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Case Analysis

The Outlooks for the Opposition in Iraq's Kurdistan Region

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Introduction

Two years after the beginning of its parliamentary participation, the Change alliance – the largest opposition formation in the Iraqi Kurdistan parliament with 25 of 111 seats – demanded the dissolution of both the legislature and the regional government, and called for the formation of a technocratic government that would pave the way for early legislative elections. It also called on the two largest Kurdish political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), to stop interfering in the government's bureaucratic apparatus, and to pledge to refrain from "political nepotism".[1]

This paper discusses the outlook and future of the political struggle in the Iraqi Kurdistan region, which exhibits a strong polarization of power, which in turn is represented by both the two traditional Kurdish political parties and the rising political forces influencing the politics of this administrative region.[2] This paper studies the positions of these forces at the moment, and their connections to the general political climate in the region. It also discusses the possible paths available to the political opposition, based on the transformations expected in the region in the foreseeable future.

The Main Actors:

1. The two main Kurdish political parties: the KDP, led by Iraqi Kurdistan President Massoud Barzani, and the PUK, led by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani;[3]
2. The Change alliance, which broke off from the PUK;
3. The group of Islamist and leftist parties allied with either of the two main parties: the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU, led by Salahuddin Mohammad al-Baha), the Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG, headed by Sheikh Ali Babir), the Kurdish Social Democratic Party (headed by Mohammad Haji Mahmoud), and the Kurdish Communist Party;

[1] To read more about the demands of the Kurdish parliamentary "Change" alliance, see the following link: www.alrafidayn.com/2009-05-26-22-07-53/29332-2011-01-30-09-58-01.html

[2] For more on the structure of the Kurdish parliament, see: www.perleman.org/default.aspx

[3] For more on the political positions and strategies of the ruling Kurdish political parties inside Iraqi Kurdistan, see:
www.kdp.se
www.pukonline.com
www.kurdiu.org

4. A group of political parties that represent religious and national minorities in the region (Turkmen, Arab, Assyrian, and Yazidi).

External Actors:

1. The Iraqi central government, and most of the Iraqi political parties;
2. Regional and international powerbrokers which influence politics in the Kurdish; region (Turkey, Iran, Syria, Israel, the United States, and the European Union).

There are two structural forms of political life in Iraqi Kurdistan:

First: The Kurdistan region contains two currents that disagree about the foundations of political legitimacy. On one hand is the establishment, represented by the two main political parties that emerged from the region's "revolutionary" history, whose legitimacy was based on militant violence and whose power derives from a decades-long struggle with the central government in Baghdad. For this reason, this establishment's political discourse (which is built on a widespread populism) focuses on the fact that nationalist and "revolutionary" definitions are the bases for the regional regime's legitimacy. On the other hand is the rising opposition, which has based its own legitimacy on civil society's definitions of the democratic rule of law and therefore focuses on corruption, services, and political nepotism, arguing that such concerns should be the foundations of any ruling party's legitimacy. The framework of political legitimacy in the Kurdish region is therefore marked by the presence of this binary contrast.

The manner in which these opposing sets of ideas came to coexist simultaneously can be traced back to the historical position of Iraqi Kurdistan. The region emerged as an entity after a decades-long struggle between the major Kurdish political forces and the central state; this is the source of the first camp's legitimacy. However, over the past decade, the region has arranged its position in a manner that opposes it, as a "democratic" political entity, to the "authoritarian" central regime, particularly after the US occupation of Iraq. The Kurdish region now positions itself as a "post-authoritarian" entity, which is, essentially, where the second camp's legitimacy arises. The contrast between these "two legitimacies" is nothing more than an expression of natural political practices.

The Kurdish region does not have clearly delineated geographical and political borders. The "internal" political process takes place in just three regions, but the issue of the disputed regions of Kirkuk and Mosul remains ever-present in this process. The political competition in the region is non-traditional, so each political current aims to win a parliamentary majority and form a government in the areas within its reach; in fact, the political struggle is more intense in the regions not under the provincial government's control, an area as large as the three Kurdish provinces and whose inhabitants account for the majority of the Kurdish region's population. However, most importantly, the political loyalty of those Kurds who live outside the region is not completely tied to the game of wealth and loyalty. They remained outside the political competition between the two main regional parties until the start of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

The Geostrategic Map of Kurdish Political Power Distribution:

For interrelated historical and cultural reasons, the traditional distribution of political power across the map of the Kurdish area is divided along regional lines, in the following manner:

- A heavy presence for Barzani's KDP in most of the province of Dahouk, the Kurdish-majority regions in the province of Mosul, the northern and western parts of Irbil Province, and a large section of Irbil itself;
- A strong presence for Talabani's PUK in Suleimaniyya Province, the Kurdish-majority regions of the provinces of Kirkuk, Diala and Salahuddin, as well as in the Eastern part of Irbil Province (in the city of Kuba and the region around it);
- The Change current has a concentrated presence in the city of Suleimaniyya and Suleimaniyya Province's northern towns, as well as in Irbil. The Change alliance`s infrastructure is basically that of a civil society movement, which has met with approval in the Suleimaniyya region.
- Neither of the two largest Islamist parties (the KIU or the KIG) has absolute control over any of the region's provinces.[4] However, the KIU[5] has begun to jostle for power with the

[4] There is a specific pattern of political control in Iraqi Kurdistan. To say that a party absolutely controls a specific geographic region means that its forces, or forces affiliated with it, have military, economic and cultural control. Political parties in Iraqi Kurdistan are generally recognized as the strongest organizing force in the areas under

main parties in all of the region's largest cities, and in the land corridor that connects Irbil to Kirkuk. For its part, the KIG has an effective presence in the Southeastern part of Suleimaniyya Province (the environs of the city of Halabja, often described as "Kurdistan's Kandahar"), and some parts of Dahouk and Mosul provinces.

Prior to the July 2009 elections, the map of the political forces in Iraqi Kurdistan was based on a simple rule: the two major parties controlled most (75-90%) of the parliamentary seats, with the rest of the seats distributed among the Islamist and leftist parties, which would play their opposition roles in one of two manners: either ideologically or by providing services, without bringing up the sensitive issues of the general political process in the region.

But the general elections of 2009 produced a strong showing for the Change current, which is headed by a former high-ranking PUK official, Nishrawan Mustafa. The entire political map in the region was therefore redrawn when Change received the largest proportional share of the votes in Suleimaniyya Province (the largest of the three Kurdish regions in terms of population), and a large number of votes in the province of Irbil.[6] Since the Change current received 25% of the parliamentary seats and the Islamist and leftist parties received approximately 20%, the absolute majority of the two traditional powers became smaller, and the transformation from a servile "services-based opposition" into a genuine "political opposition" began.

If one looks beyond the simple subjects of disagreement between the opposition and the authorities in Iraqi Kurdistan, three major issues can be isolated on which the two sides are fundamentally at odds. They are:

1. **The role of political parties in political and public life**

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their control, something that the traditional Islamist and leftist parties were not able to practice until very recently; for this reason, the areas of their presence are always relatively small compared to the traditional political parties.

[5] The Kurdish Islamic Union – Islamic Current party represents the ideology of the Muslim Brotherhood; the ideology of the KIG is closer to Salafism.

[6] For a detailed analysis of the Kurdish province legislative elections results in July 2009, see: http.//en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iraqi_Kurdistan_legislative_election,_2009

Iraqi Kurdistan's political parties are the prime – perhaps only – organizers in the areas that fall under their control, along the lines of the political map explained above. In these regions, government action and political-party action are intertwined at all levels. Prominent party members, for example, are also prominent government officials, and government decisions in these areas are primarily political-party decisions; furthermore, the economy – both public and private sector – in these regions is dominated and managed by party apparatuses. Even the security, intelligence and military services bear clear loyalties to the political parties. The opposition demands a transparent separation between the private political and the general public sectors, since genuine and fair political competition among all political currents cannot be achieved otherwise. The two major Kurdish parties reinforce their control with the power they wield over government apparatuses in the regions under their control. The outlines of this disagreement emerge in the opposition's three core demands on this subject:

- Unifying the region's security and military forces, and defining their constitutional and legal allegiance to a government whose borders are clearly set, independent of any political-party apparatus.

- Removing political parties (including those not related to the two major parties) from government offices and other public facilities and returning these to the state, after which the government will employ a transparent formula to sell these properties to any parties willing to buy them.[7]

- Publishing balance sheets of public revenues and expenses in annual and monthly financial reports to be issued by the government of Iraqi Kurdistan.[8]

[7] This file also includes the demand to return thousands of government buildings, currently occupied by parties or civil organizations affiliated with them, throughout the central cities and towns. The file also relates to the case of the "closed areas"; many civil rights groups have complained that vast regions of Iraqi Kurdistan have been closed off and are under the control of political parties, outside the government's reach. This includes three areas controlled by the KDP in Irbil and Dahouk and an area controlled by the PUK on Lake Dukan in Suleimaniyya Province.

[8] There is a real financial crisis in the Kurdish region. Many of the service-providing organizations and the media are connected to the political parties, but their employees receive their salaries from the government budget. The other issue is that there is no clear accounting of expenditures, since the budget is distributed to administrative bodies, but there is no clear detailing of how it is spent.

2. Formulating a Political Regime in the Region

Seven years after the American invasion and the beginning of relative stability in Iraqi Kurdistan, the political regime in the area remains unclear. This is manifest in the following three examples:

- The lack of a permanent constitution for the region. The previous government proposed a regional constitution a few years ago, but it has still not been voted on, a rare and quite embarrassing situation for the region's political life.[9]
- Political life in Kurdistan varies between more than one traditional political structure. Even prior to the 2009 elections, the pattern of a constitutional parliamentary system predominated in the region. The Kurdish president was elected by the Kurdish legislature, similar to the central political structure in Baghdad. However, shortly before the last legislative elections, Kurdish President Massoud Barzani passed a law mandating that the president would be elected by direct ballot, at the same time as parliamentary elections, which brought Iraqi Kurdistan closer to a presidential model mixed with vast powers allocated to the government, rather like the French political system.
- Political nepotism. Most of the party leaders in Kurdistan are grooming their sons to take their places in the future. The opposition views this practice as not far removed from vote-rigging and buying allegiances, and they want a new law that would ban political nepotism lest it enshrine political and social customs derived from a legacy of tribal values.

3. Relations with the Central State

The two main parties insist that the political wrangling in Iraqi Kurdistan is a purely internal matter in which other political and governmental forces in Iraq should not interfere, justifying their stance by pointing to the federalist system in place in Iraq since the US occupation. However, the other political groups are calling for more trust in the country's central apparatus, and in particular the constitutional court, by allowing it to have a greater role in the political conflict in the region. As things stands, the material and financial control exercised by those in power in Iraqi Kurdistan makes it impossible for there to be any kind of balance between them

[9] To read the text of the proposed constitution for Iraqi Kurdistan, see: www.krp.org/arab/documents/default.aspx?gid=1&sm=39

and the opposition, particularly since the region lacks historically entrenched political values and traditions,[10] a clearly written constitution, and a constitutional court. Most importantly, the region lacks a neutral, unbiased military power that could maintain the legitimacy of political life.

With time, there has been a thaw in relations between the central government and political life in the region. The recent events in Suleimaniyya, in which peaceful protests were met with a violent crackdown by the security forces, has resulted in the opposition political forces' demanding the creation of a central parliamentary investigation committee. While this proposal was initially rejected by the two main parties, it was eventually approved. This reveals two things:

1. That the official security apparatus is not at equal distance from all the civilians and political forces in the region, and intervenes in the details of political life.

2. That the political forces and decision-makers in the region are not completely separate from the central authorities in Baghdad. The Iraqi state, with its autonomous institutions (parliament, the army, the constitutional court and the higher elections committee) believes that it has power over political life in Kurdistan. And this increases the amount of interaction and political integration of Kurdish residents in the Iraqi whole.

The Regional Opposition's Outlook:

Despite the presence of a vital political and media life in Iraqi Kurdistan, the general outlook is that the two main parties will remain in their positions for the foreseeable future. But this does not mean that radical changes might not influence the relationship between the authorities and the opposition in the region over the coming four years, based on the outcomes of three specific issues:

[10] There are widespread fears, verging on consensus, that the region's political struggle could degenerate into a deadly armed confrontation between the various parties.

1. The Future of the PUK

This party, established in 1975, has suffered from grave organizational problems for about four years, particularly after the breaking off of the Change alliance, led by former party official Nishrawan Mustafa.

Moreover, the health of long-time party leader Jalal Talabani, and his advancing age, are indicators that a radical change in the party will take place. If Talabani resigns from political life, the party will have to choose a new leader; Talabani's deputies do not have much chance of succeeding him, nor of being able to play a conciliatory role among the party's various internal factions, as Talabani does. First deputy Kawsart Rasoul also suffers from severe health problems, and second deputy Barham Salah (who is also prime minister in the Kurdistan Regional Government) does not have the approval of the party's conservative wing; nor does he have the personal approval of Talabani's wife Hayrukhan Ibrahim Ahmad, the powerful head of the party's executive office in the city of Suleimaniyya. Hayrukhan and Saleh's relationship is not warm because she considers him to be an obstacle to the ambitions of her and Talabani's son Qubad, currently Iraqi Kurdistan's representative in the United States. The PUK's future could take one of two forms:

- There could be a revival of the PUK's organizational unity, with the return to the fold of cadres and leaders of the Change alliance[11]; this would signal a return to the rivalry between the region's two main parties, fought with balanced political, financial, and popular tools, which could possibly devolve into an armed struggle between the two; or it could be contained in a peaceful, political/parliamentary competition;
- The PUK could splinter into more than one faction, leaving the KDP alone as the political kingpin in the region. Or it could continue to be politically cohesive within parliament and ally itself with the Islamist and leftist factions against the popular Change alliance.

2. The Future of the Region's Administrative Borders

[11] Despite the complete break in organizational ties between the PUK and the splinter Change alliance, communications between the second-tier officers in both parties have not been cut, and there is an implicit feeling that they have a shared future.

The current Iraqi government's platform stipulates that the issue of administrative borders must be resolved within the four years of its mandate, which could mean millions of new voters flooding into Kurdistan's political system. Depending on how this issue is dealt with, there are three ways that it could affect the internal political scene:

1. If the issue is resolved and all the areas in question are returned to the region's administrative control, it will mean a direct promotion of the opposition concepts including civility, welfare and policies at the expense of the ideological forms of opposition, since such a solution would pull the rug from under the nationalist discourse of the political parties, and remove the pretexts that have been used in order to prevent proper political reforms in the region. But most importantly, the entrance of these areas and their populations into the region's political process would inflate the role of the PUK and the Change alliance; most of Kirkuk and the disputed Diala and Salahuddine provinces retain their traditional political allegiances to the PUK. This could give the PUK a comfortable margin of balance with the KDP.
2. If the current situation in the region remains as is, then it is expected that the pressure on the opposition parties to postpone their demands for internal reform will increase; these opposition parties in turn could ramp up their nationalist discourse, which would signify the postponement of the region's internal reform agenda.
3. If this issue is partially resolved, then the political struggle is expected to transform from a struggle over the region's provinces into a struggle inside these provinces, which have not yet attained any organizational importance in the eyes of the two main Kurdish parties.

3. The KDP's continued organizational unity

Despite being the oldest and largest Iraqi Kurdish party, the KDP has maintained its historical organizational unity, which is based on allegiance to the Barzani family, which has maintained its traditional leadership role in the areas that it controls. However, this relationship is not immune to potential shakeups in the future, particularly since the 13th party conference in December 2010 did not adopt expected structural reforms, and the traditional leadership remained in place. The party's organizational unity may be affected in two ways:

1. No one in the current party leadership cadre is qualified to create an organizational split like the one that happened within the PUK; however, the political conflict within the next

generation of the Barzani family could intensify in the coming phase. Specifically, things may heat up between former Prime Minister (and Massoud Barzani's nephew) Nijrafan Barzani and the current led by the Kurdish Security Council president, Barzani's son Masrur Barzani. This seething rivalry between the two, which has so far been contained by Massoud Barzani's presence, could go in any number of directions as the power and influence of each of the two grows inside the party.

2. One of the influential business figures in the area under the KDP's control will try to form an opposition political group bringing together many elements of the bourgeoisie. This is expected to occur if the regime stabilizes on clearly defined constitutional grounds, providing surefire guarantees that one's political ambitions will not jeopardize his or her business interests in the areas under KDP control. What could encourage such a move would be if the KDP maintained its rigid conservative values in the public sphere, a trend that does not suit the social and economic transformations under way in the region.

If the KDP's unity erodes, or it loses its absolute political dominance over the regions under its control, this could lead to two significant transformations:

1. This could spell the end of "regionalism" in Kurdish political life. All the areas of the region will remain truly open before all the political parties active in the region, which could lead to temporary, shifting and fluid alliances between the different political forces.

2. This could open the way to the rise of new liberal political parties, something that remains sorely lacking on the Kurdish political scene, due to the fact that political life in the region oscillates between a traditional leftist bent dominated by the PUK and a form of political and social conservatism represented by the KDP.

Conclusion

There should be some signs of a democratic life and a democratic opposition in the region on the horizon; the Kurdish region cannot remain isolated from the continuing Arab Spring. Furthermore, the region does not feel alienated from, or in a political conflict with, the central state in Baghdad. In all other regions, the Kurdish issue is on the path to being resolved through the gradual cultural and political acknowledgement of a Kurdish ethnicity. However, more

important than all of this are the levels of economic wealth and high development indices showered on the region's citizens over the past few years, due to the vast revenues flowing into the region's budgets from the central state coffers. These returns have led Iraqi Kurds to demand more of a role and political acknowledgement. These were the demands of the popular protests in the city of Suleimaniyya. And here is the difficult equation blocking the way of future political life in the Kurdistan region: a traditional political infrastructure established in older political circumstances and an elapsed political climate, which wants to remain unchanged, controlling the structures that are being established in the new political environment in Kurdistan.