

Tikritis Rally Behind Jailed Imam

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Detention of cleric for pro-Saddam action seen as violation of his freedom of speech.

Anger at the arrest of a well-known imam for scrawling pro-Saddam Hussein graffiti in the former dictator's home town of Tikrit reflects his lingering popularity among local people.

Imam Jumaa Issa Khalaf was detained on July 6 for allegedly spray-painting “[Saddam] is a hero to Arabs and Islam” and “Saddam's mosque” on the walls of Tikrit's main mosque. The vandalism came one day after provincial officials ordered the mosque's name to be changed from the Great Saddam's Mosque to the Great Tikrit Mosque.

Tikrit, some 160 kilometres north-west of Baghdad, is the former stronghold of Saddam and his powerful Sunni tribe that became the political foundation of his 35 years in power.

Khalaf, 54, was born and raised in Tikrit and served as a brigadier-general in Saddam's personal staff before joining the clergy following the United States-led invasion in 2003. He is known as an outspoken critic of the US occupation and was jailed for two months by American forces in 2005.

“The imam is one of the most high-profile figures in the city,” said Colonel Mohammed Aziz al-Jebori of the Tikrit police. “Locals here respect him. We knew that, but we were ordered to arrest him and given an arrest warrant by court officials.” He would not reveal which court issued the warrant.

According to Jebori, Khalaf remains in custody on charges of defacing religious property and no date has yet been set for his trial. Supporters of the jailed cleric have called the detention an abuse of human rights and have expressed concern over a potentially unfair trial.

“This is not the first time my father has been arrested on weak pretences,” said Khalaf's son Mohammed, 25, who added that his father is a member of good standing in the Association of Muslim Scholars in Iraq. “In the past, he has been accused of links with terrorists. All his legal problems come from the fact that he is pro-Saddam.”

Many locals have complained that the arrest is a violation of Khalaf's right to freedom of expression. Officials have denied the accusation, citing the laws protecting public and religious properties.

It is also illegal in Iraq to promote the outlawed Baath party once led by Saddam, although no such charges have yet been filed against Khalaf.

“I am calling on the police and the government to release our imam immediately. The Americans and their allies crossed the seas to come to Iraq to bring what they call 'freedom' and 'democracy'. So where is this holy man's right to express his thoughts freely?” said Hasan al-Jebori, 43, a labourer in Tikrit.

Shopkeeper Ibrahim Kareem, 54, pointed out that the mosque was built by Saddam, giving him the right to have his name on it. The mosque, inaugurated in 2002, includes a religious school for children.

“Look at it this way, since 2003 no city or government official has bothered to build us even one new mosque. Why did they change the name of the old mosque? Is this the best they can do?” said Kareem.

But some feel the religious leader's actions were a betrayal of his role as a community leader.

“The imam expressed himself in a violent manner. I think he could have made his point by holding a demonstration or a sit-in as they do in modern, democratic countries,” said Jalil al-Tikriti, 39, a Tikrit municipality employee.

Cab driver Jabbar Ahmed, 38, applauded local officials for their action, but pointed out that one arrest will do little to diminish Saddam's lingering popularity in Tikrit.

“Even though Saddam is dead, the people in this city still love him. They are his relatives and tribesmen. Saddam was Iraq's president and an Arab leader for 35 years; this is our history and it won't be forgotten just because he is gone,” said Ahmed.

Khaldon Hamid is a pseudonym of an Iraqi journalist in Tikrit. Editing by IWPR Iraq editor Charles McDermid.

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