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Elections in Kurdistan: A Model Democracy or a Return to Factionalism?

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Election fever has swept the Middle East this year. Already, the results of elections in Iran, Lebanon, Kuwait and Israel have had a profound impact on the countries' domestic politics and hold important implications for the region as a whole. This trend will continue on June 25, when 2.5m eligible voters choose the president and parliament for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in northern Iraq, marking another step in the distancing of Iraqi Kurdistan from the central authorities in Baghdad.

Having pioneered the experiment in free elections in 1992 (thirteen years before Baghdad) and having presented itself as a model for democracy for Iraq as a whole, the KRG is facing strong pressure from a number of directions: its own Kurdish civil society wants fuller democratization, its erstwhile partners in Baghdad wish to bring the KRG back to the fold, and neighboring states are following with great anxiety the developments in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The run-up to the elections has been marked by a high degree of political excitement and competition. There are no less than 24 lists competing for 111 seats in the regional parliament. However, as usual, they are led by the two traditional parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) headed by Mas'ud Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) headed by Jalal Talabani (who also currently holds the largely ceremonial post of president of Iraq). Also worthy of mention are various Islamic groupings and some smaller ethnic and religious factions representing Turkomans and the Kaldo-Assyrian

communities, who will have a total of 11 seats reserved for them.

A unique development in these elections is that the two big parties and historic rivals, the KDP and the PUK, are running as partners, tendering a single unified slate of candidates, the Kurdistan List. During the mid-1980s and 1990s, the two periodically fought one another in armed combat and residues of the rivalry have not altogether dissipated. How then can one understand their willingness to field a joint list?

The motivation for a marriage of convenience runs deep, namely the fear that if they do not hang together they will be hanged together. Both the KDP and the PUK are facing strong opposition from within their ranks, as well as from among Kurdish intellectuals and the society at large. Corruption, nepotism, tribalism, mismanagement, monopolization of power and marginalization of the parliament have become standard complaints directed against the two ruling parties. Although the country's infrastructure and well-being of most of the Kurds have improved significantly since the 2003 war, the feeling among many Kurds is that most of the benefits from the huge development projects have gone into the pockets of party leaders and other high-ranking officials. Such complaints are openly voiced, particularly by courageous newspapers such as *Awena* and *Livin* and, most importantly, *Hawlati*, which maintains a drumbeat of criticism not only in Kurdish but in Arabic, Turkish and English as well.

Whereas the KDP seems to be largely immune to pressure from within its ranks, thanks to its more traditional and autocratic tendencies, the PUK, with its more liberal and democratic outlook, appears to be on the verge of breaking apart. The history of the PUK, in fact, goes a long way to explain its present situation since, from the day of its inception on June 1 1975, it has been beset by personal and ideological factionalism. This factionalism has intensified due to the sweeping economic, social and political changes that have engulfed Kurdistan in recent years. Accordingly, two antagonistic blocs are confronting one another, one which revolves around Talabani, and the other around his former companion and deputy Nawshirwan Mustafa.

Nawshirwan has been leading a reformist bloc which is running now in an independent list, *Gorran* (Change). *Gorran's* platform calls for social justice, fighting corruption, the institutionalization of the separation of powers within the KRG, and limitations of the KDP's and PUK's powers over the government, parliament and judicial system. Nawshirwan's *Gorran* poses the strongest challenge to the joint Kurdistan list, since its very emergence indicates the existing leadership's failure to effectively govern the KRG.

Challenged by Nawshirwan's strong opposition, Talabani felt hard pressed to join hands with Barzani so as to minimize as much as possible his faction's likely losses in the coming elections. In addition, the threat felt by the KDP and the PUK from Islamist groups, as well as the pressure of civil society gave further impetus to the two erstwhile rivals' instinct to bury the hatchet. For their part, the reformist bloc and smaller opposition factions seem keen on turning the Kurdistan parliament into a body which will force the two leading parties to be more transparent and democratic.

The coming elections are worth watching for several reasons. One important phenomenon is that the main opposition within the KRG is moderate, secular and liberal. This stands in sharp contrast to other democratic experiments in the region, where the opposition is most often militantly nationalist and Islamist. Women will have at least 30% of the seats reserved for them (5% more than the proportion allocated to women in the Iraqi parliament). Not surprisingly, a list which is close to the Turkish Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was not allowed to run in the elections. The Islamist groupings have formed two blocs, thus increasing their chances to win seats in the new parliament. Most of the parties advocate the adoption of a federal system in Iraq, but, interestingly enough, almost none have raised the slogan of independence. This is not to say that they have forsaken this goal, only that pragmatism dictates a more cautious approach at this stage.

The KRG president will be chosen directly by the voters and not by the Parliament as had been the case in the past, raising fears that too much power will be bestowed upon the president. Alongside Mas'ud Barzani, the current president, there are four other candidates, the most important of whom is Hallo Ibrahim Ahmad, Talabani's brother-in-law. In the meantime, a referendum on a new draft constitution, which was hastily passed by the Kurdish parliament and slated to be voted upon on July 25 as well, was deferred to another date because of its highly controversial nature. Many Kurds, especially intellectuals, rejected the draft constitution because it granted the president powers which had been previously enjoyed by the parliament, thus raising fears of the emergence of a new dictator. For its part, mainly Arab elements in the government in Baghdad were opposed to the proposed demarcation of the frontiers of the KRG, which were to include the disputed areas of Kirkuk and the districts of Mandali, Khanaqin, Sinjar and Sheikhan.

It seems likely that the joint Kurdistan List will win the elections. Still, *Gorran* and the Islamists may emerge strengthened as opposition forces. But the big

question mark is whether the democratization experience will strike deep roots in Kurdistan, or whether the KRG will become another testimony to failed democratic experiments in the region. Whatever the case, the results of the elections will have far-reaching ramifications for the ongoing nation-building and state-building processes in the KRG. This in turn will affect relations with Baghdad, which have been become strained because of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's efforts at centralization and the KRG's own push for greater autonomy. Finally, a stronger and more democratic KRG is likely to impact heavily on the Kurds in the neighbouring states and upon the broader contours of minorities-state relations in the Middle East.

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