi's sentence was condemned during Friday prayers at many mosques in Iraq. In Baghdad's densely

populated, predominantly Shiite working class district of Sadr City, the Associated Press reported that cleric Sheik Suhail al-Iqabi told his congregation that it was "a verdict against the Iraqi people who refuse the American occupation". In the Shiite centre of Kufa, Sheik Abdul-Hadi al-Mohammadawi stated: "We just wonder on what law the judge has based his sentence. Was this verdict taken to satisfy their masters? Why do you not try the Americans who are killing the Iraqi people in cold blood?"



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