

Policy Watch: Maliki's monumental mistake

Published: Jan. 8, 2007 at 3:12 PM

MARK N. KATZ

Saddam Hussein was a horrible man. We still do not know how many Iraqis he killed during his tyranny. He is responsible for the deaths of many Iranians and Kuwaitis too. His unseemly execution, however, has turned him into a martyr in the eyes of many Sunnis both in Iraq and elsewhere. And the person responsible for this is the American-backed Iraqi prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki.

In the now infamous video circulating on the web, those present at Saddam Hussein's execution can be heard taunting him and shouting, "Moqtada! Moqtada! Moqtada!" (for Moqtada al-Sadr who heads the powerful Shiite militia movement known as the al-Mahdi Army). Their enthusiasm for Saddam's impending death made his executioners appear not as impartial officials carrying out a judicial sentence, but as revenge-seeking supporters of Moqtada al-Sadr. This is certainly how it appeared to many Sunnis, among others.

The result is that instead of bringing the different Iraqi communities together, Saddam's execution has driven them further apart. It has only inflamed the fears of the Sunni minority about how a Shiite majority government will treat them. The Kurds are also disappointed because Saddam's execution for the death of some 150 Iraqi Shiites in 1982 has forestalled his ongoing trial for the death of many more Kurds. What has also been forgotten is that Saddam killed many Arab Sunnis too.

If Maliki had really wanted to heal Iraq's sectarian divisions (as he has claimed), it would have been far better for him to keep Saddam alive and on continuous trial so that how he oppressed every Iraqi community -- Arab Sunni as well as Arab Shiite and Kurdish -- could be publicized in detail. Saddam should also have stood trial for the consequences of the wars he launched against Iran and Kuwait too. A true statesman would have recognized this. Maliki did not.

The unseemly chanting of "Moqtada!" just before Saddam was executed implies even worse about Maliki. News accounts indicate that it was Maliki who insisted upon and arranged for Saddam's execution. It was he and his staff who had the most control over who attended it. The fact that Saddam was taunted with the chant of "Moqtada!" suggests that Maliki's office sympathizes with Sadr, has been infiltrated by his supporters, or is acting on his behalf. While this may not be true, many Sunnis regard the video of Saddam's execution as proof that it is.

After the negative worldwide reaction to the video, Maliki has called for an investigation. So far, though, it appears that he is less upset about the disgraceful manner in which Saddam was executed than about how what happened was surreptitiously videotaped and publicized.

The highly negative Sunni reaction to Saddam's execution has set back the task of reconciling Iraq's divided communities. How should Iraq's Shiite majority government -- and the United States -- now proceed? Maliki himself recently stated that he does not want a second term as prime minister of Iraq, and that he would even like to give up the office now.

He should be granted this wish -- even if he changes his mind. Healing Iraq's divisions would be difficult for any Iraqi prime minister. Because of the way in which he mismanaged Saddam's execution, this is a task that is now impossible for Maliki to accomplish.

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(Mark N. Katz is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University.)

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