

Political Reform Before Referendum and Independence

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Brief Analysis

September 19, 2017

Since the decision to hold a referendum on the future of Iraqi Kurdistan, there has been a fierce debate between those in favor of the decision and those against, among people of all backgrounds and positions. These debates are not without serious political intimidation against anyone who stands in opposition to the referendum.

Where is this opposition coming from? Does it stem from a lack of faith in self-determination or from a critical attitude towards a political discourse that ostensibly embraces democratic independence while consolidating individual authority and family domination? Does it stem from the hope of an Iraq with citizenship, freedom, justice, and a dignified life or from dissatisfaction with a Kurdish administration that does not see anything wrong with a tradition of tyranny, nepotism, and political monopoly and oppression?

These are issues that can no longer be anesthetized by nationalist party slogans and romantic speeches. Nor can the expression "death for independence" be used any longer to stir the people to action and mobilize whenever political oppression requires it. These are not questions that correspond to a populist political language about the impossibility of coexistence in Iraq. Coexistence, even at its lowest political level, does not exist in the Kurdistan region because of its isolation and the terrible misuse of power and wealth.

There are many reasons that compel us to carefully examine Massoud Barzani's call for a referendum. Barzani himself is the first reason, since despite his term officially ending on June 30, 2015, he has not left the office. In the first obstacle to democratization in Kurdistan, his term was renewed in 2013 through backroom dealings between

his Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). Moreover, in October 2015 Barzani made the decision to close the doors of Parliament.

Holding the referendum on schedule and postponing the parliamentary and presidential elections scheduled for early November is another game designed to prolong Barzani's personal and familial control. In this regard, we support the position announced by the European Union Delegation to Iraq on July 24, 2017 that "the full operation of the Kurdistan Region's elected institutions, in particular the reactivation of its parliament and the holding of elections, is an important prerequisite for stability and for the region's continued political, social, and economic development as envisaged in Iraq's program of reforms."

The stifling economic crisis facing Kurdistan, where local government debt has reached \$30 billion due to the government's erroneous and non-transparent oil policy, is another factor of distrust towards the referendum and the fragile promises of nationalism. The road down which Barzani is leading Kurdistan, with the debt, the deepening economic crisis, and internal political conflicts, will not end much differently than famine-ridden and civil war-ravaged South Sudan. Is it possible for an economically unstable region to stand up against the threats of supposed friends and hostile neighbors who control its infrastructure? This is a question to be answered by rational economic and political pragmatism, not by nationalistic and patriotic romanticism that would put everything that has been achieved since 1991 at risk.

We would also like to address the absence of an independent judiciary and the subsequent legal decisions that are in accordance with partisan and authoritarian interests. The average citizen no longer believes in the judiciary's ability to protect their life or rights. In the absence of law, independent press, and effective civil society, political punishment, prosecution, and restrictions on freedoms, particularly in areas under the control of Barzani, have become a standard feature of power in the Kurdistan Region.

In addition to this, the Kurdistan Region lacks a unified Peshmerga and internal security force, because of the KDP and PUK dominance over military decisions benefitting their own interests. The Peshmerga are not capable of defending the hoped-for state should it be subject to external aggression without some sort of international protection.

The United States has stated that the time is not right to hold a referendum and that the focus should be on the war against the Islamic State and cooperation with the Iraqi government. The EU position is similar, its delegation to Iraq stating that "actions that do not result from dialogue and agreement between the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Federal Government...are counterproductive."

Kurdistan's northern neighbor, Turkey, announced its opposition to the referendum. In the event that the referendum is held, Turkey would like to see a state similar to Northern Cyprus, which is recognized only by Turkey; that is to say, it wants a second Turkish colony in the Middle East. Iran has, on more than one occasion, announced that it is against Kurdish independence and the language of its political and security leaders has not been without direct threat. They have also sent indirect threats sent through channels within the Iraqi government, which is itself in opposition to the referendum and considers it unconstitutional.

Kurdistan's reality requires a national project that combines the various political, social, religious, and ethnic parties and real political and economic reforms to liberate them from partisanship and familial control. Such a project entails finding a solution to the presidential crisis, the primary cause of the other crises, in order to prevent the reproduction of any dictatorial or hereditary authoritarian regime and remove the mechanisms that concentrate power in the hands of a single individual. While the focus on the referendum and its consequences is another blow to democracy and a protraction of the situation in Kurdistan, we believe that holding presidential and parliamentary elections in a single electoral basket is a correct step towards normalizing the situation.

As for the relationship with the Federal Government, we believe that rethinking the current political system has become a pressing demand if we are ever going to see a light at the end of the tunnel. Due to the concentration of power in the hands of individuals and forces indifferent to democratic values, human rights, transparency, and the rule of law in the federal system, Iraq is not a successful model. We believe that reshaping the current political system according to a confederate model combining three states – Kurdistan, a south-central region, and a western region – in a union called the United States of Iraq is a suitable and satisfactory solution. Any step in this direction, with the backing of the international community vis a vis the UN, the Arab League, the United States, and the European Union, could open the door to a permanent solution to Iraq's reoccurring problems. In the event that this vision is rejected, a referendum could then be used as an alternative solution for determining the shape and future of the Kurdish relationship with the Federal Government.

In short, confederation, in addition to eliminating sectarian and nationalist violence between parties and finding solutions to outstanding issues, including that of the disputed territories, according to the mechanisms set by the Iraqi Constitution provides a common currency with each country retaining the keys to its own independent economic, cultural, and foreign policies. ❖

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