

An  
unusually  
well-placed  
Middle Eastern  
diplomat could  
hardly believe  
his ears

when, last January, he was relaxing with some friends in Baghdad's Officers Club. "Thank you, Ceaucesco", said a group of Iraq's top soldiers, and they drank to it. President Saddam Hussain's government had just announced that it was lifting one of the most irksome restrictions in place since the beginning of the Gulf war in 1980—the ban on foreign travel—and the officers attributed this concession to the last and bloodiest of the great upheavals in Eastern Europe. The toast was all the more astonishing in that word had it—and in such a fear-ridden society the word carries as much weight as the

proven fact—a number of officers recently faced the firing squad as the first victims of the tape-recording “watches” introduced into the regime’s awesome armoury of eavesdropping techniques.

Outwardly, Saddam’s position looks as solid as ever. But, until the moment of their going, that is usually the way with absolute rulers. In reality, the shadow of East Europe hangs over the Middle East in more ways than one, and, as the officers’ extraordinary indiscretion shows, over nowhere more than Iraq, presided over by the Arab ruler who, in his personal megalomania, the corruptions of his entourage, the ferocity of his repression and the narrowness of his clan-based apparatus, most resembles the late Rumanian dictator.

Saddam is now bending all his efforts to escape from that shadow, and he has hit upon a means which ensures that the world is going to hear a lot more about this contemporary reincarnation of the classical Oriental despot in all his splendour, cruelty and caprice. He is trying for size the mantle of pan-Arab champion in a region now singularly devoid of credible heroes. At a time when the Arab-Israeli conflict threatens to enter a new, unprecedentedly vicious phase, possibly even its terminal one, this constitutes for him, self-styled victor of one war, the perfect field for a flashy foreign policy which risks another, one that will preoccupy disgruntled generals, who consider it was their victory not his, and distract his people from domestic woes so reminiscent of East Europe’s shattered communist order.

THE REGIME for which Ceausceco’s fate carries such ominous significance is bedevilled above all by the legacy of “Saddam’s Qadisiyah” (after the Arab’s great, early Islamic victory against the Persians), obligatory title for the war which he so flagrantly and inadvisedly began. It is true that to have brought the Iranians to an inconclusive ceasefire amounted to a great achievement for Saddam, but only in the light of the extremities to which, as a result of his original blitzkrieg, he was at times reduced. It is an achievement which Arabs are apt to appreciate much more than the Iraqis themselves. Where,

for them, lies the victory in an eight-year struggle which cost hundreds of thousands of dead, wounded and captured, immense physical destruction and economic havoc, yet still leaves the country on a permanent war footing, still seeking to re-negotiate the status of the Shatt al-Arab estuary, the disputed waterway which furnished Saddam with his official, but strictly minimum, war aim?

All the more reason, given these paltry results, for Saddam to recompense his people for their war-time sufferings. From the outset there were expectations, to some extent officially encouraged, in two broad areas: democratisation and material betterment. It is now clear that the people are most unlikely to get either.

Publicly, Saddam and his henchmen affect a complete indifference to East Europe. Communism was a flawed creed, they say, Baathism, as a native growth, is not. So there is no comparison between the two—QED. But privately, they are clearly obsessed by it, thoroughly aware that, in the eyes of their people, the comparisons are inescapable.

Like Ceaucesco's, Saddam's megalomania expresses itself, most overbearingly, in monumental architecture, where the public—an amazing array of bizarre or futuristic memorials to "his" Qadisiyah—merges with the private, his proliferating palaces, in grandiose tribute to the Leader-President, Knight of Arabism, Nation, Light of Our Days, and all the other attributes, bordering on the divine, which are daily ascribed to him.

Luckier than Ceaucesco, Saddam has all the immemorial relics of Mesopotamian civilization to identify himself with. He lovingly supervises that archaeological heresy, the restoration of ancient Babylon, "rebuilt"—as the new wall inscriptions say—"in the era of Saddam Hussain." But with his own Qadisiyah Palace he will outdo Nebuchadnezzar himself. "It will cost billions", said a diplomat, marvelling at the designs, published in the press, that call for a 17-metre base in commemoration of the "glorious 17 July (1968) Revolution", waterworks, including an imitation confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates, that will

grace its courtyards, and four ceremonial entranceways in emulation of the gates of Baghdad which pointed to the four corners of the empire in Abbassid times.

Meanwhile, he is busying himself with a lesser conceit. Construction of his palace on the top of Mount Sarsang, several thousand feet up in the Kurdish north, goes on by day and night, even in the thick of winter snows. If it symbolises anything it has to be his gas-assisted subjugation of the autonomy-seeking Kurds. From there he will survey a landscape in which at least three quarters of the villages have been razed to the ground. For again, luckier than Ceaucesco, Saddam has ruled long enough actually to carry through his great peasant "systemisation" scheme.

The people glimpse little of their demi-god behind his palace walls, and screen upon screen of security barriers. But he is otherwise omnipresent; from the moment one alights at Saddam International Airport, one is assailed at every turn with giant hand-painted portraits of him in all manner of poses—from bemedalled Field Marshall to jolly man of the people—and in an even greater variety of sometimes bizarre costumes—from Arab galabiyah to Siberian toga—that pour forth from the Saddam Arts Academy. And if he is not quite omniscient, his people are made to feel that he regulates everything down to veriest minutiae of their daily lives—even the instructions on how to make use of zebra crossings bear his name.

Now into its twenty third year, and with its last great internal convulsion eleven years past, Saddam's despotism has evolved its recognisable norms of conduct, and, however ferocious these may be, citizens are by and large safe if they respect them. But still, he likes from time to time to use that essential weapon of the ultimate tyrant, the occasional flamboyant, contemptuous act of supreme lawlessness or unpredictability, and the enforced prostration of his whole apparatus, in praise and rejoicing, before it.

There may have been compelling, if arcane, family-cum-bureaucratic reasons why his elder son Uday—whom, in 1988, he ordered to be tried for the murder of one his favourite

retainers—has now been brought home from exile, and restored to his official position as the President of the Iraqi Olympic Committee, and, behind the scenes, to much else besides. But as a public act of state, this clemency looked all the more arbitrary in a ruler who, during the war, once awarded the Order of Rafidain, one of Iraq's highest, to a father who ostensibly murdered his own son for desertion; which is perhaps all the more reason why the post office saw fit to commemorate the prodigal's return with a special stamp. And woe betide the official who forgets to address his president, in the Arab tradition, as Abu Udai (father of Udai).

**Y**ET THE ADULATION which Saddam requires simultaneously exasperates and bores him. He recently complained to his ministers that if he were to set himself up as seller of pebbles, he would find people to buy them for thousands, nay millions, of dinars, people who would tell him that from, such a hand, these were pearls, not pebbles. He clearly suffers all the loneliness of total power, and what, as an undoubtedly intelligent despot, he realises is its potentially dangerous ignorance.

It was before the fall of Ceausesco, but with what he called the new "pluralist trends" in the world very much on his mind, that Saddam instructed all Baath party members to submit regular written reports about what the people were saying. For their own reassurance the reports could be anonymous. He got no response, so he instructed party bosses to hold information seminars instead. At the first of these, Saadi Salih, President of the National Assembly, called on his audience, as "the eyes and ears of the leadership", to speak out. Again, nobody dared, until finally, after he had all but begged for someone to say something, one bold spirit did pipe up, and confirmed that the people were indeed complaining bitterly, and "making nasty jokes about the party and the leadership." But when Saadi, interrupting him, demanded some "concrete example" of this, the man took fright and refused point blank. So did everyone else. Saadi stormed out in a fury. Perhaps he had forgotten, remarked an exile, that, in spite of promised

liberalisation, the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) decree of 6 November 1986, which prescribes the death penalty for the deliberate and public insult of the President, the RCC, the Baath party or the National Assembly, remains on the statute books.

It was also before the fall of Ceaucesco that Saddam raised the question of democracy with some of his closest collaborators. Transcripts leaked to an exile Arab weekly furnish a rare insight into the internal debates, and the often peculiar reasoning, of one of the world's most secretive systems. Nothing would happen in Iraq, Saddam assured his confidants, so long as he was alive, because he would "cut off the head of anyone who tries to mount a coup"; however, "if we don't apply democracy somebody not worth a row of beans will one day come out of the night and say that 'I represent Iraq.'"

But what kind of democracy? They all agreed that there could be no place in it for those who had not supported "Saddam's Qadisiyah", which of itself rules out a hefty segment of the relevant opposition, "chauvinists" (Kurdish-based parties), "sectarians" (Shi'ite-based ones) and "lackeys" and "traitors" in general; perhaps, Saddam suggested, there should be a "another party like the Baath, but in strong competition with it, so that the original one can develop."

But Izzat Ibrahim, RCC Vice President, found even this too much. Since, according to his calculations, there were no less than fifteen million Baathists (in a country of 16 million, 60 percent of whom are under 16 years of age) "we will be obliged to bring people from the party and tell them: 'form parties'." How, he asked, could one expect a self-respecting member or the "vanguard party" thus to renege on his principles? He failed to mention what surely ranks as a much more formidable deterrent than that: the decree which, since the 1970s, has made it a capital offence to leave the Baath party and join another also remains on the statute books.

The debate seems to confirm what the swelling ranks of exile opposition forces have said all along: that Saddam will never liberalise a system which depends for its survival on his

terrifying charisma; that, if anything, many of his inner circle, who know that if he goes they assuredly will too, are even more afraid of liberalisation than he is; that he is every bit as trapped as Ceaucesco was in an absolutism which is apt to grow more paranoid, brutal and capricious the more it feels the need to appear otherwise. "God spare us this talk of democracy and pluralism", wrote the communist opposition newspaper *Tarik al-Shaab* recently, "all our people's experience of this regime is that when it starts doing that its tyranny grows worse than ever."

There was a time when for Baathist and other such "revolutionaries" of their generation Arab monarchies were reactionaries and Western lackeys which it was their business to sweep away. In Iraq itself, the Hashemite dynasty came to a bloody end in 1958. But scholars have now "discovered" that President Saddam Hussain is related to the Hashemites and, as such, descended from the Prophet Muhammad himself.

So if, one day, he were to declare himself king that would merely set the seal on a revisionism, some already call it a counter-revolution, that has long been under way. Saddam still proclaims himself a Baathist, but in his search for a much loftier personal legitimacy, he has risen above mere party and its dogmas. Of the Baath's famous trinity, Unity, Freedom and Socialism, Saddam can only credibly claim to have done something about the third. But much of what he did he is now undoing.

When the 1980 Gulf war began, "guns and butter" was the cliché generally applied to Saddam's economic strategy. He could then afford to preserve the state's overwhelming preponderance in economic life, bountiful source of employment in civil service, industry and agriculture, of welfare and subsidies. But with the slump in oil revenues, and vast war debts, he embarked on a new policy which systematically undermines those "gains of the masses" which were the pride of his revolution's early years.

He has abolished trade unions, legislated in favour of bosses, ruthlessly pruned the civil service, cut back on welfare and services, permitted private universities and hospitals,

privatised some seventy five state industries, agricultural production and distribution, enabled privileged merchants to import what they like with what, for others, would be "illegal" hard currency, and generally opened up the economy to the free play of market forces. And the Minister of Economy says abroad what he never says at home: Iraq faces ten years of "austerity."

It is Thatcherism with a vengeance—but in an underdeveloped country with no built-in democratic constraints, and weak societal ones. And the inequities which, at least to begin with, such a policy is bound to entail are greatly augmented by the nature of the regime which is applying it.

It might be going too far to say that Saddam runs the economy like a feudal monarch, with his clansmen from the small provincial town Takrit as the barons whose services are rewarded by a share in the monarch's estate, but that is the general direction in which, with only the exigencies of modern statehood to hold him in check, his instincts push him. Most of his key executives are members of his own immediate family; the whole apparatus is packed with Takritis. And now, the new economic policy has furnished the Takritis with rich opportunities to reinforce their political power with an all-pervading economic power. They are the aristocrats in a hierarchy of patronage, both legal and illegal, systematic and random, which chiefly rewards the conscienceless and the sycophantic.

At the apex of this pyramid there are few accounts, let alone accountability. True military and related spending is a state secret. If the estimated \$250 million spent on, say, the Martyrs Memorial could conceivably be classified as a "defence" allocation, the same can hardly be said of the projected "Qadisiyah Palace" which will dwarf it.

In the great privatising bazaar, Takritis get the lions' share, and the choicest morsels. "There are two kinds of Takritis", said a businessman, "those on Saddam's mother's side, the Tulfahs, who simply rob the state, and those on his father's side, the Majids, who steal directly from the people,



forcing businessmen to take them into partnership and then grabbing it all from themselves." The scale is vast in either case. When Defence Minister Khairallah Tulfah died last year in one of Iraq's remarkably frequent helicopter crashes, his father reportedly sold off some 500 cars in his private collection.

Saddam seems to encourage corruption in his bureaucracy even as he sometimes complains about it. A high civil servant, on say 350 dinars (£60 at the real rate of exchange) a month, could not begin to live decently without it. Corruption fits in with his royal style, the illicit bounty which inculcates a loyalty built on fear. Its beneficiaries know that if, for some reason, they incur the displeasure of the uncontrollable monster, he will not be content with simply withdrawing what he bestows. Almost everyone is corrupt, but every now and then, someone, like a recent Mayor of Baghdad, must be seen to lose his head for it.

The royal munificence is partly institutionalised, as, for example, in the shape of the cars which high-ranking officers and civil servants can buy every two years at the official rate of exchange—and then promptly sell off at the market price for twenty times as much. Or it is the random gift of the monarch for whom the state treasury is his own—as, for example, the forty nine cars which Saddam distributed on his last visit to Amman, the best in bullet-proof Mercedes for King Hussein, Porsches for his sons, lesser models for minister and high officials, and \$1,000 each for the Iraq embassy staff, from ambassador to doorman.

**P**RIVATISATION AND AUSTERITY combine in a vicious assault on the living standards of everyone except those, the "new money" and the residual old, who profit rankly from it. There are really two economies, the state-controlled one based on the official rate of exchange of some three dollars to the dinar, and the new free-market one, based on the illicit, but surreptitiously tolerated, one of four dinars to the dollar. While those on fixed incomes continue to benefit from the subsidies on basic necessities they are bludgeoned by

the ever rising prices that derive from the private sector, free-market imports, or the gray area where the two economies intersect.

As luxury goods suddenly flood into the country, and incite the conspicuous display of the fat cats who alone can afford them, the price of meat, vegetables, rents, spare parts soar for everyone else. Of the diminishing numbers with access to state supermarkets, many now queue up for their ration of meat at 2 dinars a kilo only to sell it off for eight. A top university professor said: "I tell the butcher I want scraps for my dog, I feed them to my family."

Saddam is aware of the underlying political dangers. But his corrective interventions are apt to be erratic, improvised or cosmetic, or detrimental to his higher economic strategies. It was after the food riots in Jordan that the government conceded its first pay rise, an estimated 25 percent, since the beginning of the war. Yet according to its own, rosy calculations, inflation in, for example, foodstuffs was 169 percent for the period.

It was after Ceausescu's fall that he allocated an unbudgeted—and, given Iraq's debt-servicing ratios, financially punishing—\$500 million for emergency purchase of foodstuffs.

It was after he chanced upon a disturbing article in a specialised economic journal that he summoned the author to his palace, went on a surprise walk-about in the market place, and ordered a restoration of price-fixing, which runs counter to the basic rationale of his new economics.

He can even, on occasion, rein in the fiercely resented licence of the Takritis themselves. Apprised a few weeks ago about the multi-million dinar mansion which a twenty-year-old Takriti security man had built for himself, he again went out to see for himself, had the culprit paraded on television and imprisoned for twenty years. But interventions of this kind are very judicious. The culprit belonged to the Majid clan, and at the moment Saddam finds it expedient to favour the Tulfahs.

On yet other occasions, however, his interventions can veer just as arbitrarily in a contrary direction; he once personally ordered a five-fold increase in the price of tomato

paste, and summarily dismissed his Minister of Labour for introducing new limits on working hours—because these contradicted his “directives for continuous work.”

**M**ATERIAL HARDSHIP exacerbates a general moral decline and social disruption which the Iraqi opposition attributes to the pernicious impact of the prolonged impressment of the country's youth into an unpopular war by a dictatorship that systemtically relies on the worst in human nature.

There has been an upsurge in violent crime. Highway robberies are common, carried out either by the bands of army deserters who still hide out in the southern marshes and other places, or by common criminals undeterred by the ferocious penalties liable to be meted out. Last summer a gang was specialising in the theft of Mercedes cars and assaults on their drivers, or so at least a public completely starved of official information on such matters firmly persuaded itself; some saw it as a form of protest against the insolent disparities of wealth. A general demobilisation of the long-serving conscript army could only aggravate social tensions.

The growth of prostitution in what is still a very conservative society clearly disturbs Saddam. But here he stepped in with a solution so arbitrary, reactionary and grotesque that, for once, he had to retreat under pressure of public opinion. Iraq's women's organisations and embarrassed, Iraq-supporting Arab “progressives” caused the authorities to pretend that the Revolutionary Command Council never did issue that infamous decree which conferred on Iraqi males the right to kill their adulterous female relatives.