

Qubad Talabani speech, April 19, 2009

“The World’s Newest Democracy” (The Future of Democracy in Iraq)

National Press Club, Washington, D.C.

Good morning ladies and gentleman.

On Sunday, I returned from two weeks in Kurdistan, the first weeks of our new year. Always an exciting time, this visit was even more so. Things that Iraqis had once only whispered about, and then realized they could hope for, are becoming true. We are developing our democratic and economic institutions and now have the confidence to further open our nation to our friends, for investment and development.

Iraqi Kurdistan is one of the seeds of democracy within Iraq and the Middle East. We cherish the opportunity for freedom that has finally come to us and we are determined not to let it slip away or be destroyed. We want to see what we have started blossom throughout Iraq.

Many elements of democracy have taken root and are now growing. We have freedom of religion and many have come to Kurdistan from other parts of Iraq in order to practice their views safely and openly. We have a new press freedom law that, among other things, has barred the jailing of reporters and removed the threat of criminal penalties against journalists and newspapers. We are working to ensure that women, minorities and all segments of our society have equal rights and opportunities and protections under the law. We have increased transparency in our business sector.

Our government and political parties are in transition from opposition to a dictator to full participants in a new democracy. There are many changes to come; just as we have made important progress already, so we will continue to make progress in the future.

When those in Iraqi Kurdistan speak of democracy – we know of what it means. We know its challenges and its triumphs.

But we are only a part of Iraq. As we like to say, we are Tomorrow’s Iraq Today. To consider the future of democracy in ALL of Iraq, there is only one place that discussion must begin, and that is with our nation’s new Constitution. Because, quite frankly, the future of democracy in Iraq, if it

will live or die, will rest on how our Constitution is obeyed, supported, and cherished.

The Iraqi constitution is the law of the land. We respect it and embrace it and follow it. We expect – and perhaps we politely insist – that others in our country respect it, embrace it and follow it. Not just when it is convenient to follow it, but always. In fact, a true test of any democracy is following its Constitution and laws when it is not always so convenient.

The Iraqi constitution is the unifying force for our new democratic nation but the document is only as good as the institutions of state that exist and the determination of Iraqi national leadership to uphold those ideals. This is not just the KRG point of view; it is also the point of view of scholars and experts, including a recent panel at the U.S. Institute of Peace which reached the same conclusion.

And it is also the point of view of President Obama, who during his visit to Baghdad earlier this month noted that strict adherence to the Iraqi Constitution remains the best mechanism for peace and stability in Iraq.

Like President Obama, those academics, diplomats and civil servants who gathered at the USIP offered a clear-eyed assessment of where Iraq is now and what issues, developments, and unfinished business the U.S. should take into consideration as it formulates its strategy towards Iraq. The USIP presentations dealt with the military component of U.S. strategy, as well as political, diplomatic, economic, and institutional elements. They all stressed the importance of actions and structures that unify the nation while at the same time ensuring individual liberties and preventing any return to the past.

And they returned to the importance of the Constitution.

The constitution of Iraq, while far from perfect, is the only national compact Iraq has. Our constitution, like yours, is full of holes and is open for interpretation. It allows for amendments to be made. But it is still the only law of the land, and it must be respected.

But while Iraq has a constitution we still lack a shared vision of what Iraq is, and what it means to be an Iraqi. That has created a potentially dangerous schism of whether Iraq will be governed by a central authority in Baghdad or if power be substantively devolved to the regions and provinces as outlined in the Constitution.

Article 1 of the Iraqi constitution declares that the nation is a single, independent federal state and that “This Constitution is the guarantor of

its unity” for all Iraqi as “the sons of Adam” and of “the people of the land between two rivers.” But because some leading Iraqi politicians in the cabinet and the legislature appear to not know the true meaning of federalism, things begin to become dangerous

I was so impressed while recently attending a swearing in ceremony for a good friend of mine at the State Department. At that ceremony I heard my friend state the words: ‘I swear to uphold and defend the Constitution of the United States of America.’ He didn’t say I would defend my government, my party, or his ideology; he said he would defend his Constitution. I long for the day that the rule of law, so lacking in Iraq today, reaches a point where Iraqis, whether Kurd or Arab, mean it when they swear to uphold their constitution.

Why should we be surprised at how those in the U.S. view the Constitution and its importance to keeping the American democracy strong and growing? The phrase “unconstitutional” carries more weight in this country than almost any other legal or political decision – and some may argue it is the MOST important determination.

Now, the United States can help our young democracy in some important ways. For example, it can open up consulates throughout Iraq, in Basra, Anbar and Erbil. It can help fund or help train those who will be in the frontlines of democracy, such as judiciary and government workers and journalists.

But at the end, it will depend on all Iraqis to ensure that our democracy lives.

It is ironic that it has been Iraq’s Kurds -- who since the inception of the Iraqi state in 1921 have historically opposed the central government, its laws and its institutions -- are today one of a few communities who are upholding those very same things they used to disregard.

We understand that democracy is an evolutionary process, both in Iraq and elsewhere. The KRG and the people it represents value the democracy we have built – the security that is within Iraqi Kurdistan, the opportunities for business available to our citizens as well as foreign investors and the great possibilities for the future. We must remain vigilant and determined, until the day the Iraqi constitution is enshrined and beloved by all and followed, and until the important national issues are resolved.

A young America saw political turmoil and trial and error. Only after a few years of uncertainty and eventual stability, and a decreased threat from outside, did its leaders produce the Constitution of the United States – a document whose noble ideals have been embraced for

centuries by freedom seeking people around the world. We have long looked to the United States as our role model in building the democracy they have helped launch in Iraq and in Kurdistan.

Of course, we expect and hope that Iraq and all Iraqis will emulate the path of the Constitution as followed by Americans – never using the Constitution to hurt parts of the nation, but only to bind together, to constantly find better ways to give more rights and freedoms and protections to more and more citizens.

To preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States is a powerful pledge that all public officials in this country take. By taking that pledge, it is not only the national institutions one is embracing – but power to all institutions in the government. It is the unifying factor in a nation, yours or ours. One can still be a Texan or Pennsylvanian or Californian or Floridian, but ultimately one is an American with a national purpose and interests. That is where we need to be in Iraq for our democracy to succeed.

This is a new concept for many Iraqis. Power was wielded against most of us for so long, we are fearful of letting anyone else have it. We think our best interests are in holding ALL power, when in reality our strength – and our brilliance – will emerge from a sharing of power with mutual respect and mutual vision. In the end, just as in the United States, our Iraqi Constitution must prevail.

At his inauguration the second president of the United States, John Adams, reminded his countrymen of the importance of the Constitution as the key to whether that still young democracy would continue and improve. He spoke of the creation of the U.S. Constitution as the product of “good heads prompted by good hearts.”

It is the hearts that must love a country that is a democracy and the heads that must be wise enough to write a Constitution and follow its laws that will ensure that our Iraqi democracy shall not perish.

Thank you very much.

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