



Saddam Hussein's Rule of Iraq

This is a transcript of the [Saddam Hussein's Rule of Iraq](https://www.mrallsophistory.com) podcast from www.mrallsophistory.com

In the previous podcast we explored why Saddam Hussein was able to come to power in Iraq in 1979. Once he became President, Saddam successfully kept hold of power for the next 25 years and this podcast will explore why he was able to do this.

You will remember from the previous podcast that Saddam was able to come to power for three key reasons: his dominance of government, a series of social and economic policies that benefited the vast majority of Iraqis, and a ruthless system of terror and repression that dealt with anyone who dared to oppose him. He continued this general style of rule as President, but his use of fear and violence to maintain his position increased significantly. The strength of the Ba'ath Party was also central to his position, and he acted quickly to ensure that he would not face any opposition. Within a week of becoming President, Saddam ordered a meeting of Ba'ath Party members in which he claimed he had identified 68 traitors. These members were quickly removed, tried for treason, and executed. By the start of August, hundreds more had been killed. Therefore, from the very moment he became President, Saddam ensured that people who were a threat to his position were removed.

For many ordinary citizens, however, Iraq's strong economy meant that they experienced a good quality of life under Saddam. Much as he had done during his rise to power, Saddam continued to plough money into improving and modernising the infrastructure of Iraq. Education and healthcare remained high on the spending budget, with university education being made free. Across the country, improvements to electricity and water supplies, and an improved road network secured Saddam the support of swathes of Iraqi citizens. In the 1995 election, for example, the official results showed that Saddam received over 99% of the vote.

His popularity was helped by propaganda. When Egypt signed the Camp David Accords with Israel, Saddam used the so-called betrayal of the Arab world to his advantage. Iraqi media presented him as the saviour of pan-Arabism, while his cult of personality was reinforced by the erection of statues of him all over the country. Although the education system was free, it indoctrinated people with ideas that benefited Saddam. Even the way he encouraged people to refer to him by his first name rather than his surname, as is usually the case with political leaders, helped in some way to present Saddam as a father figure to his people, rather than as a vicious dictator.

But however good the situation appeared to be, the reality was that violence and fear were central tools in maintaining Saddam's power. From the outside Saddam's policies of freedom or religion were the hallmarks of a developed nation. However, his violent repression of Shiite Muslims and Kurds proved this to be an illusion. Although Shiite Muslims were the



majority religious group in Iraq, Saddam was a Sunni Muslim and consequently saw them as a threat to his power. Saddam had already ensured that his government was a Sunni majority. Removing threats was key to his rule, and so deportations of those he could not trust were common. Consequently an estimated 200,000 Shiites were sent to neighbouring Iran in 1980-81 alone. Many more were monitored, arrested, and tortured if the internal security forces thought they were a threat to Saddam.

Although the repression of Shiite Iraqis affected many hundreds of thousands of people, the Kurd minority in Northern Iraq suffered even more. Whereas the threat from the Shiites came from their desire to become more involved in Iraqi government and society, the Kurds were a threat to Saddam's power because they wanted to separate from Iraq and create their own country called Kurdistan. Saddam was determined to extend his government's hold over all areas within Iraq, and this directly impacted the Kurds who had previously been left with a certain amount of freedom from the Iraqi government to govern themselves.

Beginning during his Vice-Presidency, Saddam launched a series of attacks against the Kurds that exiled or killed their leading figures. However, Saddam's hatred of the Kurds reached a boiling point after the separatists sided with Iran in the Iran-Iraq War. As part of the conflict, Saddam ordered the bombing of the Kurdish town of Halabja in 1988. While this in itself was not unexpected, the attack included the use of chemical weapons such as mustard gas and cyanide. 5,000 Kurds were killed, and a further 10,000 seriously injured. This added to the existing attacks on the Kurdish nationalist movement that had been masterminded by Saddam's cousin, nicknamed Chemical Ali. As well as the chemical attacks, he bulldozed entire villages and conducted mass executions. The destruction of the Kurdish north was vicious, with somewhere in the region of 150,000 Kurds killed and a further 100,000 fleeing to nearby Turkey.

The level of violence that Saddam was willing to use against his own people was a key reason that he was able to maintain his hold on power, as few were prepared to stand up to him. However, it's important that when assessing Saddam's rule you consider both his repression of enemies and reasons why people actively supported him. If you are asked how far terror was responsible for his hold on power, you must be able to give evidence on both sides of the argument.