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Challenges to Secular Reforms in the KRI's Biggest Islamist Party

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Brief Analysis

Iraqi Kurdistan's Komal party faces a difficult dilemma as it seeks a more reformist direction.

On February 18, The Kurdistan Islamic Group, or Komal, the largest of several Islamist political parties in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq (KRI), removed the word “Islamic” from its name and replaced it with “Justice”. In addition, the party decided to **change** the title of the party leader from “emir” to “president” and selected four women to serve on the 22-seat **Party Presidency Council**.

This series of reformist changes in Komal—the KRI’s fifth largest party overall—might not seem highly consequential for Iraqi politics, but they represent a significant question for the KRI’s Islamist parties. As a result, the reforms are facing serious challenges from both inside and outside the party. If Komal continues to pursue a new reformist direction, it may have to choose whether to remain in league with other Islamist parties in the KRI or attempt to join secular coalitions as a more moderate party. As Komal navigates that dilemma, it could define the future of Islamist politics in the KRI.

Komal’s leadership has sought to justify the new reforms with historical and current political context. After the arrival of Komal’s reforms, Faruq Ali, a member of the Komal Presidency Council, **explained** that the party has already undergone significant changes in the past, including the decision in 2004 to dissolve the party’s military

office after the collapse of the Iraqi Baathist regime. In explaining the recent reforms, Ali stated that the party dropped “Islam” from its name because some violent organizations had used the word in their titles, by which he may have been referring to ISIS. Likewise, the change in the party leader’s title from “emir” to “president” also seems like an effort to avoid any organizational resemblance to ISIS, whose leaders were known as “emirs”. And though it has not been emphasized by the party members, Komal’s reforms could also be a result of political Islam’s perceptual regression in the Middle East. In this sense, reforms could be an effort to emulate the kinds secularizing steps recently employed in several Muslim countries, notably in the Gulf.

Nonetheless, despite historical precedents for change and current secularizing trends, such reforms certainly face challenges. Although a majority of Komal members voted for the changes, opposition within the party cannot be underestimated, and the transformation presumably will not be easy. Five hundred and fifty-three party members voted for the changes, while 123 opposed them, with the party consisting of 892 members in total. Komal’s founder and current president, Ali Bapir, has underlined that he had been considering the name change for some time, but that it only became possible in the last congress.

As such, a significant portion of the party still opposes the reforms, with members like Dilshad Garmiani, a former member of Komal Politburo Office, calling the name-change a “strategic fault”. In the face of this and other criticisms, in which party members claim that the name change will drive the party far from Islam, Bapir has referred to Sharia and the Quran, highlighted the party’s Islamic platform, and pointed out that Sharia requires the party to seek peace and coexistence.

Moreover, outside the party, Komal’s reforms could result in significant challenges from other Islamist parties as well. Even though Komal seems to be softening its Islamist stance, it still competes with other Islamist political parties for the same constituent base. These parties include the Kurdistan Islamic Union, known as Yekgirtu—similar to the Muslim Brotherhood—and the Islamic Movement of Kurdistan, which was founded as an armed, sharia principles-based party also known as Bzotnawa, though it disarmed in 2003. Besides Komal’s already existing rivalry with these two main Islamic parties, the new reforms could make it more difficult for Komal to unite with them in an attempt to form a stronger coalition of Islamist parties in Iraqi Kurdistan.

At the same time, Komal could find it difficult to leave other Islamist parties behind and join secular political coalitions, capitalizing on its new, more moderate image. Considering the criticisms already arising from within the party, the idea of aligning with secular parties could weaken the party’s identity and push some members towards rival parties. As such, in the event of a re-orientation towards secular coalitions, Bapir would need to exercise the ability to confront internal opposition and disunity within the party. Because of the difficulty in that task, Komal may avoid such coalition moves in the near future.

Furthermore, perhaps one of the biggest challenges to Komal in entering a secular coalition is the fact that all the party’s current leaders have an Islamist background, including some with known violent pasts. Bapir, for example, was arrested in 2003 by the U.S. forces in Iraqi Kurdistan for almost two years over alleged ties with Ansar al-Islam, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization. Bapir is also a former top commander in Bzotnawa, an Islamist party that retained an armed division in the past. Moreover, Bapir has made comments in the past claiming that joining parliament contradicts Islam, though he has since stepped back from his anti-democratic positions and asserted that democratic processes are important.

Furthermore, regardless of the ideological challenges to joining a secular coalition, it can be estimated that Komal will not be an indispensable party for the creation of a coalition in Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)’s next parliamentary election. It is true that Komal’s recent policy on regional and domestic issues have gained it popularity, and the party certainly did well by opposing the 2017 Independence Referendum due to its timing, withdrawing from the government in December 2017 out of support for the anti-government protests, and

criticizing corruption and salary cuts. However, in the current coalition, Komal has **positioned** itself as an opposition party, declaring it would offer the government “constructive criticism,” and the numbers do not suggest that Komal is needed to create a new coalition in the 2022 parliamentary elections. Accordingly, not taking part in the government might be Komal’s most prudent move in order to avoid the increasing public criticisms directed at current government components.

Considering Komal leadership’s militant past, current parliamentary dynamics, and the fact that the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the strongest party in KRI, already holds a large number of conservative votes in the region, Komal would face formidable challenges in joining a secular coalition in the short term. If Komal really plans to take a moderate political stand and expand its target audience, it has to adopt more inclusive and critical discourse with a larger focus on societal issues. These issues include problems faced by youth and women in the KRI.

Komal therefore finds itself in a difficult position, distancing itself from a militant Islamist past while facing the obstacles to potentially entering a doubtful secular society. The degree to which the party will commit to the new reforms is unclear, but they certainly mark a serious change in the Islamist politics of the KRI. What remains to be seen is whether other parties, Islamist or secular, will change their tune in response. ❖



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