

Some Indian Lessons for an Iraqi Democracy

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Academic theorists on international relations come dominantly in two antagonistic flavors: optimistic liberals who believe in cheery ideas such as democratic peace and pessimistic realists who favor an unsentimental focus on power and the importance of killing those who are trying to kill you. True to his promise to be a uniter and not a divider, President Bush has incorporated ideas from both sides in his approach to the world.

I think it is fair to say that the administration has the realist component of its strategy down pat. It is possible though that they could use help with the liberal bit where there is some skepticism as to whether a democratic Iraq is possible, let alone whether it will nucleate a Kantian Peace in the Middle East.

Much of the skepticism has to do with the ability of an ethnically diverse country with a low level of social trust to hold together in the absence of an imperial power or an irresistible center. Such skepticism was rife for the first several decades of India's existence as a multi-ethnic state and yet India has run on democratic lines for over a half century. Presumably there are lessons in the Indian experience that Iraq could use and as a public service, I will list a few of them.

- (1) *Elections are important* The confidence that elections are fair and hence their day will come gives the political opposition at any moment an incentive to avoid civil wars. India has a powerful Election Commission overseeing this important activity and an anti-defection law that minimizes the overturning of popular mandates by sheer bribery.
- (2) *Parliaments are useful* India's parliamentary system leads to a lot of give and take among its political class and encourages the formation of cross-regional alliances. A presidential system is more of a winner-takes-all affair, probably less suited to encouraging the bargaining that stabilizes a diverse polity.
- (3) *An optimal federalism is good* More than one secessionist movement in India has been defused by the expedient of encouraging the rebels to win elections in their regions. As the Federal government still retains a lot of goodies to hand out, the newly triumphant rebels soon see the virtues of being "responsible"
- (4) *A fragmented majority is stabilizing* The fine art of Indian politics still consists in considerable measure of lining up half the Hindu castes on one side at which point the other half promptly head for the other side. This gives the minorities a fair amount of leverage and has kept them in the game, with periodic local exceptions, since India's independence. With any luck, the Shias will behave similarly, perhaps dividing by Ayatollah or, better still - with some gerrymandered encouragement - by region. This will leave them dominating the Iraqi state but not at a cost the others will find prohibitive.

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(5) *Red tape binds the nation together* India's celebrated national civil services, most notably the Indian Administrative Service, maintain a basic national perspective, e.g. by encouraging their members to serve in other regions. The IAS has also long made it its aim in life to keep the Indian Army spinning itself dizzy which has kept that institution from even thinking about a coup.

Now all of the above sounds, well, Madisonian in its reliance on preventing the tyranny of a single group or institution. For most purposes such a dispensation works rather well – on the whole India is a marvel of largely peaceful coexistence among very diverse groups, a vibrant culture, and a largely unthreatening external stance, unable even to bring a much smaller Pakistan to heel. Such an Iraq would be a triumph for Mr. Bush and a vast improvement over Saddam's regime.

It can however, come at a cost in efficiency as India's notoriously wasteful government and endlessly distorting subsidies illustrate daily. The issue here is really more of getting things right at the start since democracies have a hard time changing direction once interest group politics settles in. India had the misfortune of starting with Pandit Nehru who used the more or less free hand he had, to implement all of the misguided ideas on economics that he could find.

Iraqis, who will have considerable oil wealth to tempt them into endless silliness, should ponder this cautionary example. They might consider asking that the interim administration be headed by a first rate economist, a man such as the former Treasury Secretary Larry Summers. Come to think of it, he already has experience running a place with a famously tribal culture – Harvard – and being Lawrence of Arabia would be a feather in his cap. The few Iraqis who would find his rule intolerable could always move to Princeton.