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Fikra Forum

The New Politics of Iraqi Kurdistan

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Aug 16, 2016

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Brief Analysis

Kurdistan has been an island of relative stability and economic progress for nearly two decades, but continuing this success will require putting aside personal elitist rivalries and committing to political deal making and power sharing.

A recent agreement between two of Iraqi Kurdistan's main political parties -- the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Movement for Change (Gorran) -- is likely to set the stage for Kurdish politics in the years to come. The agreement is also expected to aggravate tensions with the dominant Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) who perceives this new alliance as functioning to undermine them. But if treated with more flexibility by the KDP, the deal could, in the long run, stabilize politics in Iraqi Kurdistan.

The PUK and Gorran signed a deal on May 17 whereby they agreed on a joint action platform that will bring the two parties together in the Kurdish and Iraqi political arenas. While the PUK, led by former Iraqi president Jalal Talabani, has been part of the Kurdish establishment, Gorran has often presented itself as an anti-establishment party. The agreement between the two parties is not only important because it ends nearly seven years of hostile relationships between the two sides, but is likely to present a counterweight to the KDP, which is led by Iraqi Kurdistan's acting President Masoud Barzani. It will also mean the effective termination of a so-called "strategic agreement" that turned the former foes, KDP and PUK, into allies for a number of years.

The PUK-Gorran deal came about after a dramatic collapse of Gorran's relations with the KDP. The main trigger for this fallout came when Gorran led an effort in June 2015 to introduce a number of bills amending the presidency law of Iraqi Kurdistan when Barzani's term was nearing its end. The KDP saw this as an attempt to undermine Barzani,

and consequently its relations with Gorran went sour. The law was never amended. A governmental body later extended Barzani's term despite strong protest from Gorran and some smaller parties. When in October of the same year KDP's offices in Sulaymaniyah province came under attack by protesters causing at least five fatalities among KDP supporters and protesters, Barzani's party blamed Gorran for the assault on its offices. In an unexpected twist, the KDP then blocked Gorran's speaker of Kurdish parliament and five of the group's ministers from entering Erbil in October 2015 ending Gorran's participation in the Kurdish government institutions. That led to a divorce between the two sides and brought an end to an uneasy partnership that had started in 2014 when the KDP, as the largest bloc in the newly-elected Kurdish parliament, picked Gorran over the PUK as its major partner in the new coalition government.

WHAT'S IN THE DEAL?

The deal contains a number of provisions that if actively pursued by the PUK and Gorran will only deepen the political crisis and fragmentation in Kurdistan, given KDP's opposition to the agreement.

Given that the coalition now has more seats than the KDP in the Kurdish parliament, 42 to 38, the PUK and Gorran hope they can maintain this advantage and form the largest Kurdish political bloc in the future. However, this might be too optimistic, considering that many Gorran votes were the result of its oppositional political stance and anti-establishment rhetoric -- now Gorran itself will be increasingly seen as part of the establishment. Its alliance with the PUK may cost Gorran a portion of its votes in future elections, especially among the young, educated demographic, given that they consider the PUK to be just as corrupt and nepotistic as the KDP.

The PUK-Gorran deal calls for an unconditional re-activation of the Kurdish parliament that has been crippled since KDP banned its speaker from entering Erbil last year. KDP officials say they will accept the activation of the parliament, but only if a non-Gorran figure leads it.

The deal also calls for establishing a parliamentary system where the president of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq will be elected in parliament, but not through a direct vote. Given that Barzani is likely to retain the office of presidency in any future scenario, the KDP fears that if the president is elected by the parliament he will be beholden to coalition agreements, thus hampering his ability to advance KDP's policies.

KDP AND PUK: A LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP

Kurdish politics has been fraught with internal armed fighting. The PUK emerged as a reaction to certain KDP policies and practices. In 1964, the nucleus for the PUK took form when Jalal Talabani and his future father-in-law, Ibrahim Ahmed, parted ways with KDP's Mustafa Barzani, father of the current leader Masoud Barzani. They objected to senior Barzani's monopolization of power within the party's ranks. Talabani returned to the KDP in early 1970s, only to leave again when the Barzani-led Kurdish revolt against the Iraqi government collapsed in 1975. That same year, Talabani established the PUK with a group of other young leaders trying to set a new path in Iraqi Kurdish politics. Despite periods of cooperation, the relationship between the PUK and the KDP has been largely characterized by deep mistrust and armed clashes since the very beginning.

When a civil war broke out between the KDP and PUK in 1994, Iraqi Kurdistan's territory was split into two zones, with the northern part dominated by the KDP and the southern part by the PUK. Following a Washington-mediated peace process in 1998, the two parties started to gradually mend fences. They joined the U.S.-led coalition against Saddam Hussein in 2003 and managed to largely transcend partisan politics for almost a decade. During that period the parties shared power in both Kurdistan and Baghdad, later formalized through a strategic agreement in 2007 resulting in a period of unprecedented Kurdish stability and economic development.

But this carefully-crafted equilibrium was shaken when Gorran split from the PUK in 2009, taking away as much as half of the party's votes. A number of other events, including disagreements over how to deal with Baghdad and the

repercussions of the Syrian crisis, drove the KDP and PUK further apart. When the PUK came third in 2013 Kurdish parliamentary elections, the KDP no longer treated the PUK as an ally and instead chose Gorran as its main partner for the new Kurdish administration.

THE GORRAN-PUK DEAL: AN ALLIANCE OR MERGER?

Having grown fearful of the perceived domination of the KDP over Iraqi Kurdistan's affairs, the PUK's primary motive behind allying with Gorran serves to counterbalance the KDP. As two senior PUK officials put it, their party's aim is to restore the balance of power in Kurdistan -- not to undermine the KDP.

As for Gorran, having been forced out of government institutions in a humiliating and illegal manner by the KDP, the decision to join forces with the PUK was the party's only way of remaining a relevant actor in the treacherous waters of Kurdish politics. As Mohammed Tofiq Rahim, a high-ranking Gorran official, put it, the deal was their best shot at "stopping KDP's unilateralism and re-establishing a balance" in Kurdistan's political system. Gorran's populist politics and constant efforts to harness popular disgruntlement to its advantage have brought it into confrontation with the KDP and PUK time and again over the past several years. The deal with the PUK is a sign that Gorran leaders, in particular General Coordinator Nawshirwan Mustafa, have realized they cannot achieve much in the long run if they are not part of a larger political structure. As the second most popular party in Kurdistan's 2013 elections, Gorran brings a large popular voting base while the PUK provides military support given its sizable Peshmerga and security forces. The synergy brought about by the deal could create a win-win situation for both parties and as such might render it durable.

Despite Gorran leaders' insistence that this is merely an alliance, some senior PUK leaders, such as Adil Murad, speak of a possible merger with Gorran saying this should be the ultimate aim of the current deal. The two parties have now formed a joint leadership committee that includes the most powerful figures on both sides. Gorran's Rahim, however, denies that a merger is taking place, adding that his party has become "something different than when we were part of the PUK."

The mere fact that Gorran chose such a strategic alliance with the PUK is an admission of failure in bringing about change through conventionally democratic means in Kurdistan. As senior PUK official Farid Asasard said, "If Gorran could have been successful on their own, they would not have entered into this agreement." The PUK-Gorran accord might also cause deep disappointment among many young Kurds who pinned their hopes on Gorran to shake up Kurdistan's stagnant politics and bring about more social justice and equal opportunity in a system dominated by the Barzani and Talabani families and their immediate circles. The Gorran-PUK deal -- or possible merger -- demonstrates the limited capacity of Kurdish politics to accommodate processes of democratic change.

RELATIONS WITH BAGHDAD: MAKE OR BREAK

KDP's rhetoric in the last couple of years has been focused on either a peaceful separation from Iraq or reorganizing Baghdad-KRG relations on a confederal basis. As the major component of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the KDP has advocated for more KRG autonomy vis-a-vis Baghdad when it comes to such crucial issues as control of energy resources and the extent of Kurdish self-rule. The party has been the major driver behind the independent oil export policy that the KRG recently implemented and which eventually led to Baghdad cutting off Kurdistan's share of the Iraqi budget in early 2014. A strong PUK-Gorran alliance might deepen the divide in Iraqi Kurdistan regarding the Iraqi government, as the PUK and Gorran have both largely supported better relations with Baghdad.

As Gorran's Rahim argues, "no matter what your long-term thinking is, you need to have normal relations with Baghdad. Bad relations with Baghdad will be in Baghdad's interests and to our detriment." Rahim, like many KDP opponents, considers KDP's independence rhetoric to be "propaganda aimed at misleading people."

Although in their recent deal the PUK and Gorran have voiced support for a long-term goal of Kurdish independence, their leaders often appear more reserved about the issue. The PUK in particular has been more vocal in pushing for a rapprochement with Baghdad and postponing plans for separation. PUK's veteran politician Adil Murad believes Kurdish independence "is not realistic" at the moment due to a hard-hitting economic crisis in Kurdistan and the possible threat of military confrontation with Baghdad or Shia paramilitary groups supported by both Baghdad and Iran. Given that the zone dominated by the PUK and Gorran only has borders with Iran and Iraq, the two parties might find it harder, in practice, to support secession from Iraq, hence their more conciliatory tone toward Baghdad. Many among PUK and Gorran also fear that independence will further strengthen the KDP's grip on power in Kurdistan.

PUK-GORRAN INTERNAL CONDITIONS

The deal between the PUK and Gorran might have different ramifications for the internal dynamics of each party. Whereas the PUK is seen as a deeply divided party, the deal has brought together different party factions in a show of unity. Given that personal and factional power struggles within the party run deep, it remains to be seen whether the current unity will last. The dominant faction within the PUK, consisting of Talabani's wife and her allies, is trying to use the deal with Gorran as a means of introducing some internal order and reenergizing the party's base, which has been deeply disappointed with its leadership's performance in recent years.

The deal might have different implications for Gorran, as the party has a mixed composition of people who split from the PUK and many idealistic young Kurds who saw in Gorran an opportunity to reform the corrupt and ailing Kurdish political system. While the former PUK elements within Gorran appear mostly excited about an alliance with the PUK, some of the younger officials and cadets worry that their roles will be compromised, and the ideals for which they joined Gorran might lose their priority. At the end of the day, the PUK has not undergone any significant change from the days when Gorran campaigned so ferociously against it. Some would argue the PUK has actually turned even more towards nepotism in recent years. It remains to be seen whether Gorran and the PUK will drift closer together or possibly merge, and if that were to happen, how the younger, more idealistic elements within Gorran will react.

THE WAY FORWARD

After a few years of KDP domination over Iraqi Kurdish politics, a new reality is emerging. The new Gorran-PUK bloc will, through its size and resources, pose a challenge to KDP's hegemony over Iraqi Kurdistan. Nevertheless, the new PUK-Gorran front, will not be homogenous and the two sides may differ on some key issues depending on their perception of their interests and priorities.

While the KDP has reacted in a defensive and hostile manner to the PUK-Gorran pact, it's important that it comes to terms with this dynamic. It should realize that it cannot maintain the offices of President, Prime Minister and National Security Chancellor for as long as it wishes and hence must be prepared for some realistic compromises. In the interest of Kurdistan's long-term stability and progress, a new power-sharing agreement has to be negotiated. PUK and Gorran officials are quick to mention that this is the goal they are seeking. The KDP should take them at their word and enter into negotiations with the Gorran-PUK alliance. Decades of experience have shown that neither of these two blocs can subjugate nor eliminate the other side, not even through armed conflict or reliance on powerful regional states such as Iran, Turkey, and Iraq. Since each of these Kurdish blocs has a separate geographic sphere of influence, none of them can rule Kurdistan without cooperation from the other side.

The onus is on the KDP to show flexibility and actually consider the PUK-Gorran deal an opportunity for re-establishing a new balanced order and lasting equilibrium that ensures stability and long-term gains for all sides. Zero-sum games will be detrimental to the strength and stability of Kurdistan and its parties.

Meanwhile, the PUK and Gorran should stop their demonizing propaganda campaign against the KDP that has been going on for years. They need to assure the KDP of their good intentions. The PUK-Gorran propaganda machine has created such a negative mentality toward the KDP in Sulaymaniyah that any lasting cooperation with the KDP seems quite unlikely. The outcome of this intensive anti-KDP and anti-Barzani propaganda campaign has been the birth of what could be termed a "Sulaymaniyah consensus" whereby the KDP is the fixed villain in the political narrative coming out of Sulaymaniyah even though the party has a minimal role in governing that area. This anti-KDP consensus has become the common wisdom shared not only by Gorran and the PUK but even Islamist parties, the bulk of the media establishment, and many independent figures there. This rhetorical trap has played an important role in the PUK's and Gorran's failure to build a viable relationship with the KDP, fearing backlash from their base.

If Iraqi Kurdistan is to survive as one stable entity, all sides should manifest a spirit of compromise and genuine willingness to work together. Falling victim to personal ambitions, populist impulses and conducting vilifying propaganda campaigns will only further corrode the situation and drive Kurdistan to the verge of a dangerous cliff. The PUK and Gorran should cease enlisting the support of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in their power struggle with the KDP. Providing an opportunity for the PKK to establish a foothold in PUK-dominated territories and the Yazidi-dominated Sinjar area will be detrimental to Iraqi Kurdistan's stability by exacerbating tensions, planting seeds of ongoing conflict, and inviting further undesirable outside intervention, namely from Turkey, in Kurdistan's affairs.

The immediate impact of the deal has been a dangerous escalation of tensions among the KDP, on one side, and PUK and Gorran, on the other. The KDP's strategy so far has been to drive a wedge between the PUK and Gorran by adopting a highly hostile rhetoric and course of action toward Gorran, although in recent weeks it has, to some extent, softened up its attitude. In the KDP-controlled Erbil, judicial authorities recently issued an arrest warrant for Gorran's leader Nawshirwan Mustafa. The party's senior officials have said they are not ready to negotiate with the Gorran-PUK joint bloc under any circumstances. The aim of such tactics appears to be forcing the PUK to reconsider its alliance with Gorran as the KDP and PUK still have major strategic interests tying them together in the form of energy cooperation and the fact that they are the backbone of the Kurdish government and armed forces.

There is an important role here for the United States to play by exerting leverage on Kurdish parties to negotiate a viable deal. The issues are mostly about personal elitist rivalries and not core strategic conflicts. While Washington has invested heavily in Baghdad's political process and democratic development, it has not shown much interest over the past decade or so to engage in Kurdistan's political development. But given that the United States has been acting as the main guarantor of Kurdish security for the past couple of decades, it wields considerable influence and leverage that it can use for an excellent cause. This leverage is even greater now that the Kurds heavily rely on the United States to counter ISIS's grave threat.

Kurdistan has been an island of relative stability and economic progress for the past 18 years and the long-term survival of this stability requires continued commitment to political deal-making and power sharing. Pragmatist politicians on all sides should be able to transcend narrow personal and political gains and see the benefit in long-term cooperation. Washington's engagement is even more imperative given the interferences by regional countries such as Iran and Turkey, who each seek to prop up their local allies: Iran backs up the PUK-Gorran bloc, while Turkey supports the KDP. Otherwise, the stakes are too high and undesirable scenarios, such as a partition of Iraqi Kurdistan into two separately-administered zones and perhaps even armed conflict, loom on the horizon. ❖

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