

Saddam's road to power

AGENCIES

Saddam Hussein's road to absolute power began in his home town, Tikrit, in central Iraq where he was born in 1937.

Joining up with the clandestine Baath party, he participated in a failed attempt to assassinate Iraq's then military ruler, General Kassem. In a country where politics was always a violent game, his talents took him swiftly to the top.

He spent six months in prison in the slaying of his brother-in-law, a communist.

Saddam was forced to flee Iraq in 1959 and spent four years in exile in Cairo. When the Baath party finally seized power in 1968, he emerged as the number two figure behind General Ahmad Hassan al-Bakr.

Now the power behind the throne, he took over when Bakr was quietly shunted aside in 1979 and began the reign of terror that was to keep him in power for so long.

Within a year, he launched Iraq into a massive and risky adventure.

Seeing himself as the new leader and champion of all the Arabs, he poured his army across the border into western Iran, hoping to defuse a potential threat from the new Islamic revolution there.

The war brought Saddam closer to the United States, which sold his regime arms and other aid as a bulwark against Iran.

They turned a blind eye to Iraq's human rights record and to atrocities like the Kurdish villages of Halabja.

After the ceasefire with Iran in 1988, Saddam's constant striving for regional supremacy intensified. His experts produced special long-range missiles and pursued ambitious nuclear, biological and chemical weapons programmes.

But war with Iran had crippled the Iraqi economy and the Iraqi leader desperately needed to increase his oil revenues. After accusing Kuwait of driving the price of oil down, he invaded, then annexed, the emirate.

The reality of war over Kuwait, when it came, was terrible. Weeks of US-led bombing, during what Saddam had christened the 'Mother of All Battles', reduced Iraq's infrastructure to ruins, and wrought havoc among front-line troops.

But this time, the Iraqi president's blunders did lead to consequences at home. Encouraged by

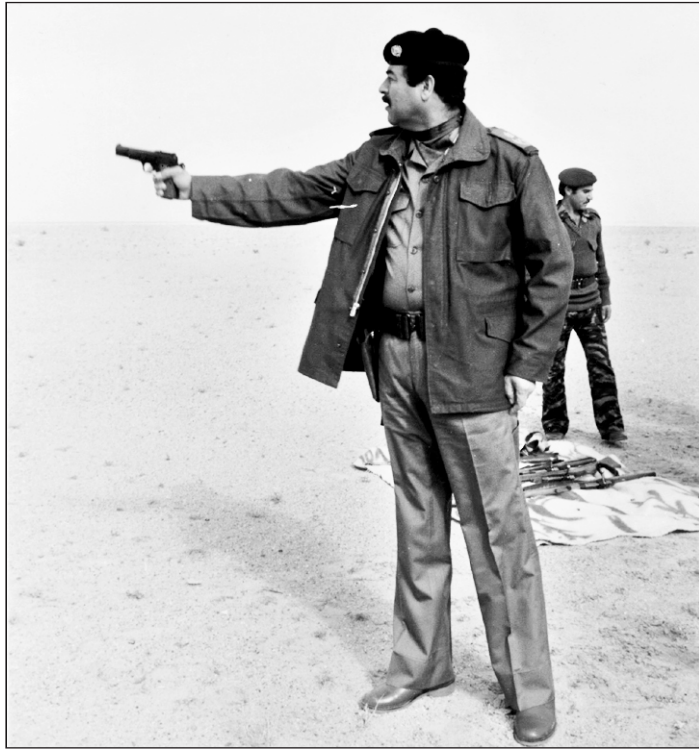


PHOTO: AFP

An undated file picture shows former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

the first President Bush to rise up, the Shia of southern Iraq revolted.

But the Western powers did nothing, as Saddam ruthlessly restored his grip on the south.

In the north, he attacked the rebellious Kurds. Millions fled into the freezing mountains and the West was forced to impose a "safe haven", maintained by a constant air umbrella, over the area.

To add to his humiliations, after his ejection from Kuwait, the Iraqi leader was forced to agree to the elimination of all his weapons of mass destruction by the United Nations.

But his continual obstruction of the UN weapons inspectors led to Anglo-American air attacks on Iraqi targets in 1998.

Stringent international sanctions remained in full force in the years after the Gulf War, crippling the country's economy and eventually causing a near-collapse of the Iraqi economy.

The election of President George W. Bush, in 2000, increased the pressure. Washington now talked openly of "regime change".

And, following the September 11, 2001 attacks, the US named Iraq as a "rogue state".

Is Laden next after Saddam?

REUTERS, Kabul

Afghanistan welcomed news of Saddam Hussein's capture yesterday, but said it was too early to say if it might lead to stepped up efforts to find elusive al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

The whereabouts of bin Laden, the man accused of masterminding the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the United States, are not known, but Pakistani and Afghan officials have said he may be hiding in rugged border regions.

Asked to comment on a US announcement of Saddam's capture near his hometown of Tikrit, Afghan government spokesman Javid Loodin said:

"It is positive news. It's a positive development. The capturing of Saddam Hussein has been one of the primary objectives of the war in Iraq."

"Now that this has been achieved, it's hoped that it will lead to a quick solution to the situation in Iraq and a better life and prosperity and security for the people of Iraq."

However, asked if he thought Saddam's capture could lead to stepped up efforts to capture bin Laden, he replied: "It's too early to talk about that."

How Saddam was caught

AFP, REUTERS, Tikrit/Baghdad

Saddam Hussein was captured in an underground "crawlspace" near his northern hometown of Tikrit Saturday, the US Army announced yesterday.

Soldiers captured him without incident, the army's 4th Infantry Division (4th ID) said in a statement. "Two other people were captured with Hussein and soldiers confiscated approximately 750,000 in US currency," the statement said.

"Saddam the deposed leader of Iraq has been captured. Coalition forces... raided a compound in the town of Ad Dawr, just south of Tikrit on Dec 13. Hussein was found hiding in an underground crawlspace."

"The intimidation and fear this man generated for over 30 years is gone," said 4th ID commander Major-General Raymond Odierno.

"Many will rest much better tonight knowing Iraq is moving forward to a more secure environment," he said.

US forces show video footage
US forces yesterday showed a video of a bearded and disheveled Saddam Hussein in custody after

his capture near his hometown of Tikrit.

The video, aired at a news conference in Baghdad and on local Iraqi television, showed Saddam undergoing medical check. Soldiers took what appeared to be DNA swabs from his mouth.

The former Iraqi president, with a straggly, graying beard, was not putting up resistance after eight months on the run.

A picture that appeared to have been taken later showed Saddam clean shaven.

Captured without a fight

Iraqi Governing Council member Ahmed Chalabi said ousted Iraqi president Saddam Hussein was yesterday "captured without any resistance," and would be tried in public, according to Iraqi television.

"He was arrested without resistance and there was enough time for him before that to commit suicide if he wanted but he did not," Chalabi told Iraqi TV, adding that he had no further details.

"The nightmare that was haunting the Iraqi people has been lifted. Saddam is under arrest and he will be tried publicly and punished for his crimes," added Chalabi.

He predicted the daily attacks, reportedly masterminded and funded by Saddam, and targeting coalition forces and Iraqis, "will not stop right away, but the Iraqi people will sigh relief and the situation will improve eventually."

"The most important thing is that Saddam was arrested... and those who were dreaming that Saddam or the Baath party will return to power will be disappointed, as the bad dream has come to an end."

DNA tests confirm capture

The head of Iraq's US-installed interim Governing Council, Abdul Aziz al-Hakim, said on Sunday that DNA tests had confirmed that the man captured by US forces in Tikrit was ousted president Saddam Hussein.

"The criminal Saddam Hussein has been arrested," Hakim told a press conference in Madrid.

"Saddam Hussein is alive. His identity is not in doubt because DNA tests have been done on him and they confirmed his identity," said Hakim.

Hakim, fronting a delegation of Iraq's provisional government on a two-day visit to Madrid, said the former president had been

arrested at an underground vegetable store in his home city of Tikrit north of Baghdad.

"Members of the Iraqi government are on their way to meet (Saddam)," said Hakim.

"He will be presented before the judges and will be judged according to the law before the courts."

Hakim predicted Saddam's arrest would boost attempts to restore democracy to Iraq.

"Without a doubt attacks will diminish. This is a big blow to terrorists in Iraq. It is a great day for humanity and the Iraqi people," said Hakim, whose delegation will visit France, Germany and Italy later this week, according to the Spanish foreign ministry.

A cooperative Saddam

Ousted Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein, captured alive by coalition forces, is being "cooperative and talkative", the top US military commander in Iraq said Sunday.

"Saddam Hussein the captive is talkative and being cooperative," Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez told a news conference in Baghdad.

"The medical examination showed he had no injuries and is in good health," added Sanchez.

'We got him ...'

AFP, Baghdad

The following is the full statement made by the US civil administrator in Iraq, Paul Bremer, on Sunday on the capture of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein:

"Ladies and gentlemen, we got him."

Saddam Hussein was captured Saturday, December 13th, at about 8:30 p.m. local in a cellar in the town of Adwar, which is about 15 kilometers south of Tikrit.

Before Dr. (Adnan) Pachachi, who is the acting president of the Governing Council, and Lieutenant General (Ricardo) Sanchez speak, I want to say a few words to the people of Iraq.

This is a great day in Iraq's history. For decades, hundreds of thousands of you suffered at the hands of this cruel man. For decades, Saddam Hussein divided you citizens against each other. For decades, he threat-

ened and attacked your neighbors. Those days are over forever.

Now it is time to look to the future, to your future of hope, to a future of reconciliation.

Iraq's future, your future, has never been more full of hope. The tyrant is a prisoner. The economy is moving forward. You have before you the prospect of a sovereign government in a few months.

With the arrest of Saddam Hussein, there is a new opportunity for the members of the former regime, whether military or civilian, to end their bitter opposition. Let them now come forward in a spirit of reconciliation and hope, lay down their arms, and join you, their fellow citizens, in the task of building the new Iraq.

Now is the time for all Iraqis, Arabs and Kurds, Sunnis, Shiaa, Christian and Turkaman, to build a prosperous, democratic Iraq at peace with itself and with its neighbors."

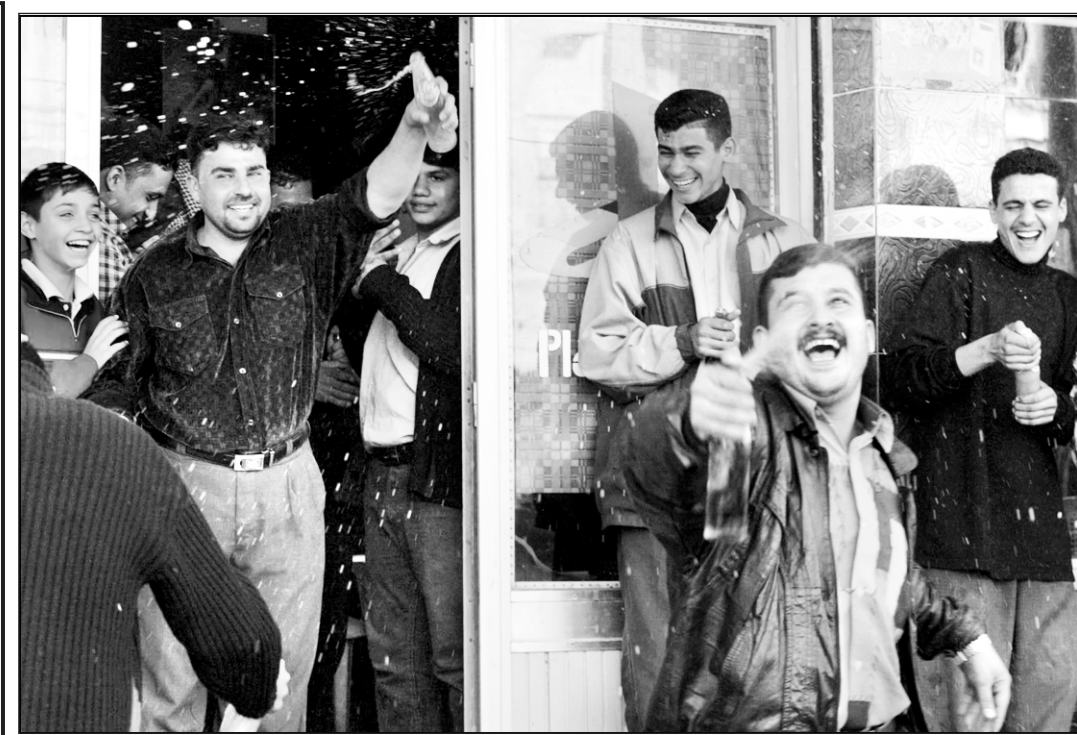


PHOTO: AFP

Iraqis celebrate in the southern city of Nasiriyah after the capture of ousted Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein.

'Saddam used to phone wife, son once a week'

AFP, London

Saddam Hussein's second wife, who lives with the ousted Iraqi leader's only surviving son under an assumed name in Lebanon, said her husband calls or writes to them at least once a week, a London newspaper reported yesterday.

"If he cannot say something in detail on the telephone, I know I will receive a letter in two to three days giving me an explanation," Samira Shahbandar told The Sunday Times in an interview.

After the Iraq war in March, Shahbandar -- described by the paper as mysterious and the closest of Saddam's four wives -- said she crossed the border into Syria, then travelled to Beirut where she was given a Lebanese passport.

Now living under the name of Hadija, she said she expected to move to Paris next month.

She said Saddam, ousted as Iraq's president following the US-led war on Iraq in March, had given her five million dollars in cash and a hoard of jewellery and gold before sending her and his 21-year-old son, Ali, over the border into Syria.

Ali, Saddam's only surviving son, has changed his name to Hassan, according to his Lebanese

passport.

Saddam's two elder sons, Qusay and Uday, were killed by US forces in the war. Their mother and Saddam's first wife, Sajida, is thought to be in Syria, the paper said.

A representative of The Sunday Times met Shahbandar, whom the paper described as blonde with hazel eyes, in La Cottage, a restaurant in Ba'albeck, near Beirut. The date of the interview was not given.

The weekly printed black and white photos of her and said it was the first time her face had been published.

Shahbandar, whose age was also not given, said Saddam attributed his loss of power to betrayal by his closest aides.

She said Saddam had arrived at her hiding place on April 9, the day Baghdad fell, to say goodbye.

"He came to me very depressed and sad," she told the paper.

"He took me to the next room and cried. He knew he had been betrayed."

"He told me not to be afraid. He kissed Ali and said the same -- 'Don't be afraid. Take care of your mother. People will come and they will bring you things to help.'"

US reviewing pay package for Iraqi army

AFP, Baghdad

The US-led coalition in Iraq was reviewing the pay scale for the New Iraqi Army Saturday after some 300 soldiers walked out on the fighting force's first battalion, as the violence on the ground continued.

Meanwhile US President George W. Bush touted Saddam Hussein's ouster as part of a "year of accomplishment," but made no mention of the unfound weapons of mass destruction on which the war was predicated.

The US military commander in Iraq, Lieutenant General Ricardo Sanchez, told reporters that the Iraqi troops' mass walkout was caused by unhappiness among married soldiers who said they could not support their families on a monthly wage of 60 dollars.

Sanchez also said that despite a string of recent fatalities, attacks on coalition soldiers had fallen to "around 20" per day.

"We have achieved a significant decrease in attacks," he said.

In November, which proved to be the deadliest month for US soldiers in Iraq, the number of daily attacks surpassed 35 and hit 55 on one occasion.

Arabs show mixed reaction

REUTERS, Cairo

Arabs greeted the capture of Saddam Hussein with divided emotions Sunday, welcoming the arrest of a dictator yet tinged with regret that a symbol of Arab defiance against the United States was behind bars.

Some feared Saddam's capture would boost President Bush, who many Arabs believe has waged a campaign against them and other Muslims after the September 11 attacks. But others said the fight against US occupation would go on.

"It is happy news but we wish it were the Iraqi people who had captured him, not US troops, because this will give Bush a boost in the upcoming election," said Bahraini salesman Hussein Jafar as news of Saddam's capture swept through Arab capitals.

US troops captured Saddam, grubby and bearded, when he was dug out by troops from a narrow hiding hole during a raid on a farm near his hometown of Tikrit.

"I only wish it was not the Americans who got him. I don't like

Saddam but as an Arab I wouldn't like to see them (Americans) dragging him around Baghdad," said Syrian student Abdul-Nasser.

For others, the capture was disappointing news. Saddam may have been seen as a dictator who oppressed his people, but many also saw him as the only Arab leader who stood up to the United States, which they said rode roughshod through the region.

"Of course it's bad news. To us, Saddam was a symbol of defiance to the US plans in the region. And we support any person who stands in the face of the American dominance," said Azzam Hneidi, an Islamist member of Jordan's parliament.

Others said the US success might prove fleeting, saying Iraqis were not fighting for Saddam but for an end to the US occupation of Iraq.

"The situation in Iraq will not change much. I don't think the resistance was linked to Saddam and it will increase as was the case after the death of Uday and Qusay," said Yemeni political analyst Saeed Shabet, referring to Saddam's two sons.

Afghan constitutional convention opens

AP, Kabul

A landmark constitutional convention began in Afghanistan yesterday with solemn prayers, the songs of children and a stirring speech by the nation's former king, who echoed the aspirations of his war-weary countrymen with a call for unity and peace.

Some 500 delegates from village mullahs to Western-educated exiles were gathered at a huge tent in the capital, Kabul, to hammer out a new constitution in a traditional loya jirga, or grand council. Among the issues they were expected to spar over were the role of Afghan women, Islam's place in the politics and the sharing of power in a nation accustomed to fighting over it.

"The people are relying on you and you should not forget them," the 88-year-old former monarch, Mohammad Zahir Shah, told the assembly. "I hope you will try your best to maintain peace, stability and the unity of the Afghan people."

The loya jirga is a key step in the two-year drive to stabilise the country under an empowered central government, and is supposed to lead to national elections slated for June.

The king spoke after a reading from the Quran, Islam's holy book, by a blind cleric and a rendition of a traditional Afghan folk song by a group of young children, wearing Nike shirts under richly embroidered traditional vests, that brought several delegates to tears.

"This constitution will determine the political, social, and economic future of Afghanistan," President Hamid Karzai told the gathering. "For the first time in the history of Afghanistan, the people of Afghanistan have the opportunity to appoint the representatives of their choice. ... This constitution will guarantee the rights of all Afghan people... and put an end to anarchy."

Security was extremely tight after warnings from the US military that Taliban militants might try to attack the convention.

Indian SC rules Father can gift ancestral property to daughters

PTI, New Delhi

In a major judgement, the Indian Supreme Court has ruled that a father can gift a reasonable portion of his ancestral immovable property to daughters at the time of their marriage or even long after their marriage.

This ruling was given by a bench comprising Justice RC Lahoti and Justice Ashok Bhan while settling a 15-year-old dispute between a father and his daughters in Salem district of Tamil Nadu in favour of the latter by setting aside a trial court order which was upheld by the Madras High Court.

Considering several rulings of the apex court, the bench said "it can safely be held that a father can make a gift of ancestral immovable property within reasonable limits, keeping in view the total extent of the property held by the family in favour of his daughter at the time of marriage or even long after her marriage".

Benazir visits Ajmer

AFP, New Delhi

Pakistan's former prime minister Benazir Bhutto yesterday visited a revered Sufi shrine in India's western desert state of Rajasthan.

Benazir, who is in India for a conference organised by the Hindustan Times newspaper in New Delhi, offered prayers at the shrine of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer, television footage showed.

Known as the "Dargah Sharif" it is the last resting place of the saint who died in 1235.

Hundreds of thousands of visitors of all religions go to the marble-domed mausoleum each year seeking blessings or peace of mind.

Benazir, a two time prime minister of Pakistan who now lives in exile in London and Dubai, last visited the shrine three years ago, reports said.

She will visit Jaipur, capital of Rajasthan, before returning to New Delhi late Sunday and leaving for Dubai, officials said.

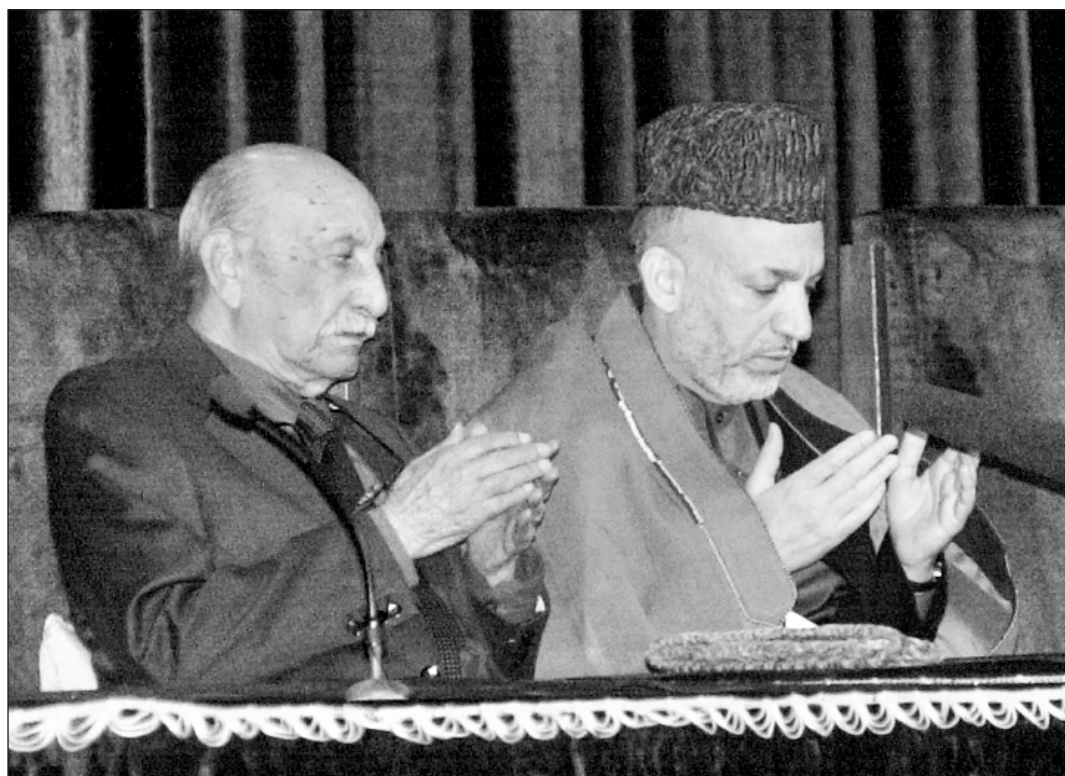


PHOTO: AFP

Afghanistan's former King Mohammad Zahir Shah (L) and President Hamid Karzai (R) raise their hands in prayer during the opening ceremony of the grand assembly (loya jirga) in Kabul yesterday. The meeting, attended by some 500 delegates from across Afghanistan, which was opened by Zahir Shah, will debate and ratify Afghanistan's first post-war constitution. Karzai said the constitution would offer Afghans a stable future under presidential guidance.