



What Caused the KRG Miscalculation on the Independence Referendum?

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Brief Analysis

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The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) conducted the independence referendum on 25 September 2017. Of the 72.16 percent of eligible voters in the Kurdistan Region and the disputed territories that cast their votes, 92.73 percent favored separation from Iraq despite vehement opposition both internally and externally. The KRG had planned to start negotiations with the Iraqi government to settle the conditions of independence after the referendum, using the overwhelming support for separation as a bargaining chip. However, once the referendum was over, the Iraqi government, along with Turkey and Iran, imposed economic sanctions against Kurdistan. Additionally, the Iraqi army and Hashd al-Shabi advanced to take back the disputed territories unilaterally controlled by Peshmerga in 2014 amid the confusion of the IS takeover of Mosul. The Kurds lost a significant amount of land and oil resources they once controlled, which shattered the dream of independence in the foreseeable future.

The Kurdish leadership in Iraq had expected strong opposition from both Iran and Turkey, the regional powers who were concerned about the referendum's effects on Kurds in their own countries. However, such a harsh reaction from the Iraqi government was beyond the scope of their assumptions, as were the internal Kurdish divisions that enabled the Iraqi military advance and the total non-support for Kurds from the international community.

The first miscalculation by the KRG, or rather by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) who led the referendum aggressively, was that they expected Arab Iraq to understand their desire for independence. First, there was almost zero support among the Kurds in Kurdistan for staying within the Iraqi state in the future. Kurdistan has the collective memory of suppression under the Saddam regime, and the experience of more than twenty-five years of autonomy reduced both their physical and emotional connections with Iraq. However, Arab Iraq maintains strong Iraqi nationalism that supports the peaceful coexistence of all Iraqis regardless of religious or ethnic backgrounds. Those sentiments are especially strong now in light of the victory over the terrorist organization IS that had recently

occupied parts of Iraq. The unique nature of Kurdistan and Kurdish nationalism tended to be trivialized in the broader context of Iraqi nationalism. Even if Arab politicians were familiar with their Kurdish counterparts' aspirations for independence, they had no incentive to persuade their own Arab constituencies to support Kurdish secession. In Arab society, there has been frustration over the Kurdish political leadership who exploited the fragility of Iraq after 2003, behaving like a state with unilateral diplomacy or control of oil exports. This pent-up irritation culminated in the unprecedented military offensive in Kirkuk. Public sentiment or opinions are not at all shared between Kurdistan and Arab Iraq, and the Kurdish leadership who failed to gain a real understanding of Arab society took an unrealistic view of the probability of independence.

However, the Kirkuk operation may not have been possible without Kurdish internal divisions. The KDP underestimated Kurdish opposition to referendum, including that of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Although it is often pointed out that the KDP rushed into the referendum to divert criticism of the stalemate in Kurdistan politics or economic difficulties, for the KDP leadership, especially those of the older generation who fought long guerrilla wars and managed to build the de-facto state, the cause of independence was simply prioritized over anything else.

Furthermore, it was expected that they would lead the way since it is KDP who represents Kurdistan in their view. This mindset overlooked the dilemma faced by Kurds who wanted an independent Kurdistan but not a Barzani dynasty. It is said that in Suleymaniya, a PUK and Gorran stronghold, voter turnout was merely 50 percent, and yes votes constituted only about 80 percent of votes cast. In mid-October, the Talabani faction of the PUK, facing pressure from the governments of Iraq and Iran, relented and ordered the Peshmerga to withdraw from the Kirkuk frontline. The KDP's failure to carefully build consensus in Kurdistan resulted in losing 'the heart of Kurdistan'.

The KDP's last miscalculation was its failure to accurately predict the reaction from the international society. Due to international norms respecting existing national boundaries, there would be no state to support secession. At the same time, since the right of self-determination itself is undeniable, the opposition to secession tended to take the position that 'it is not the right time' as repeated by many country officials. The KRG therefore needed to read international sentiment cautiously. Although the US and Europe never explicitly supported independence, they nonetheless treated Kurdistan as a de-facto state reflecting the situation on the ground since 2003, which resulted in the KRG's unrealistic expectations of support. For example, consular offices in Erbil were in fact diplomatic counterparts for the KRG, and major oil companies invested in Kurdistan with tacit approval from their own governments despite the strong opposition from Baghdad. Military support for Iraq was expanded to include Peshmerga when IS assaulted Mosul and other cities. This situation gave the KRG the erroneous impression that the US and Europe would eventually embrace an independent Kurdistan. This may have even been the case if the Iraqi government had accepted independence, but it did not mean the US and Europe would treat Kurdistan as an equal of the sovereign Iraq state when tensions rose between the Iraqi government and the KRG. The odds already seemed against Kurdistan when the UN Security Council expressed 'concern' over the referendum several days before the vote. Consequently, the US and European countries distanced themselves from the Kurds when the Iraqi army advanced to Kirkuk rather than intervene to defuse tensions. This miscalculation might partly be attributed to the lobbying activity the KRG had been aggressively engaged in for a long time. This lobbying activity surely influenced international public opinions to garner sympathy to the Kurds. However, the KRG, surrounded by their lobbyists, may have been unable to objectively gauge the real support or non-support from Washington.

These three miscalculations of the KRG are significant factors leading to the failure of the independence referendum. The public opinions of Arab Iraq and the attitudes of international community could possibly change over time. However, it will be the responsibility of the Kurdish leadership to mend internal divisions and rebuild institutions beyond parochial party politics, because this is not the first time that disarray among political parties is exploited by

external actors. Strengthen nation-building efforts in Kurdistan, such as the unification of Peshmerga or consensus decision making through democratic parliamentary politics is an absolute necessity for Kurds even if their status remains as an autonomous area in a foreseeable future for the sake of securing their status in Iraq. Institutionalization of governance structure in Kurdistan would be a vehicle to help reaching out the international community with one voice, which is essential to convince the world that independent Kurdistan would not cause further destabilization in the Middle East. ❖



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