

For Iraqis, Image of Ex-President Stirs Reverence and Hatred

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BAGHDAD, [Iraq](#), Oct. 19 - From the very start of the trial, from the moment [Saddam Hussein](#) refused to tell the judge his name, Hiba Raad said she knew she was watching the same man who had ruled over Iraq for decades with muscular authority. "He's a hero, he's a tough leader," Ms. Raad, 20, an education student at Mustansiriyah University, said as she reclined in black pants and a T-shirt on a sofa in her living room. "If he came back, I'm sure he'd provide us with security."

In her home in the Sunni Arab neighborhood of Adhamiya, Ms. Raad had just finished watching the opening session of the trial alongside her parents and sister. They continued staring transfixed at the television, listening to the breathless commentary on an Arab television network. Her grandmother, Samira al-Bayati, shuffled into the room in her black robe, a burning cigarette in one hand.

"I felt sorry," she said. "I almost cried. Every country in the world has terrorism. All the presidents of this region torture their people. Why, of all the countries, do they come after us?"

So went some of the talk this afternoon, as millions of Iraqis spent hours gazing at the stern, wrinkled visage of the leader they had once feared, loathed and lionized. It was nothing less than a national spectacle, with Iraqis from the dusty holy cities of the south to the valleys of Kurdistan gathering in front of television sets. Their viewpoints varied widely, some calling it a tawdry display of victor's justice, others a long-awaited, if somewhat unsatisfactory, accounting for sins too numerous to list.

The opinions generally divided along ethnic and sectarian lines, with many Sunni Arabs expressing some sympathy for Mr. Hussein, one of their own, and long-persecuted Shiites and Kurds barely controlling their anger. Everyone, though, seemed to take notice of Mr. Hussein's fierce disposition, his unwillingness to bend to his captors even after so much had been stripped from him.

In Tikrit, Mr. Hussein's hometown, scores of protesters waved Iraqi flags and photos of Mr. Hussein, chanting, "You're still the son of Iraq." In eastern Baghdad, in the Shiite slum of Sadr City, crowds called for a swift, though preferably painful, execution.

"This is divine justice," said Shakir Majeed, 38, an appliance repairman who was fiddling with an electric generator in his shop to keep the television going. "The proper sentence for him is execution, but this method of trying him is not encouraging. His crimes are

many and the court shouldn't spend time hearing him out. The court should judge him at the first session without listening to his defense."

"This tribunal is weak and isn't the one we wanted," Mr. Majeed added. "Saddam appeared confident of himself, and the judge dealt with him too easily. Here, Saddam still believes himself to be president. Maybe we're not used to seeing such tribunals on TV, but we'd like him to be tried the same way he tried his victims."

Mr. Hussein's display of unalloyed confidence, the same willpower that may have propelled him to the ranks of the modern world's most feared dictators, seemed to disturb many people.

"The judge dealt with Saddam as a regular man, not as a criminal," said Akil Jawad, 20, a tailor in Sadr City trying to mend a shirt with a sewing machine while watching the trial. "We suffered a lot under him. And I don't feel optimistic about the trial because Saddam smiles a lot and feels confident in his answers."

Ali Abbas, an air-conditioner repairman, also in Sadr City, suggested bypassing the trial altogether.

"There's no need for Saddam to be judged because he's been indicted already," Mr. Abbas, 28, said. "We don't want him to be executed. I'd rather that he be beaten by shoes. Execution would be mercy for him."

To be flailed with the soles of shoes is one of the ultimate humiliations in the Arab world. It was this kind of disgrace that many Iraqis hoped today to see Mr. Hussein subjected to. But they largely came away disappointed - up until the very end of the session, when Mr. Hussein scuffled with a guard, the ex-president remained defiant.

"It's a historical farce, not a historical trial," said Furad Saadadeen, 35, a resident of the embattled northern city of Mosul. "Saddam doesn't deserve anything but execution, and his government too."

Elsewhere in Mosul, a city where the insurgency has strong support, some rationalized the killings during Mr. Hussein's rule. As for the mass executions in the Shiite village of Dujail, for which Mr. Hussein was being tried, some residents argued, hadn't the people of Dujail orchestrated an assassination attempt on Mr. Hussein? In the case of Halabja, where 5,000 Kurds were killed by chemical weapons, wasn't Mr. Hussein protecting Iraq from an unholy Iranian-Kurdish alliance?

"Saddam doesn't deserve all this," said Ahmad Muhammad, 31, a taxi driver. "In Halabja, there was an entire Iranian army inside our land, and who helped them enter? The traitors. What should he have done other than kill the traitors and our enemies?"

The same support could be found in the deserts of western Iraq, the rebel heartland, and even on the streets of Mansour, an affluent neighborhood in western Baghdad.

"I watched some of the trial, and I was upset because his rule was better than what we have today," Qusay Muhammad, 24, said as he sold cups of tea from a sidewalk booth. "I don't mean to say I love Saddam. I'm just making a comparison between the old regime and the government today."

In the south, dominated by Shiites, the attitude was markedly different. Mr. Hussein's forces swept through that region in 1991 and killed at least 100,000 Shiites as American troops stood by during the end of Operation Desert Storm. That, along with the mass killings of Kurds in the late 1980's, will likely form the basis for the next set of charges brought against Mr. Hussein.

"I had four sons executed by Saddam," said a 64-year-old woman in the Shiite holy city of Karbala who gave her name as Umm Mahdi. "When he's executed, I'll finally hold their funerals."

Reporting for this article was contributed by Khalid Hassan, Khalid al-Ansary and Sahar Najib from Baghdad, and Iraqi employees of The New York Times from Mosul and Karbala, whose names are being withheld for security reasons.