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Tribal Loyalties

By EDWARD WONG

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THE OCCUPATION OF IRAQ

Winning the War, Losing the Peace.

By Ali A. Allawi.

Illustrated. 518 pp. Yale University Press. \$28.

As the Iraq war enters its fifth year, an old saying can be heard more and more often in the homes, cafes and streets of the country: “Because of a lack of horses, they put saddles on the dogs.” There are no real Iraqi leaders, a Kurdish friend told me, and the Americans have blindly, and often desperately, propped up politicians who are venal, ineffective and more than a little megalomaniacal.

They are warlords living in compounds walled off from the rest of Iraq, driving through Baghdad in armored convoys to cut backroom deals with one another, deciding who will control which cities, ministries and reconstruction contracts. Their first priority is their own well-being, or that of their political party, tribe or ethnic-sectarian group. They spew venomous oratory and push through divisive policies that have helped drive the country into a civil war. Ordinary Iraqis speak their names with more than a hint of bitterness: Hakim, Sadr, Maliki, Chalabi, Ayad Allawi, Barzani, Talabani, Hashimi, Dulaimi, Mutlak.

Much has been written about the Bush administration’s seemingly endless series of miscalculations. But few authors have tried to pinpoint the role of the new Iraqi political class in shaping the catastrophe. Ali A. Allawi, one of the exiles who returned to Iraq to help run the country — first as defense minister, then as finance minister — attempts to do exactly that in “The Occupation of Iraq.”

His book is the first on the war written by a senior Iraqi official, and it is the most comprehensive historical account to date of the disastrous aftermath of the American invasion. Allawi writes in a straightforward, dispassionate manner, painstakingly documenting events from the rise of the Iraqi exile politicians in the 1990s to the sectarian cleansing that began sweeping Baghdad in 2006. Few institutions or policies escape his critical eye, and his words are all the more biting because, as a nephew of the former Pentagon favorite Ahmad Chalabi, he was among the Iraqis who benefited most from the toppling of Saddam Hussein.

Like other authors before him, Allawi harshly criticizes the American effort in Iraq, concluding that “Bush may well go down in history as presiding over one of America’s great strategic blunders. Thousands of servicemen have been the casualties of a failed policy.” Also like others, Allawi blames the zealotry of the neoconservatives and the corruption inside the Coalition Provisional Authority, the governing body led by L. Paul Bremer III and stocked with naïve young political appointees.

All that may be familiar to many readers and not much different from what journalists in Iraq have been writing for years. But few can speak as authoritatively about the shortcomings of the Iraqi leadership as Allawi can. He builds his analysis on the research of a prominent Iraqi social psychologist and historian named Ali al-Wardi. Western scholars have ignored Wardi’s work, but he was the one person who “has come close to unlocking the secrets of the Iraqi character,” Allawi writes.

Wardi believed, in Allawi’s words, that because of Iraq’s long history of being invaded, “the process of modernization and urbanization was skin deep in Iraq and that tribal values, born of the experience of surviving in the harsh environment of the desert, continued to hold sway for the vast majority of the country’s inhabitants.” Confronted with a hostile outside force, “Iraq would rapidly shed its civilized veneer and revert to the culture and values of tribal nomadism.” And though the state may be “a defining feature of advancing civilizations,” in Iraq it “stands in contrast to tribal solidarity as an organizing principle.”

There can be no truer description of Iraq since the American invasion. No unified government has emerged to impose control on the fractious country. The leaders bicker endlessly inside the Green Zone. The Shiite Arabs are willing to share little of their newfound power, the Kurds will brook no threat to their autonomy and the minority Sunni Arabs want nothing less than a return to the past as the rulers of Iraq.

Himself a Shiite, and closer to them than to the other groups, Allawi is all too aware of the unalloyed ambitions of the Shiite politicians. After the religious Shiite bloc won the greatest share of parliamentary seats in the elections of January 2005, it set out to remake the government in a purely sectarian cast. Allawi cites an internal document laying out a seven-point plan that included filling government security forces with recruits from the Badr Organization, a well-disciplined Shiite militia, and intensifying the process of de-Baathification, essentially a purge of Sunni Arabs from government. Those policies transformed what was at the time an incipient civil war into a wider-scale conflict between Sunni and Shiite militias. Meanwhile, “a tired and weary citizenry stood back and hoped against hope for some reprieve from lawlessness, violence, power blackouts, gasoline lines and water shortages.”

Yet for all his knowledge of Shiite machinations and the promise in his preface to write from “the perspective of an Iraqi insider,” “The Occupation of Iraq” lacks the insider details one might have expected from Allawi. There is little behind-the-scenes information here. Allawi rarely gets into the thoughts, motivations and hidden actions of the main Iraqi leaders.

One exception is his fascinating analysis of Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the enigmatic, reclusive cleric who rarely emerges from his home in the holy city of Najaf. The Americans fooled themselves, Allawi says, into thinking Ayatollah Sistani would distance himself from politics. For unlike his clerical mentor, who promoted a quietist school of Shiite Islam, Sistani is “vitaly concerned with the role of Islam in state and society.” He “does not

advocate a benign negligence or avoidance of all things to do with the state or government,” Allawi writes. Therefore, by fashioning a political process endorsed by the ayatollah that ultimately put religious Shiites beholden to Iran in power, the Americans undermined their goal of creating a secular, pro-Western nation.

This view of Sistani is not the one most foreign journalists have provided, and I wish Allawi had given us similar insights into Iraq’s other leaders. For the most part, however, his tone of distanced objectivity means we never really find out what makes them tick, what their personalities are like when they’re not in the public spotlight. That dispassionate style is particularly stultifying in the few instances where he appears in the book, because he writes about himself in the third person. Talking about an ill-fated agreement between Marine commanders and hard-line Sunni Arabs to create a Sunni militia in the city of Falluja, he says: “Ali Allawi, the Iraqi minister of defense, and the national security adviser were outraged that the deal had been struck behind their backs, and at the serious implications of handing over security of a key city to a force of questionable composition and loyalties.”

In the end, Allawi writes, Iraq’s politicians made “expedient or wild promises that took no notice of the prevailing conditions of insecurity, administrative chaos and dysfunctional government.” Iraq is now being overseen by its fourth government since the fall of Saddam Hussein. Throughout history, many countries suffered through dark periods of rule by weak and grasping leaders before a strongman emerged to bring unity from chaos. Post-invasion Iraq could very well follow the same pattern, though it could take years, or even decades — and that assumes it does not break up. But for the moment, as one senior Iraqi politician explained to me over dinner on his front lawn inside the Green Zone, “it’s about raw power.”

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