



Iraqi Constitution: Attitudes Towards Democracy

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THE IRAQI CONSTITUTION PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION

After the liberation of Iraq from the Ba'athist regime of Saddam Hussein, the country has embarked on a transition towards democracy. The successful establishment and consolidation of democracy will be determined by various factors. A core component of this will be popular legitimization of democracy as a system of governance. Investigating the political culture present today in Iraq will shed valuable light on whether there exists a popular desire for democracy and hence indicate the likelihood of a successful transition.

Young people are a major portion of Iraq's eligible voters (63.1%)¹, and their beliefs and attitudes will have a decisive impact on the country's democratization. University students represent the most-educated tier of Iraq's young men and women. The prospect of democracy in Iraq largely rests on the shoulders of these students, as they will be the future leaders and policy makers of this country. In a nation that has experienced decades of dictatorship and where religious influence runs deep, there is a need to ascertain young people's understanding of democracy and their desire and commitment to it.

Current university students are old enough to have lived through the three Gulf wars as well as the UN sanctions imposed in 1991. Their experience of normal civil society is limited due to the totalitarian nature of the Ba'athist state. Universities were not immune from the regime's reach. The majority of professors were members of the Ba'ath party and Ba'athist student groups were active throughout campuses and kept a close eye on fellow students. Rather than places of political and social dialogue, universities were just another means of indoctrination and control by the state where students were actively coerced into joining the Ba'ath party.

With the fall of Saddam Hussein the regime's shackles have fallen away from universities and political activity within them has flourished to a certain degree. Whilst political parties were quick to establish offices around the country, they have been slow in reaching out to the young generation of university students. Student wings of the major political parties either do not exist or are yet to have any real following on campus.

How young Iraqi men and women voted and how they will vote rests on their, as of yet, largely unexplored beliefs and attitudes. In order to explore these beliefs and attitudes, the Iraqi Prospect Organization surveyed a nationally representative, stratified, probability sample of 834 Iraqi university students about their attitudes towards democracy.

METHODOLOGY

The instrument for survey was a structured questionnaire⁴ consisting of approximately 40 items that covered areas of understanding and attitudes towards democracy and secularism. Face-to-face interviews were conducted between December 1 and January 29 by 25 trained pollsters at university campuses. Interviews were conducted in the universities of Baghdad, Mustansariyah (located in Baghdad), Basra and Mosul. The number of students interviewed at each university was proportional to the number of students that attend that institution.

University	Number of respondents
Baghdad	411
Basra	110
Mosul	102
Mustansariyah	211

Male : Female ratio = **414 : 420**

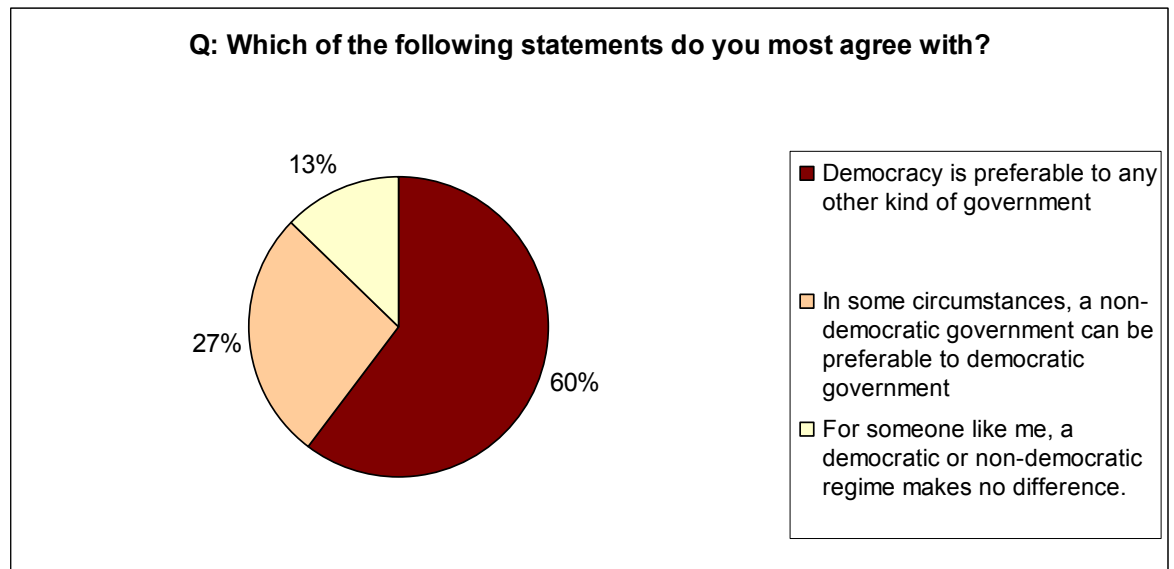
Median age: **22.4** years.

From a sample of 955 at total, 834 valid interviews were obtained, rendering a sample rate of 87.3%. The overall margin of error for the survey is **±4%** at a confidence interval of 95%.

RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Support for Democracy

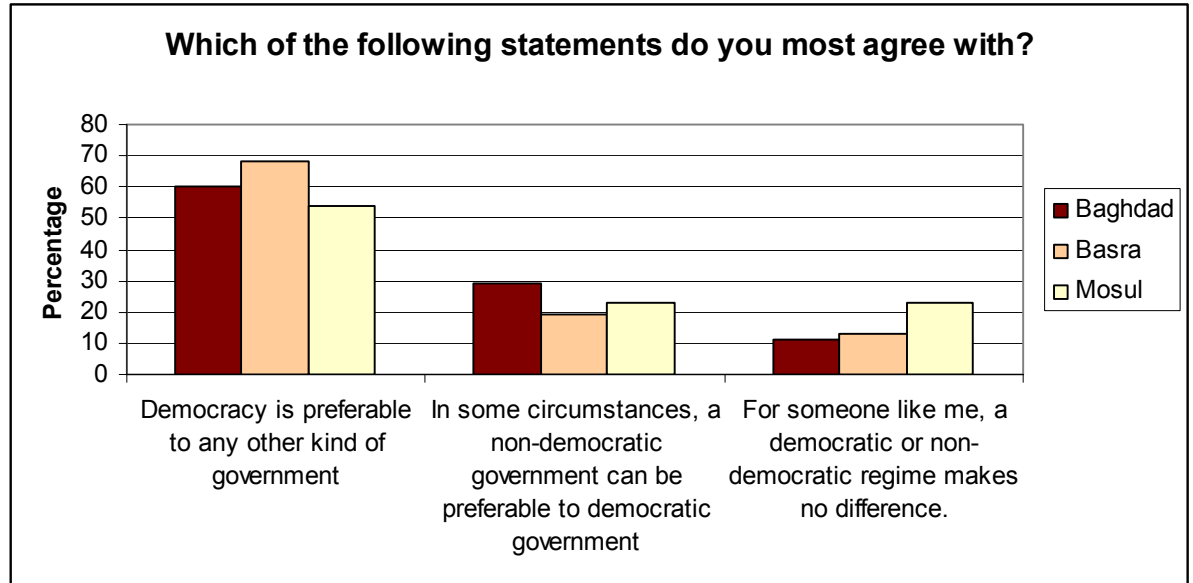
To establish levels of support for democracy interviewees were given three statements and asked which they most agreed with. While 60% agreed with the statement that democracy is preferable to any other kind of government a significant proportion, 27%, believed that there were circumstances where a non-democratic government was preferable. 13% of respondents were indifferent to the type of system governing them.



Comparing support for democracy between cities shows that it was in the southern city of Basra that most respondents (68%) felt that democracy was the most superior form of governance, followed by Baghdad (60%) and lastly the Northern city of Mosul (54%).

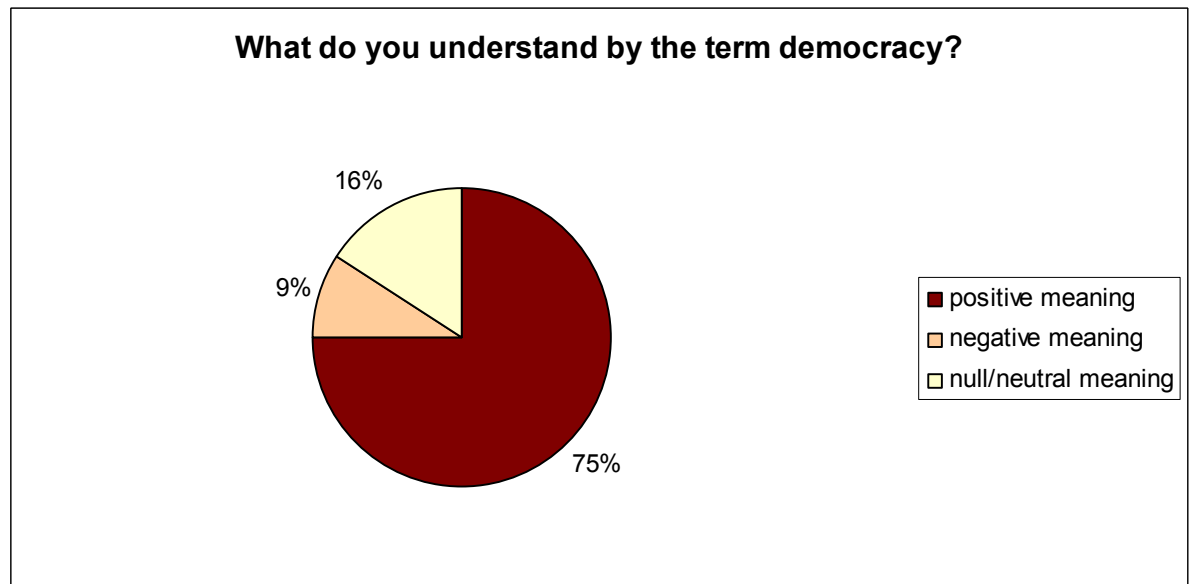
There is broad agreement that democracy is the only valid form of governance in a country. However, a significant proportion of people are yet to be convinced about the superiority of democracy in comparison to other forms of rule. There is also a clear regional variation, with more people believing democracy to be a superior form of government the more south you travel.

Since Basra is predominantly Shi'i, Mosul is predominantly Sunni and Baghdad is mixed this suggests that Shi'i students are slightly more committed to democracy than Sunni students.



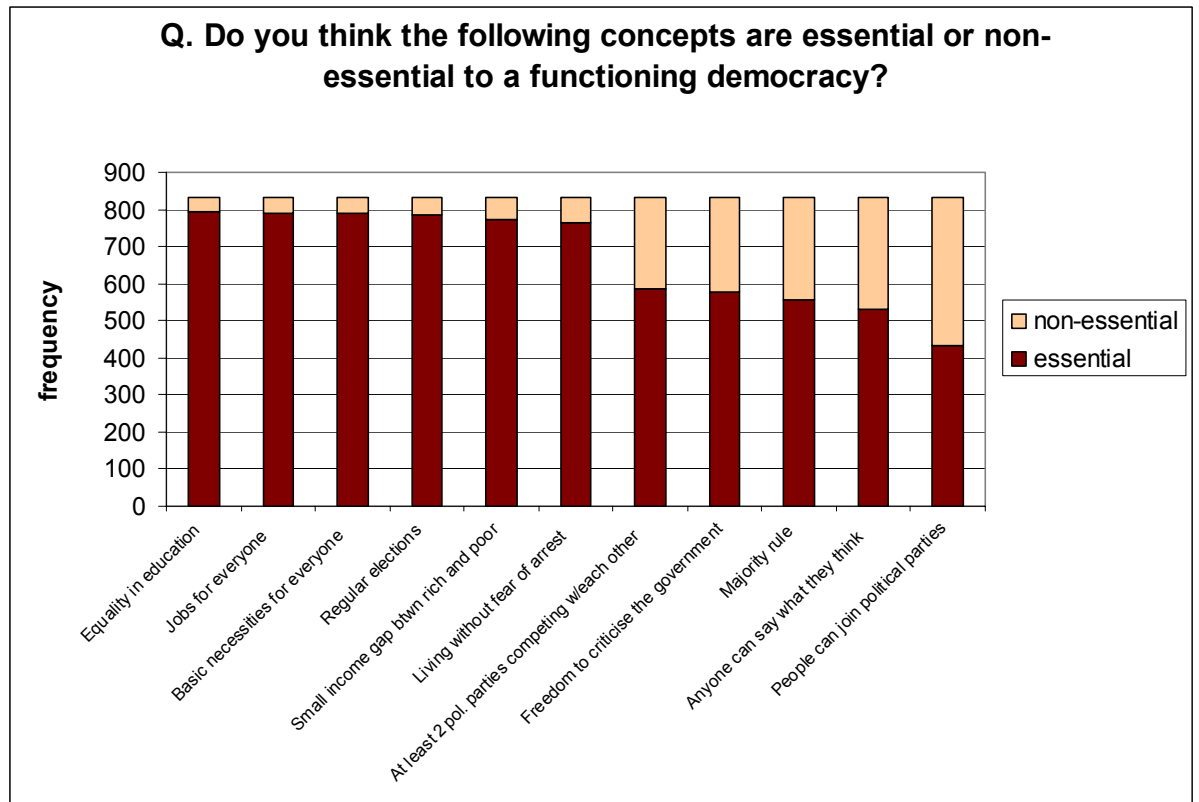
Perception of Democracy

To investigate attitudes towards the term 'democracy', students were required to choose whether they thought that democracy was a positive, negative or neutral term. The large majority of interviewees, 75%, believed democracy to be a positive definition, while only 9% thought it was negative.



Understanding of Democracy

Students were then asked about what elements, that were normally associated with the term democracy, they considered essential to a functioning democracy and which were non-essential. The responses largely favored the perceived economic benefits such as equality in education (95%), jobs (95%) and a small income gap (92%) rather than political elements such as multi-party politics (70%), freedom of speech (63%) and freedom to join political parties (51%). This indicates a more instrumental view of democracy where it is defined by its substantive outcomes as opposed to the intrinsic model that views democracy in terms of civil and political rights (Diamond 1999²). Such a flawed understanding of democracy is likely to have resulted from the economic hardships people have faced, especially during the previous regime, and their observation that countries with strong economies tend to have democratic systems.



There is some understanding, although superficial, of what democracy is with the vast majority of students, 94%, stating

regular elections to be an essential component. Elections are almost always the first notion, and usually the predominant concept, to be initially associated with democracy. However, an equally high number of students (91%) thought that living without fear of arrest was an essential component of democracy. This reveals the effect the previous regime has had on the people, and this has matured people's understanding of democracy further by providing the only other concept that is almost universally accepted.

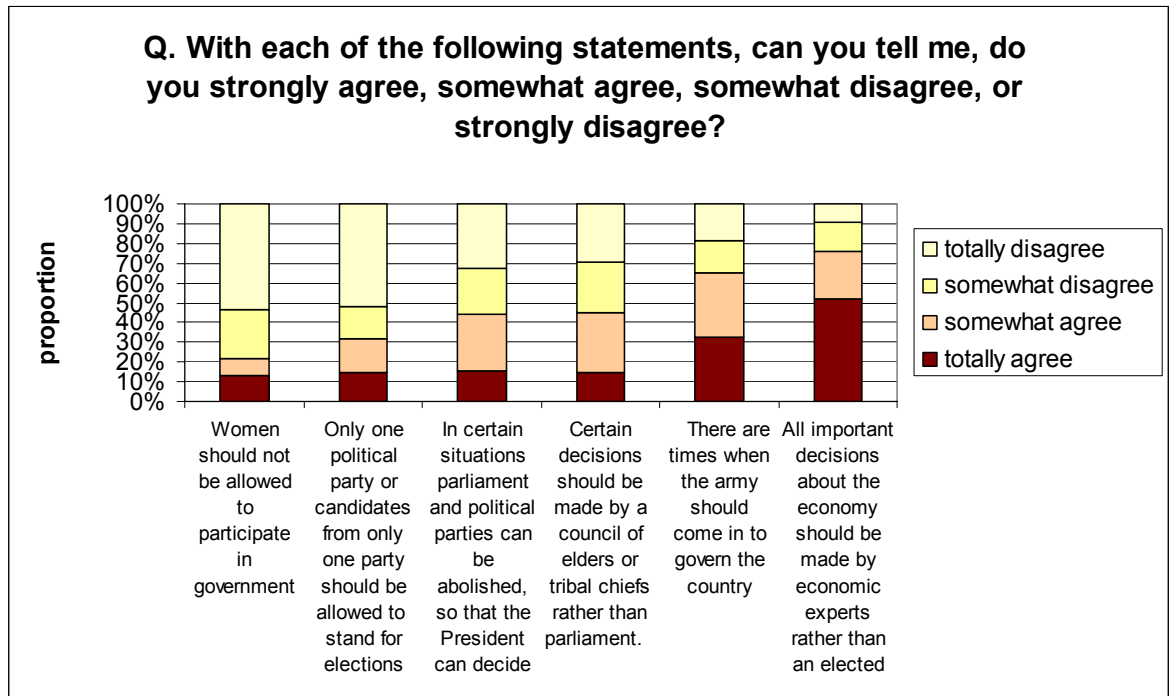
The components which significant numbers of respondents viewed as non-essential mostly revolved around the democratic characteristic of pluralism. Around 30% of respondents did not believe that freedom to criticize the government or multi-party politics were an essential component of democracy. Surprisingly, 37% did not think freedom of speech was an essential component of democracy. This relatively low level of support for numerous opinions to exist in society is likely to stem from a false perception of the cause of the current instability in the country and the oppression faced under the former regime. Plurality of opinions, whether from freedom of speech or multi-party politics, is seen to cause instability. Experience has taught many that when two groups disagree they fight each other. This was how the Ba'ath Party dealt with other political groupings and this is how the current insurgency is behaving. A significant proportion do not seem to have realized that it is not plurality of opinions that produces instability, but the resort to violence which does.

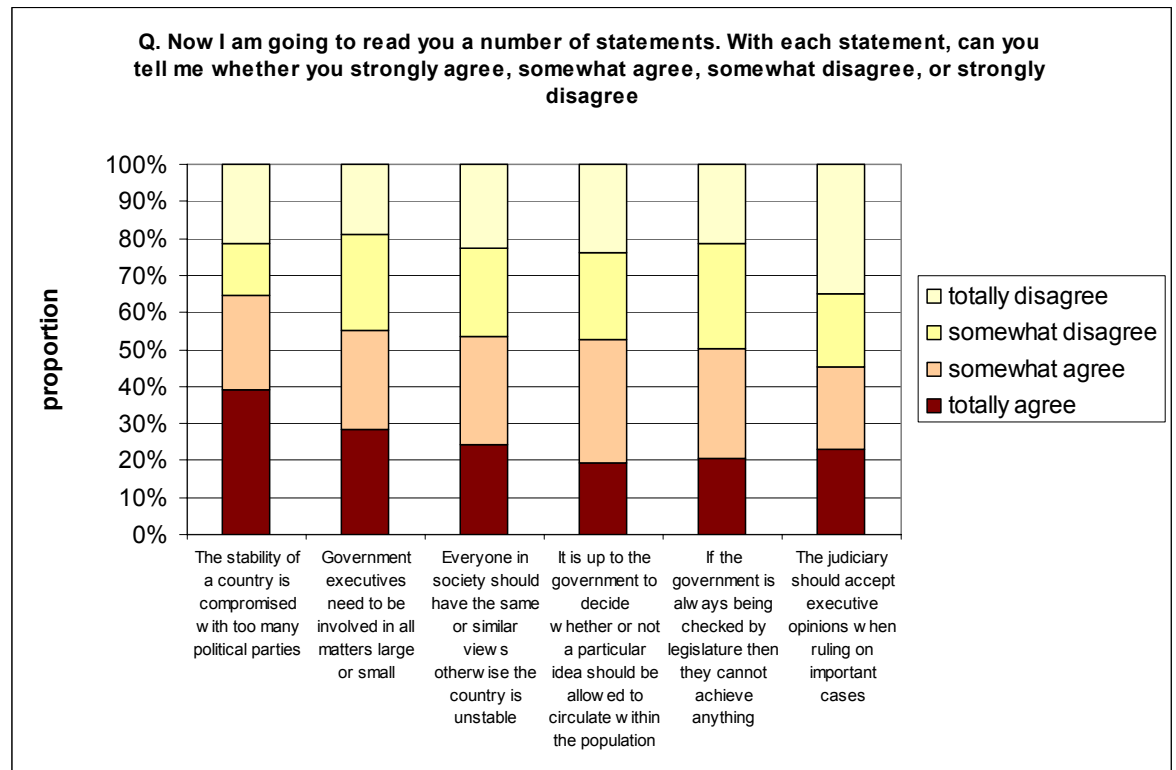
Given the distinct multi-ethnic make-up of Iraq, it is not surprising that relatively low numbers of respondents felt that majority rule was not an essential part of democracy. A majority was most likely seen in terms of an ethnic or sectarian grouping rather than a majority of people sharing the same political outlook.

The component that scored lowest was freedom to join political parties, with only 51% thinking this to be essential for democracy. While this might seem strange, it may be explained by a predominantly negative attitude amongst ordinary Iraqis towards political parties. Prior to liberation political parties have always been associated only with the Ba'ath Party, which interfered in every aspect of people's lives. The formerly exiled political parties have struggled to overcome this perception as previous polls have shown⁶.

Democratic Attitudes

Interviewees were given certain scenarios which would investigate their commitment towards democracy. All scenarios were non-democratic and therefore it would be expected that a person dedicated to democracy would reject them. 78% of respondents somewhat or strongly rejected the idea of women not being allowed in government; 68% of those interviewed rejected the idea of a one party state but only 56% opposed the scenario of a parliament being abolished to be replaced by a president. Opinions were split when it came to supporting the idea of the army's intervention in politics with just 55% somewhat or strongly opposing it. Similar figures were found when students were asked their opinion about whether certain key decisions could be made by unelected tribal chiefs and elders with only 55% opposing this notion. As much as 65% of respondents thought that important economic decisions should be taken by unelected experts rather than parliament.





A more in-depth investigation of students' attitudes towards democracy was carried out with interviewees being given statements that referred to the functioning of a state and asked about whether they agreed or disagreed with it. A respondent with a better understanding of the workings of a democratic state would disagree with the statements that were given. Surprisingly, the percentages of those who somewhat or strongly disagreed with the statements ranged only between 35% to 55%.

There was a large majority of people that rejected the idea of women being barred from government which reflects positively on Iraqi culture, given the general notion of a deeply entrenched patriarchal society in the Middle East.

Given Iraq's history of military coups and the rise of one-man dictatorships, it is surprising that greater numbers did not reject the idea of the army's involvement in politics and the abolishment of parliament by a president. While a significant proportion of students may not be convinced in democracy to reject non-democratic alternatives, and so are uncommitted to the idea, the fragile security situation is likely to have played a role in influencing student's opinions. The desire for stability in

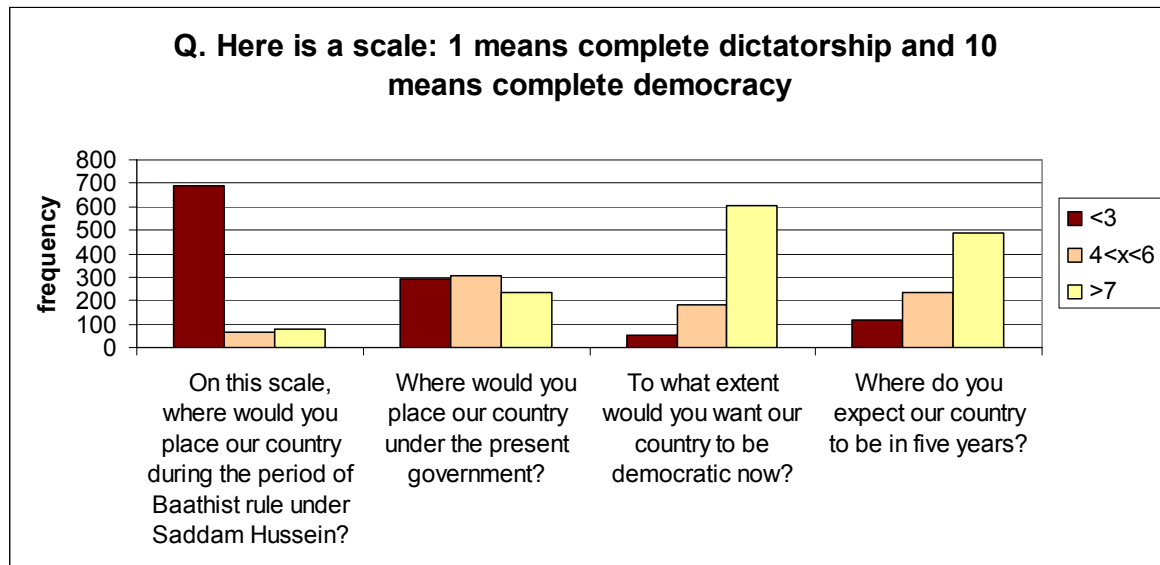
the country has lead some to support the army's involvement in politics or the apparent wish for a 'strong man'.

These relatively low figures indicate a somewhat superficial understanding of democracy on the part of many respondents. There was majority agreement with the idea that multiple political trends and ideas have a deleterious effect on a country's stability, supporting the previous deduction that there exists an association made by young Iraqis of a pluralistic society with violence and instability.

Only 45% disagreed with the idea of the government executive interfering with the independence of the judiciary. One possible reason for the apparent disregard for the judiciary's independence is that under the previous regime the judiciary was well-known to be corrupt and easily bought-off, in addition to being 'under the thumbs' of Saddam's henchman. It is crucial that the independence and integrity of the judiciary is restored and these results suggest it is equally important to restore people's faith in this branch of the state.

Iraq and Democracy

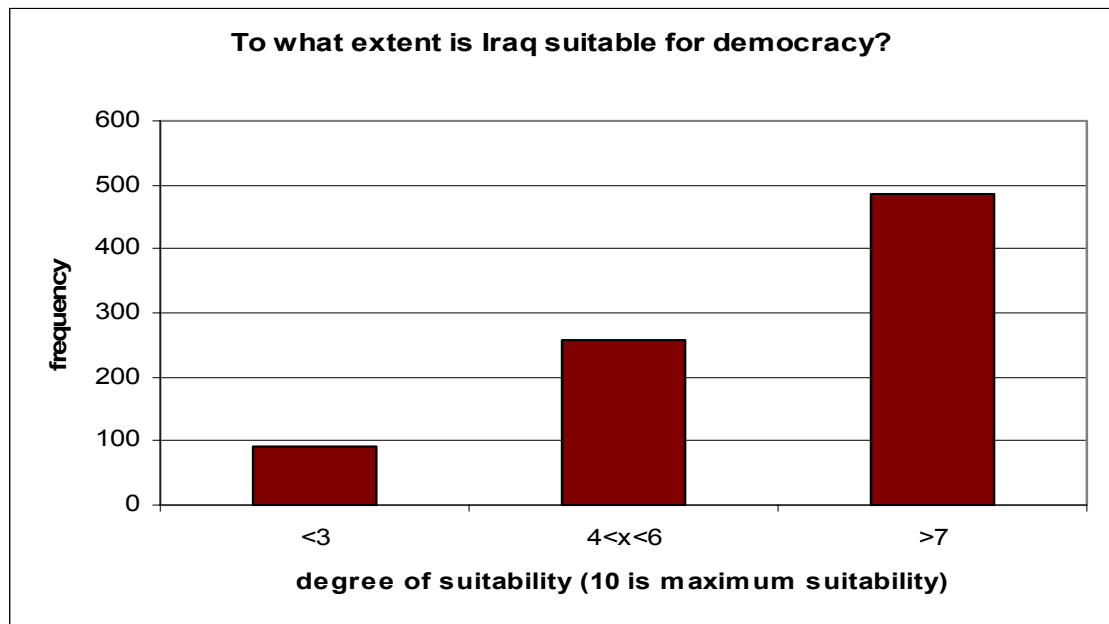
Interviewees were asked to describe the position of their country in terms of democracy on a perceived scale of 1 to 10 where 1 was a dictatorship and 10 a complete democracy. The large majority of respondents (83%) thought that the previous Ba'ath rule tended towards dictatorship (<3). Their views on the interim government were split with similar numbers of people placing the government in the undemocratic, somewhat democratic and democratic categories. In comparison, 72% of respondents gave a score of 7 or more for where they wanted their country at the time of the survey, but only 58% thought that Iraq would reach a score of 7 or more in five years time.



The clear shift towards greater democracy demonstrates that people evidently feel real change is in progress and that the transition period is bringing brought about democratization.

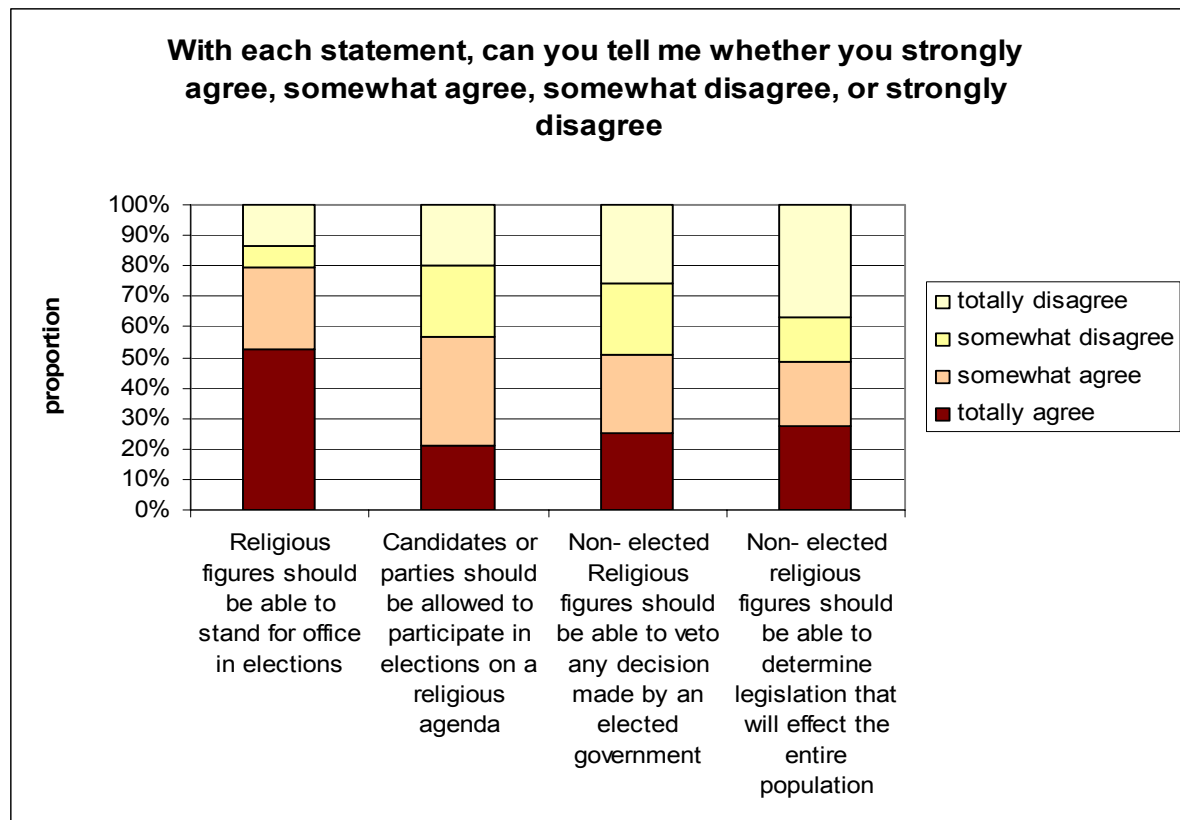
A high figure of 72% of Iraqi students wanted their country to achieve a high democratic score. This certainly indicates a desire from the majority of students for their country to progress and reach a strong democratic state in the near future. Yet a lower number (58%) thought Iraq could achieve this within five years. There are two possible explanations as to why they might think like this – the first is that 5 years is too short a time, the second possibility is that while they wish Iraq to be more democratic they believe that it is not suited for democracy. This query was addressed in the following question were interviewees were asked about the extent to which they thought Iraq was suitable for democracy.

58% of respondents strongly felt Iraq was suitable for democracy by giving a score of 7 or more. This figure can be compared to the same figure of 58% in the previous question that believed that Iraq would score highly on the democratic scale within five years. While there is a majority who believe that Iraq is strongly suited to democracy, a significant proportion who want their country to be more democratic do not believe the country is suitable for greater democracy.



Secularism

The next set of questions focused on students' thoughts on the relationship of religion and state. A large percentage of respondents (80%) strongly or somewhat agreed with the idea of religious figures being allowed to stand for office. Interviewees were roughly evenly split over the idea of candidates or parties being allowed to stand on a religious agenda (57% in favor). However, just over half agreed with non-elected religious officials being allowed to veto government decisions. 53% of those interviewed disagreed with the idea of non-elected religious officials being able to determine legislation.

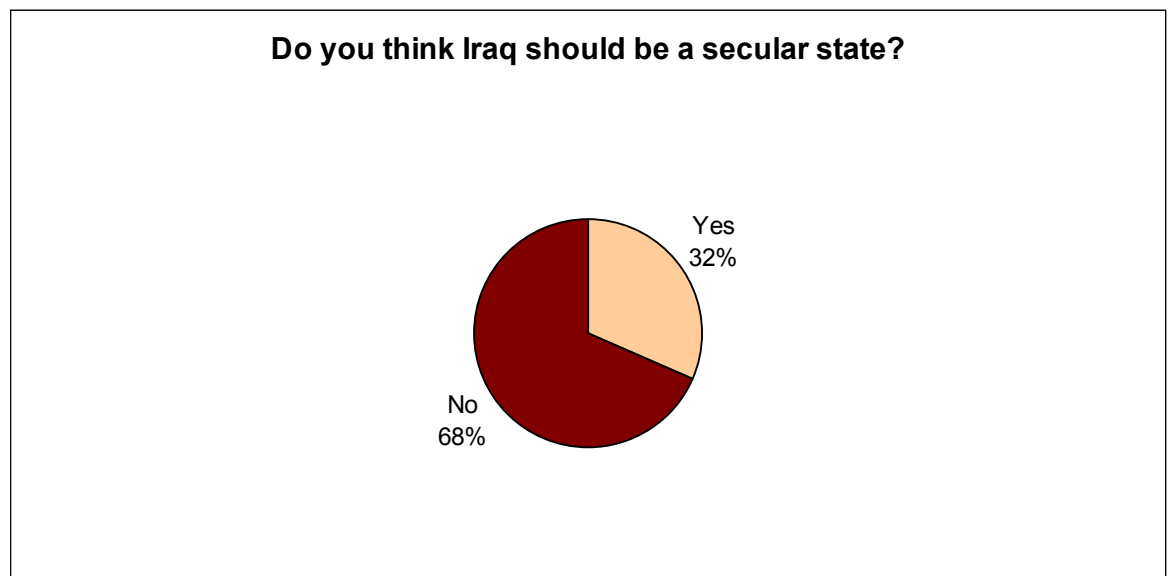


The questions were asked in order to identify the 'acceptable' limits of the religious authorities' powers within a functioning state. In terms of the relationship between religion and politics, there was an acceptance by the majority of respondents for religious figures to be able to stand for elections, while just over half somewhat or strongly agreed with the idea of religious figures standing on a religious agenda. This suggests that any form of separation of religion from politics, similar to the secular system of France or Turkey, will not be accepted by the majority of young Iraqis. A factor that might have influenced these results is the recent actions of the grand Shi'i religious scholar Sayyid Sistani. He issued a fatwa demanding Iraq's draft constitution be written by an elected assembly and later intervened last summer to diffuse the crisis in Najaf with the troublesome Muqtada Al-Sadr.

The next set of questions looked at attitudes of the relationship of religion and state. Approximately half of respondents did not disagree with the idea of non-elected religious figures being able to veto government decisions and even draft legislation. While these answers do not enable us to see how students view the

role of religious authority within a functioning state, it is clear that a significant proportion of respondents recognize the religious establishment as a genuine form of authority within the country. It is worth noting that significantly less people rejected the idea of the separation of religion from state as opposed to the separation of religion from politics.

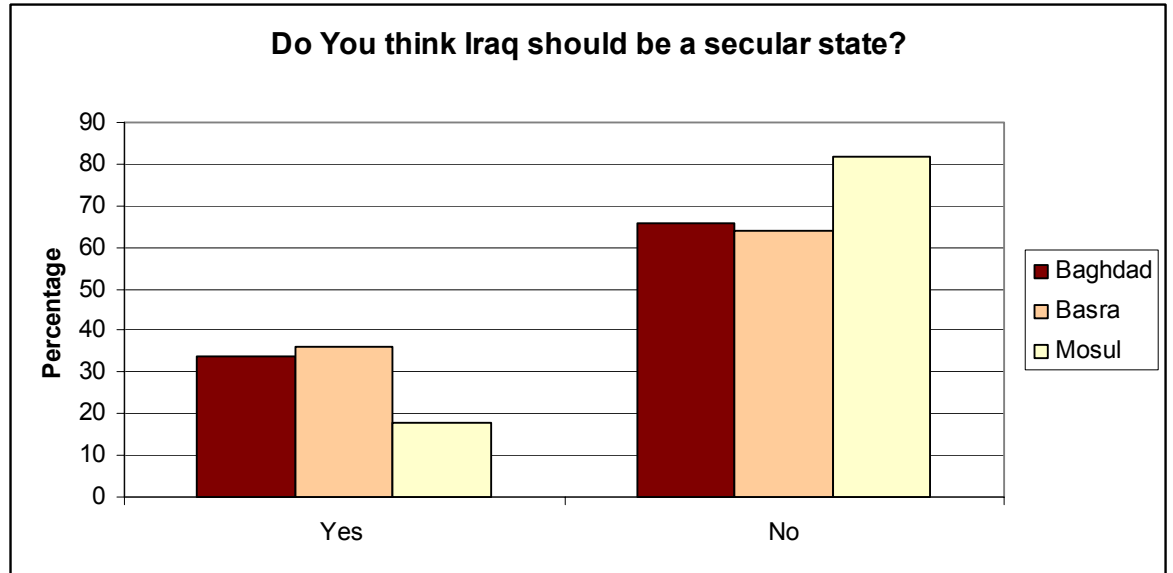
A direct question was given to interviewees that looked at their opinions about whether Iraq should be a secular state. A majority of 68% of respondents rejected the idea of Iraq being a secular state.



While observing that 68% of respondents rejected the idea of a secular state only 47-51% of them agreed with religious figures being allowed to interfere with the workings of the state. This discrepancy suggests that a significant proportion of young Iraqis do not fully understand the term secularism and so reject the notion even though they hold the view that religion and state should be separated. The word 'secular' has a different meaning to some people in Iraq, not to mean separation of religion and state, but to mean anti-religion.

Attitudes towards a secular state differed significantly between cities. Basra was the city with most respondents supporting a secular state (36%) and similar numbers (34%) also supported a secular state in Baghdad. In Mosul however, only 18% of respondents supported a secular Iraq. This finding supports the recent poll carried out by the International Republican Institute

in December 2004 that showed more people in Sunni-dominated regions felt that religion had a special role in government than people in the Shi'i-dominated south⁵.



CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

What can be concluded from the preliminary findings of this poll is that there exists broad support for democracy to establish itself in Iraq, and furthermore there is strong expectation and a desire for its consolidation within the next few years. However these results have also highlighted the lack of in-depth understanding of the term democracy on the part of students. There is poor recognition of what are considered essential components of democracy as well as a perception that democratic characteristics, such as the existence of multiple opinions or political trends within a society, are synonymous with a country's instability.

There were differences noted between the regions included in the survey with higher percentages of respondents agreeing with the superiority of democracy the more south you went. Attitudes relating towards the relationship of religion and state also differed with more students favoring a secular state in Basra and Baghdad than in Mosul. This may reflect a slight difference between Sunni and Shi'i attitudes.

It seems as though the majority of students are quite happy to support the idea of democracy taking root in the country and furthermore they expect this to take place in the near future. However, when it comes to awareness of what democratization entails, there is significantly less understanding.

The enthusiasm for democracy that this poll has demonstrated must be seized upon to develop a more in-depth understanding amongst young Iraqis. There is a clear need for programs that serve to inform and educate young Iraqis about the essential components of democracy and the steps needed to be taken to construct a viable democratic state and civil society. A deeper understanding amongst young Iraqis will extend the roots of democracy and strengthen the country's commitment and resolve to see this through in the face of the continuing hardships.

While parts of this poll might paint a somewhat grim picture for the establishment and consolidation of democracy in Iraq, one has to bear in mind that these young students have never experienced genuine democracy or a pluralistic civil society. The real desire and expectation for democracy to work in this

country, seen in the survey, demonstrates that Iraq is fertile for successful democratization. However, without sustained efforts to build-up civil society and serious work to develop people's understanding of democracy and democratic values, especially amongst young Iraqi men and women whom Iraq's democratic hopes rest on, then democratization will fail.

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<http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/iz.html#People>
2. Diamond, L (1999) *Developing Democracy: Toward Consolidation*. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
3. Stedman, S. ed, *Botswana: Political Economy of Democratic Development*, Boulder: Lynne Rienner Press, 1993.
4. The questionnaire was designed in consultation with Dr. Larry Diamond, senior fellow at Hoover Institution with expertise in the establishment and consolidation of democracy in Asia, Africa, and Latin America.
5. Survey of Iraqi Public Opinion, Nov 24-Dec 5 2004, The International Republican Institute.
6. National Survey of Iraq, June 2004, Oxford Research International. This poll found that only 32.6% of respondents named a political party when asked to state which party they would vote for in an election.

APPENDIX

Tabulated Results

A. Support for democracy

	Responses
Democracy is preferable to any other kind of government	503 (60%)
In some circumstances, a non-democratic government can be preferable to democratic government	223 (27%)
For someone like me, a democratic or non-democratic regime makes no difference.	107 (13%)

B. Attitudes towards the Term "Democracy"

POSITIVE MEANING	NEGATIVE MEANING	NULL/NEUTRAL MEANING
621 (75%)	75 (9%)	132 (16%)

C. Understanding of Various Components of Democracy

	Essential	Non- Essential
Iraqis equal to each other	797 (96%)	37 (4%)
Equality in education	794 (95%)	40 (5%)
Jobs for everyone	789 (95%)	45 (5%)
Basic necessities for everyone	788 (94%)	46 (6%)
Regular elections	784 (94%)	50 (6%)
Small income gap between rich and poor	773 (92%)	61 (8%)
Living without fear of arrest	765 (91%)	69 (9%)
At least 2 political parties competing w/each other	584 (70%)	250 (30%)
Freedom to criticize the government	577 (69%)	257 (31%)
Majority rule	558 (66%)	276 (34%)
Anyone can say what they think	532 (63%)	302 (37%)
People can join political parties	432 (51%)	402 (49%)

D. Rejection of Non-Democratic Alternatives

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Women should not be allowed to participate in government	110 (13%)	72 (8%)	209 (25%)	443 (53%)
Only one political party or candidates from only one party should be allowed to stand for elections and hold office	125 (14%)	142 (17%)	137 (16%)	430 (52%)
In certain situations parliament and political parties can be abolished, so that the President can decide everything	128 (15%)	239 (29%)	194 (23%)	273 (33%)
Certain decisions should be made by a council of elders or tribal chiefs rather than parliament.	121 (15%)	256 (31%)	214 (26%)	243 (29%)
There are times when the army should come in to govern the country	269 (32%)	273 (33%)	136 (16%)	156 (19%)
All important decisions about the economy should be made by economic experts rather than an elected government or parliament	431 (52%)	202 (24%)	124 (15%)	77 (9%)

E. Democratic attitudes

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
The stability of a country is compromised with too many political parties	325 (39%)	214 (26%)	118 (14%)	177 (21%)
Government executives need to be involved in all matters large or small	236 (28%)	225 (27%)	214 (26%)	159 (19%)
Everyone in society should have the same or similar views otherwise the country is unstable	203 (24%)	242 (29%)	199 (24%)	190 (23%)
It is up to the government to decide whether or not a particular idea should be allowed to circulate within the population	161(19%)	280 (34%)	194 (23%)	199 (24%)
If the government is always being checked by legislature then they cannot achieve anything	171(21%)	248 (30%)	237 (28%)	178 (21%)
The judiciary should accept executive opinions when ruling on important cases	191(23%)	187 (22%)	163 (20%)	293 (35%)

F. Perceptions of democracy of the past, present and future

	<3	4<x<6	>7
On this scale, where would you place our country during the period of Ba'athist rule under Saddam Hussein?	689 (83%)	64 (7%)	81 (10%)
Where would you place our country under the present government?	291 (34%)	306 (36%)	237 (28%)
To what extent would you want our country to be democratic now?	50 (6%)	180 (21%)	604 (72%)
Where do you expect our country to be in five years?	155 (14%)	234 (28%)	485 (58%)

G. Ideas about Iraq's suitability for democracy

	<3	4<x<6	>7
The extent to which Iraq is suitable for democracy	90 (11%)	259 (31%)	485 (58%)

H. Attitudes towards religion and state

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Religious figures should be able to stand for office in elections	440 (53%)	222 (27%)	61 (7%)	111 (13%)
Candidates or parties should be allowed to participate in elections on a religious agenda	174 (21%)	300 (36%)	193 (23%)	167 (20%)
Non-elected Religious figures should be able to veto any decision made by an elected government	210 (25%)	213 (26%)	195 (23%)	216 (26%)
Non-elected religious figures should be able to determine legislation that will effect the entire population	231 (27%)	172 (20%)	124 (15%)	307 (37%)

I. Attitudes towards a secular state

	YES	NO
Do you think Iraq should be a secular state?	265 (32%)	569 (68%)

ABOUT THE IRAQI PROSPECT ORGANIZATION

The Iraqi Prospect Organization (IPO), a not-for-profit and non-partisan group, was established in January 2002 by a group of Iraqi exiles in London. Following the fall of Saddam's regime, the IPO expanded to Iraq, where its headquarters now resides. The IPO aims to promote the establishment of a proportional democracy, increase understanding amongst young Iraqi men and women about democratic values and civil society, and increase the participation of young Iraqi men and women in the political process.

Focusing on promoting tolerance, freedom of speech, and democratic values the IPO established debating societies and newsletters in universities in Baghdad and Hilla.

The IPO also produces fortnightly analysis on current events surrounding Iraq and their impact on democratization. To subscribe and to access the News Analysis go to:
<http://www.iprospect.org.uk/news.html>

The *Iraqi Constitution Project*, started in November 2003, is an initiative by the IPO to engage with young Iraqi men and women on constitutional issues as part of the national debate on the drafting of Iraq's permanent constitution.

The project published 'Iraqi Constitution: Iraqi Thoughts' in December 2003, based on the conclusions of several roundtable discussions concerning Iraq's constitution with young Iraqi men and women in Baghdad, Najaf, Nassiriya, Al-Ramadi, and London. The report is available online at:
<http://www.iprospect.org.uk/Iraqi%20Constitution.pdf>

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