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Iraqis rally around imams

Shamsul Akmar

THE Finance Ministry building in Al Kanaa street in Baghdad looks as desolate as any other government building. It was not spared the ravages of the invasion but the damage is not as extensive as others.

There is, however, a local lore about the building which was built in the early 1980s. An Iraqi driver said the building was designed by an Israeli engineer.

"He decided to design on top of the building, the shape of the Star of David (the symbol of Israel) as a tribute to his homeland. Some time after the building was completed, Saddam (Hussein), who was in a helicopter flying above the building, noticed the symbol and directed the security forces to arrest the engineer. They said he was a spy for Tel Aviv and he was executed."

Such tales are commonplace in Iraq after the fall of Saddam.

But the intrigues in Iraq did not end after the collapse of the Saddam Government. If anything, they seemed to take greater proportions amid the chaos, lawlessness and the leadership vacuum.

Many Iraqis have started turning to the mosques and the imams.

And the imams seemed to have risen to the occasion - extending comfort, advice and even leading peaceful demonstrations against the US occupation.

But not all the imams or religious personalities were well-received or their advice accepted.

Such is the tale of London-based Sheikh Abdul Majid Al-Khoei, a respected Shia leader who was active in the Iraqi intifada (uprising) against Saddam in 1991.

He returned to Najaf, the holy Shia city some 160km south of Baghdad, after the Anglo-American troops started pushing towards the capital.

Some writers stated that the 50-year-old Sheikh Majid first tried to encourage the Shias to support the Americans and British and then discovered that such ideas did not go down well with his community.

He changed his stand, urging the Shias to remain neutral, and two days later, he was stabbed to death at the Imam Ali bin Abi Talib's mosque.

It is widely speculated that he had been killed because of his close association with the British Government and because he had miscalculated the sentiments of the Shias.

It seemed he failed to realise that the Shias' hatred for Saddam did not extend to their supporting the invading troops.

But Sheikh Mohamed Majid Al Emiri, a Shia imam of a mosque in Al Daura in the outskirts of Baghdad, dismissed the notion, saying Sheikh Majid was stabbed due to mistaken identity as he was sitting next to the intended target.

Whatever the theory over Sheikh Majid's death, the fact remains that even religious leaders are not spared from being targets of political assassinations.

It was then not surprising to see the leading Sunni imam in Iraq, Sheikh Ahmad Abed Al Qubeishi being surrounded by bodyguards while at his office or when he finished delivering his Friday sermon at the mosque of Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jailani in central Baghdad.

Immediately after the prayers ended, Sheikh Ahmad led the majority Sunni congregation and, joined by the Shias, led a demonstration along the streets of Baghdad.

It was the second consecutive demonstration after the Friday prayers he

led.

"It is not a protest against the Americans per se. Our demonstrations are to remind the Americans that they should fix what they have damaged in Iraq," said Sheikh Ahmad in an interview.

However, when asked about his personal sentiments about the Americans and British, Sheikh Ahmad said: "Words cannot describe my rage and anger for what they have done to Iraq.

"I fear we will end up like Afghanistan.

The US administration does not care about rebuilding the Iraq it has destroyed."

Despite the people rallying around him as they search for someone to fill up the leadership vacuum, Sheikh Ahmad, like many other Iraqi religious personalities interviewed, has no political ambitions.

Asked why not, Sheikh Ahmad said in the usual long-winded, analogy-filled reply of an Arabic speaker:

"I am not even fit to be a soldier, let alone a general. My heart feels for my people, the innocent children and the burden is too heavy for me to carry."

And finally the reply:

"I am not interested in becoming a politician. I hope to see an Arab leader rise from this crisis. I do not want a religious man to lead this nation. I want someone like Malaysia's Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to rule Iraq."

His reply surprised the Malaysian journalists interviewing him.

He chuckled and said: "I was in Malaysia for a few months in 1997. When I was there, I was proud to be a Muslim. It has a good system. If I can have a say in the rebuilding of Iraq, I would want the new prime minister or president of this nation to make Malaysia the model."

This aversion to be political leaders among the religious personalities seems to be prevalent among most of the Iraqi mullahs.

Shia imam of Al Daura Sheikh Mohamed Majid, despite being the guardian and defender of his congregation amid the chaos, said that he was not interested at all in being in office of politics.

"If I am offered a post in the Cabinet, I will turn it down. I am only interested in assisting my people rebuild their lives.

"The task of rebuilding the nation should go to the technocrats and administrators."

A similar reply came from Sheikh Muayad Al Adhami, the Sunni imam of the renowned Imam Abu Hanifa mosque in the Adhawiya district, also in Baghdad.

Another, Sheikh Hafiz Zidan Al Ubaidi, the aggressive Sunni imam of the Al Arqam mosque, also in the Al Daura district, was not concerned about political positions.

"If we have an Arab leader who is a good Muslim, it is sufficient. My role is to support him and if there is need to to oust the Americans, I shall rally our congregation, declare jihad and back the leader all the way."

Such is the commitment of the imams in playing the supporting role to the political leader that it is not surprising that the possibility of Iraq turning into another Iran seems quite remote.

Sheikh Ahmed put it quite succinctly:

"The only way this country can be ruled effectively is to have a Cabinet with a balanced representation between the Sunnis and Shias. If any sect dominates the Government, the leadership will not be effective."

Sheikh Muayad, however, said there was a more sinister motive behind the perception that the Shias and Sunnis were trying to outdo each other in securing power in Iraq.

"There is no such thing as the Sunnis going against the Shias. It has been systematically planted by the Western media and American intelligence operatives that there is such a rift between us.

"We are all Muslims and we have been practising our religion according to our different sects while respecting each other."

Such sentiments are echoed by Shia Sheikh Mohamed Majid of Al Daura, who said it did not matter whether the new leader of Iraq is a Shia or Sunni, so long as he is a good Muslim.

In this, Sheikh Ahmed said, lies the role of the Iraqi imams.

"It is up to us to unite the Shias and Sunnis. I believe it is heading towards that as evident during our demonstrations in which followers of both sects joined hands to protest against the Americans."

Most Iraqis believe that the good thing that has emerged from the invasion was the growing unity between the Sunnis and Shias which together, make up almost 97 per cent of the population.

Despite all the positive signs, Sheikh Ahmed was quite pessimistic about the future.

"The powerful nations which back Israel do not want to see Iraq become a nation. They want to see it divided so that they can fulfil the decree in the Old Testament that Babel must be destroyed.

"Iraq is Babel and that's what their mission is - to wipe Iraq from the face of the earth."

A bleak analysis by a leading mullah.

But Iraq has prevailed against the likes of Hulagu Khan, Tamerlane and other powerful barbaric rules in the past.

Said an Iraqi: "What is another foreign rule, barbaric or otherwise?"  
Indeed, they can only occupy the nation but never the people.

\* shamsulmk@nstp.com.my