

## English Translation from *La Vanguardia*

March 23, 2004

### "Middle Eastern political transitions?"

By Kenneth W. Stein

A major step in transforming Iraq from a brutal dictatorship to a pluralistic self-governing structure has been taken. Signed on March 8, the Iraqi administrative law provides a road map for how Iraq should be governed after the U.S. civil administration ostensibly ends there on June 30, 2004.

Without solving the myriad of Iraq's outstanding problems, the twenty-five person governing council, representing Christians, Kurds, Sunnis, Shia, and Turkomans, has demonstrated that compromise can prevail. Islam is the official religion, but the Shariah is not the sole basis of law; freedom of expression is to be guaranteed, and 25 percent of seats in the future elected assembly for women are a goal not a quota. Parliamentary elections are to be held in 2005 and presidential elections are scheduled for 2006.

What if Iraqis actually stay the course? What if the bomb-throwers, terrorists, and nay-sayers fail to instigate a civil war in Iraq between ethnic and tribal groups? What if those groups who oppose the American-led coalition presence in Iraq fail to create an embarrassing retreat? What if Iraq's ethnic mosaic layered by tribal divisions, and tugged at by leadership egos actually ends up in fostering democratic values? What if a redefined Iraqi national pact takes hold and federalism prevails? What are the long-term regional ramifications if Iraq after Afghanistan is even partially successful in creating stable governance based on pluralism?

As a Middle East observer for a quarter-century, hopes are that these transitions work, but optimism should not cloud evident realities. Writing a constitution or transitional law is a major achievement because it meant that many sides negotiated state- civil society relations. Concessions were made, but more difficult decisions were postponed for future review. In the Iraqi case, the fall of the hated former regime coupled with the knowledge that there are (oil) resources to be distributed in the future meant that participating in public policy decisions would serve particular interests.

Success has many parents; failure is inevitably an orphan. Truth be told: had Osama Bin-Laden's al-Qaeda network not attacked America and the U.S. had not tossed out the Taliban so quickly from Afghanistan and then made Iraq the next object of disaffection, there would not now be a new

system of government under construction in Iraq. Neither Arab leaders nor the Arab League can take credit for this transition; neither can Germany, France, nor any other country claim paternity if this transformation takes root. Credit those countries that forcefully tossed Saddam from power and stayed around to instigate nation-building.

Having led the coalition to overthrow Saddam, the Bush administration is steadily seeking credit for the transition taking place in Iraq. And in a broader scheme, the Bush administration has laid out an ambitious plan with parts aimed at transforming the Middle East from autocracies to democratic values and economic prosperity.

Unfurled philosophically first in November 2003, President Bush passionately proclaimed that "Iraqi democracy will succeed -- and that success will send forth the news, from Damascus to Tehran -- establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East will be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution."

In January 2004 at the World Economic Forum at Davos, Vice-President Cheney found legitimacy for the Bush administration's Middle East democracy initiative in quoting the United Nations Human Development Reports of 2002 and 2003. There Arab intellectuals spoke about a freedom deficit in the Middle East, the need for internal reform, greater political participation, the rule of law, economic openness and wider trade.

Cheney argued that democracy in the Middle East means greater security at home; in other words, the war on terror can be won if the people of the greater Middle East overcome their freedom deficit.

Now recently published in detail, the Bush administration's MEPI is to rest on four pillars: a) an economic pillar that fosters region-wide economic and employment growth driven by private sector expansion and entrepreneurship; b) the political pillar where more diverse voices can be heard and choose their governance under the rule of law; c) an education pillar that enables all people, including girls, to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to compete in today's economy and improve the quality of their lives; and d) a women's pillar where women participate and enjoy full and equal economic, political, and educational opportunities.

These are certainly laudable goals, but cynicism prevails that the administration's MEPI is a cloak for covering Bush's foreign policy shortcomings: alienating Europe in the run up to the Iraqi invasion, failing to find and produce Weapons of Mass Production in Iraq, insufficient commitment to resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, and an attempt to

control the destiny of sovereign Arab states. Another group, made of reform-minded Arabs see political change as desperately needed, but who feel that origins for change should be indigenously generated and not imported or choreographed from outside. Commenting about the initiative recently, Salameh Nematt noted in the Beirut daily al-Hayat that there are those "Arab generals, ruling directly or indirectly, who are only capable of suppressing their people in order to maintain authority, while they are offering security services to America, by chasing terrorists and talking, only talking, about reform."

It is not possible to claim that what happened so far in Iraq is a precursor for rapid change to pluralism elsewhere in the Middle East. In Iraq, the regime collapsed totally; it was relatively easy to build power centers on ethnic and tribal affinities previously suppressed and eager to organize politically. However, elsewhere in the Middle East, regimes have not collapsed. With autocrats weakened, such as Arafat's Palestinian Authority, they redefine themselves while holding desperately on to the levers of power. Does anyone believe that Mubarak's Egypt, Assad's Syria, or any number of Arab Gulf states will willingly negotiate true power-sharing with disenfranchised lower classes?

Before parades are planned celebrating Iraq's successes or credit taken for transforming the Middle East into Jeffersonian, British, Spanish, or Italian democracies, let us wait for free elections to be held more than once. Let us see if the rule of law prevails; let us see if ethnic, religious, and tribal leaders support rather than undermine the power of a new president and prime minister. Historically in the Middle East, parliaments have been marginalized by autocrats and authoritarian elites. And if they are not, parliamentarians must learn to exercise compromise, accommodation, and restraint.

Encouragement and support should be extended to Middle Eastern reformers, but they have to do it their way and when they are ready. A significant step has been taken, but crediting the MEPI for transforming the Middle East from autocracies to democracies is questionable unless of course you are the campaign manager for an incumbent candidate in an American presidential election cycle.

----

Professor Kenneth W. Stein teaches Middle Eastern History and Politics at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.