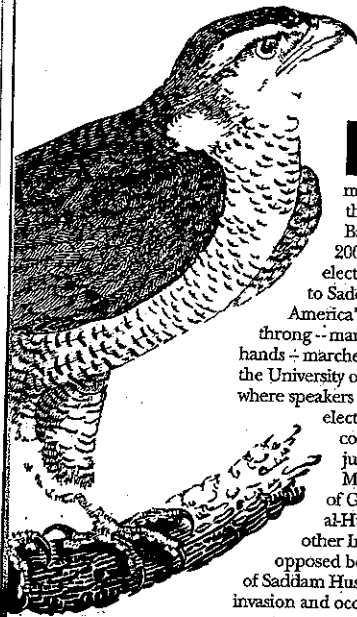


# How the

Western intervention keeps  
slamming the door on peace in Iraq.

Stephen Zunes reports.

# HAWK



**I**n a country wracked with violence, more than 100,000 Iraqis marched peacefully through the streets of Baghdad on 19 January 2004 demanding direct elections. Shouting 'No to Saddam!' and 'No to America', the nonviolent throng -- many of them linking hands -- marched for three miles to the University of al-Mustansariyah where speakers called for direct elections and a constitution based on justice and equality. Many carried portraits of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Hussein al-Sistani and other Iraqi leaders who opposed both the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and the US-led invasion and occupation of their country.

Nonviolent actions have reined in despots and ousted dictators around the globe. But could Iraqis -- left to their own devices -- have toppled Saddam Hussein?

Quite possibly. Indonesia's Suharto, who ruled the world's largest Muslim nation for more than 33 years, had even more blood on his hands than Saddam, yet he was forced from power in a largely nonviolent uprising in 1998.

class and industrial working class. However, in Iraq, thanks to the devastation of the 1991 Gulf War, and the debilitating sanctions that followed, the once-burgeoning middle class and the skilled working class were reduced to extreme poverty or forced to emigrate. In their place emerged a new class of black marketeers who had a strong stake in preserving the *status quo*. The sanctions not only had serious humanitarian consequences -- resulting in the deaths of hundreds of thousands of Iraqis from malnutrition and preventable diseases -- but actually strengthened Saddam Hussein's grip on power. By forcing the Iraqi people to become dependent on the regime for food, medicine and other necessities, the Iraqi people became even less likely to challenge it.

Since Saddam was ousted, continuing Western interference -- both politically and economically -- has created an environment in which nonviolent options have become increasingly difficult. In virtually all cases where a dictatorship was overthrown from within through nonviolence, elections came quickly and popular participation was widespread. By contrast, the Bush Administration strongly opposed holding direct elections during most of the first

By then the security situation had deteriorated badly and the important Sunni minority was largely unable or unwilling to participate. In most Sunni-dominated parts of the country it was unsafe to go to the polls due to threats by insurgents. In addition, the major Sunni parties -- angered at the enormous numbers of civilians killed in US counter-insurgency operations -- called for a boycott. The result is an elected government that is not recognized by a key sector of the population -- a recipe for continued conflict in Iraq.

## Nonviolence confronts the destruction

While it is true that transitions from autocratic to democratic governance are not always easy, none of the countries where regimes have been ousted by nonviolent movements have suffered like Iraq. Since American and British forces occupied the country, tens of thousands of Iraqis -- mostly civilians -- have been killed. Malnutrition among children has doubled and childhood mortality has tripled. More than a million refugees have fled the country to avoid the car bombs, assassinations, kidnappings, martial law, deadly roadblocks and air strikes from American forces. Lines for fuel can be days long. In short, a lot more people have suffered in the two-and-a-half years since the US invasion than in the two-and-a-half years prior to it.

And there is no end in sight to the violence. By torturing prisoners, using heavy weaponry against crowded urban neighbourhoods and shooting innocents at checkpoints, the US is creating insurgents faster than its Army can kill them.

Yet despite enormous odds some Iraqis are continuing to resist the occupation through nonviolence. Last May the city of Ramadi -- with a population of 400,000 -- was shut down in a general strike to protest the US siege of the city, assaults on civilian neighbourhoods and the random arrests of thousands of young men by American occupation forces. Adherence to the call for massive

## Will the people of the North allow the people of the South to succeed through nonviolence?

Largely nonviolent insurrections also toppled tyrannical leaders of other Muslim states -- Sudan's Jaafar Nimeiry in 1985, Bangladesh's Hussain Muhammad Ershad in 1990 and Mali's Moussa Traoré in 1991. Islam has traditionally emphasized a kind of social contract between the ruler and his subjects that gives people the right -- even the obligation -- to refuse to co-operate with authorities seen as unjust.

Ironically, in Iraq it has been the US, Britain and other Western nations that may have made the emergence of such nonviolent movements impossible. Most of the world's successful nonviolent pro-democracy movements have centered in the urban middle

year of the US occupation. Initially the US supported compliant pro-American exile, Ahmed Chalabi, as leader of Iraq. When that became unacceptable, US officials tried to keep their viceroy, Paul Bremer, in power indefinitely. Neither the Iraqis nor the international community would tolerate that option. So the Bush Administration pushed for a caucus system where appointees of American appointees would choose the new government and write a constitution. That in turn sparked those January 2004 protests demanding a popular vote. Only then did President Bush reluctantly agree to allow direct elections.

Those finally took place in January 2005, nearly a year later

nonviolent protest was near total. The streets were deserted, shops and other businesses were shuttered, the bazaars were shut down and schools, universities and government offices were closed

**Economic Violence Inc**

Like many Arab governments, Iraq under Saddam Hussein squandered billions of dollars through corruption and wasteful military spending. Nevertheless, prior to Saddam's ill-fated invasion of Kuwait and the resulting war and sanctions, Iraq ranked near the top of Third World countries according to the UN Human Development Index (which measures nutrition, healthcare, housing, education and other human needs). The irony is that Iraqis are now poorer than they were during the decade of sanctions that followed the 1991 Gulf War.

Under Coalition Provisional Authority chairman Paul Bremer, radical changes were imposed upon the Iraqi economy, closely mimicking the infamous structural adjustment programmes prescribed

Alliance – the coalition that won the national elections last January – calls for the state to guarantee a job for every able-bodied Iraqi; to support home construction; to cancel debts and reparations; and to use the nation's oil wealth for the country's economic development. Given the conditions imposed by Bremer, the Alliance is unlikely to achieve those goals.

To add insult to economic injury, the US-imposed interim constitution dictates that the economic 'reforms' imposed during the formal US occupation cannot be overturned except by super-majorities of the National Assembly and the Presidential Council, which will be almost impossible to achieve. The result will be continued economic hardship for the vast majority of Iraqis. And should the newly elected government find itself unable to fulfil its economic promises because of this externally imposed economic structure, the credibility of Iraq's democratic experiment could be put in jeopardy.

This systemic attack on Iraq's economy, combined with serious

help to reinforce popular support for democratic governance and nonviolent change.

In the spring of 1997, seven years after the US/Contra war against Nicaragua's Sandinista Government, tens of thousands of Nicaraguans engaged in a general strike to protest the austerity programmes of conservative President Arnoldo Aleman. Former Sandinista soldiers and former Contras left their guns at home and worked together to set up roadblocks and engage in street protests where they adhered strictly to a disciplined nonviolence. The Government, in the face of massive resistance, relented and the austerity measures were withdrawn. But only briefly. The IMF, with US pressure, forced the Government to adopt the austerity plan anyway. As Alejandro Badana, a leading Nicaraguan intellectual, asked an American audience a few months later: 'Will the people of the North allow the people of the South to succeed through nonviolence?'

This presents a challenge to those of us in the industrialized world who recognize the power of nonviolent action. It is not enough to stand by on the sidelines and call on the oppressed to

# kills the **DOVE**

by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. These include:

- The widespread privatization of public enterprises that allows for up to 100 per cent foreign ownership of Iraqi companies;
- The imposition of a 15 per cent flat tax, which primarily benefits the wealthy and places a disproportionate burden on the poor;
- The virtual elimination of import tariffs, resulting in a flood of foreign goods into the country. Smaller Iraqi companies – weakened by years of sanctions – are unable to compete and hundreds of factories have recently shut down adding to already severe unemployment;
- 100 per cent repatriation of profits, which severely limits reinvestment in the Iraqi economy;
- A lowering of the minimum wage increasing already widespread poverty.

STITCHES OF: BOB HAWK & RING DOVE

Recent polls show that less than seven per cent of Iraqis support these measures and more than two-thirds want the Government to play a strong role in the economy. The platform of the United Iraqi

damage to the country's infrastructure from years of sanctions and war, has led to widespread resentment against the foreign occupiers. There is now a widespread feeling that the US is after Iraq's wealth and is putting the profits of well-connected American companies ahead of the livelihoods of ordinary Iraqis. This has fuelled the armed resistance that has rendered attempts at rebuilding the country – by any economic model – virtually impossible. As a result, Washington may have no more success in imposing its free market utopia on the Iraqis than Moscow had in imposing its socialist utopia on the Afghans

**Give peace a chance**

In this difficult economic transition, Iraqis are not alone. Even in countries where nonviolence has toppled tyrants and brought more individual freedom, economic freedom remains elusive. Nonviolence has been remarkably successful in bringing about civil and political rights, but much less successful in improving social and economic rights that could



fight dictatorship and promote democracy and human rights. For the roots of much of this violence stem from the decisions of governments and economic institutions in advanced industrialized nations. Where active nonviolence is most badly needed may not be in the developing world, but here in Western democracies ■

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