



Ramifications of Iraq's Kurdish Elections

FORMER U.S. PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH'S VISION of democratizing the Middle East may have been realized in Iraqi Kurdistan (known as the Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG).

This is at least what Iraq's Kurds claim. For years they have been boasting of being a model democracy for Iraq as a whole, and some of its leaders even went as far as to suggest that their democracy is second only to that of Israel.

The elections in the KRG were unique in many respects. The Kurds went to the polls separately from the general elections in Baghdad, opening a gap between Irbil "time" and Baghdad "time." The two historical parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), headed by Mas'ud Barzani, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), headed by Jalal Talabani, ran together as the "Kurdistani list." Such a move was exceptional indeed, since the two parties were deadly rivals having had no qualms in fighting bloody battles as late as the mid-1990s.

The marriage of convenience was forced upon them by a new rising star: the five-month-old Gorran (change) coalition, which threatened them both. The reformist Gorran list, headed by Nawshirwan Mustafa, himself a cofounder of the PUK, challenged the soft underbellies of the two parties. Echoing the Kurdish street's feelings and complaints, Gorran accused the old guard of corruption, nepotism, tribalism, mismanagement, lack of transparency, monopolizing power, marginalizing the Kurdish parliament and enriching themselves at the expense of the people.

A novelty of these elections was that the president of the KRG was elected, this time, directly by the people and not appointed by the parliament as had been the case in the past, raising fears that this would give him too much power. Apart from the incumbent Barzani, there were four other candidates, but he outstripped them, winning 70 percent of the vote.

The elections were revolutionary in that, for the first time, they were competitive. In the past, the KDP and the PUK shared power 50-50, but the stunning results of this election will not allow them this luxury. The joint Kurdistani list still holds the majority: 58 percent of 111 seats. But this pales in comparison with 2005 when they held around 90 percent.

The biggest winner is Gorran with about 24 percent of the votes, thus posing real opposition in the parliament. The "change" was made possible by the burgeoning civil society, the emerging middle class, the more or less free press and the spread of education. As Gorran was an offshoot of the PUK, the latter emerged as the biggest loser. The KDP on the other hand managed to keep much of its power.

The KDP was established in 1946, and was headed by the legendary *mulla* Mustafa Barzani, father of the current president. The Barzani tribe has thus become the ruling elite, which could claim to have borne the brunt of the Kurdish national struggle against Baghdad and provided continuity for more than half a century. The riches it has amassed from oil transit to Turkey, its cohesiveness and autocratic tendencies, and the power machinery it holds helped it in its strongholds of Dhok and Irbil.

By contrast, the PUK, which was established in 1975, was from the start an amalgam of three factions and deemed to be more liberal and



IRBIL, KURDISTAN: A Kurdish woman votes July 23

democratic than the KDP. The fact that Nawshirwan Mustafa defeated Talabani in his Sulaymaniya stronghold is itself an indication of the more fractious and more democratic nature of the PUK. Talabani's preoccupation as the president of Iraq was not helpful either in the competition with Mustafa, who remained in the Kurdish areas and generated the democratic "coup."

The elections changed the balance of power between the KDP and the PUK, and the defeat of the latter might raise thorny questions of power sharing between the two. With the opposition now holding 40 percent of the seats in the parliament, it is likely to be much more effective.

The fact that the hawkish Barzani retained his post as president of the KRG may increase friction with Baghdad. Thus far Talabani has played the role of mediator with the central government, but his dwindling powers in the KRG might reflect negatively on this role. Moreover, the burning questions of Kirkuk, the new Kurdish constitution and other standing issues are likely to be exacerbated as Iraq approaches the general elections in January 2010. Most likely Prime Minister Nouri Al-Maliki will increase his efforts for centralization, while the KRG will strive for greater autonomy.

The KRG democratic model will most certainly reverberate in the neighboring countries, where Kurdish communities are closely watching the developments in Iraq and trying to imitate them.

Finally, a stronger and more democratic KRG is likely to impact heavily on its relations with its patron, the United States. So far the leadership has been more moderate than the Kurdish street. Empowering the people might mean radicalization of the Kurdish demands within Iraq. Thus, the creature might rise up against its creator.

The "model democracy" has yet to prove itself, but one thing is certain: Taking its fate in its own hands, Iraqi Kurdistan has made a great leap forward from the days of its annihilation under Saddam. ●

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