

Tikrit Celebrates Saddam's Birthday

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Old anthems heard again as people in president's home town insist they have the right to honour their former leader.

On a traffic roundabout outside Tikrit stands a life-size poster of Saddam Hussein carrying a rifle and kitted out in the uniform of his regime's Jerusalem Army militia.

Twice in the past 24 hours, United States forces have torn down Saddam's picture from this spot, say local residents. But each time, a new one promptly reappeared.

The date was April 28 – the former leader's birthday – and although most other Iraqis seemed happy to forget the date, here in Saddam Hussein's hometown it was still cause for festivities.

"We will celebrate our leader's birthday despite the Americans," said a placard posted on a downtown shop front.

A band set up in the middle of Tikrit's main street played the traditional drums and mizmar trumpet, while the crowd sang a song by Kasem al-Sultan that was a favourite of the former leader, "Get into it – the men will take care of it".

"We sacrifice our lives for you, Saddam," sang a chorus of children, performing the prewar national anthem.

On a side street, away from the Humvee vehicles of the US military on the main road, confectioners served up a two-metre wide birthday cake bearing the image of US President George W. Bush, sliced into dozens of pieces.

"We will continue celebrating April 28 every year until we die, and our sons will celebrate after our death," said Amir Muhodar, whose restaurant was serving free food for the occasion.

For Muhodar, Iraq's current troubles are a vindication of the former president.

"Let [Iraqis] see what is going on now," he said. "Iraqis will find out that Saddam is better than America when America kills more Iraqis."

"Damned traitors, agents and spies, who betrayed the hero Saddam," said grocer Fathi al-Samarrai, who burst into tears when the president's name was mentioned. "Iraqis will find out that they are lost without Saddam, because he was like a tent over Iraqis' heads."

Others acknowledged that the former regime committed abuses, but blamed them on Saddam's deputies.

"Saddam is a hero," said taxi driver Jamil al-Tikriti, 37, who believes that the upcoming trial of the former

president "will prove that Saddam did not commit these crimes against Iraqis – it was his followers, especially [Saddam's cousin] Ali Hassan al-Majid". Majid – infamous as “Chemical Ali” – led the brutal 1988 campaign against the Kurds.

Some Tikritis declared the celebrations to be their democratic right.

"Where is the freedom and democracy that America promised us?" asked Omar al-Duri, 22, a student at Tikrit university. "As part of the Iraqi people we have the right [to do this], so why do the occupying soldiers destroy the president's picture?"

"We cannot prevent people from celebrating on this day," said police officer Akram Hadi. "They aren't violating city security. They are expressing their own opinions, and this is democracy."

A handful of Tikritis, however, said that the celebrations ought to be a thing of the past.

"Saddam is finished, but Tikrit's people do not accept that, because they loved him dearly," said Kasim Ahmed, 32, who joined in the singing but clearly did not share the prevailing sentiment.

"Anyway," he says, "everything will become clear when Saddam is tried and sentenced."

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