

National Implications of the Kurdish Elections

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Articles & Testimony

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) parliament elected in July convened for the first time on August 20, ushering in a new political era in Iraqi Kurdistan. While the bloc including the long-dominant Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) currently controls a majority of 59 out of 111 seats, the new Gorran ("Change") Party has 26, and the Services and Reform bloc (including Islamists and socialists) has 13, in addition to a few seats won by smaller parties and 11 set aside for Turkoman and Christian minorities. Moreover, because Gorran is led by PUK founder Nawshirwan Mustafa and drew its votes mainly from PUK areas, the new situation is likely to spur calls for reform and leadership change within the PUK. That would make it a less reliable partner for the KDP, and will increase the likelihood of heated debate and multi-party bargaining in the parliament.

This political change in the KRG coincides with an important period in relations with the federal government in Baghdad, as Iraq prepares for national elections on January 16, 2010. It is not yet clear how large a role Kurds will play in the campaign. It is possible that Iraqi political campaigns will stress Arab nationalist themes at the expense of the Kurds, or alternatively that various factions will court Kurds, knowing they will need their votes in the new parliament.

At present, the scenario of other factions courting Kurds seems more likely. The KDP and PUK will contest the national elections as one list and Gorran will compete as another, but the two Kurdish blocs have agreed to pool their votes in the national parliament. This means that Kurds are likely to win some 50 out of 275 seats, which will likely be the largest single bloc in parliament. If electoral legislation is passed as it currently stands, the Kurds will also probably receive a seat on the three-member presidency council alongside a Shi'i Arab and a Sunni Arab representative, allowing them to veto legislation and prevent its passage unless parliament achieves the difficult task of mustering a two-thirds majority. These factors could make the Kurds an indispensable ally in forming the next Iraqi government, particularly if Arab factions remain divided along factional and sectarian lines.

While there is now less risk of an anti-Kurdish theme emerging in the coming elections, as well as strong potential for a post-electoral compromise on federal-KRG revenue sharing, agreeing on the joint administration of disputed territories will be more complex. The first problem to resolve is provincial elections in Kirkuk, the only governorate outside the KRG not included in the January 31, 2009 provincial elections. Kurdish groups were unable to obtain the holding a national census on October 24, 2009--the scheduled census has been cancelled due to the political sensitivity of the issue. The KDP and PUK now want to hold provincial elections in Kirkuk to coincide with the January 16, 2010 national elections. Turkoman and Arab groups in Kirkuk want a special elections law to be passed that allocates more seats on the provincial council to each ethnic group. Both sides appear to recognize that Kurds now significantly outnumber other ethnic groups in Kirkuk, though polling or voting in Kirkuk would be undermined by disagreements over who is eligible to register as a resident of the province.

International Role

Although the United Nations Assistance Mission in Iraq has convened a task force of senior federal and Kurdish leaders, the key external influence on federal-KRG issues remains the United States. The U.S. military presence in

Iraq is due to decline during 2010 and largely disappear either at the beginning of 2011 (if the January 16, 2010 referendum rejects the U.S.-Iraq security agreement) or by the end of 2011 at the latest. This puts the United States under pressure to move the political process forward, and to prevent local clashes between Arabs and Kurds in the meantime.

When Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki came to Washington DC in July 2009, every U.S. official he met advised him to boost his political efforts to reach an accommodation with the Kurds. When a string of senior U.S. military leaders visited the KRG in late summer, they also strongly urged the Kurdish leadership to take steps to reduce tensions. These twin pressures -- the political importance of the Kurds within Iraq as well as U.S. lobbying -- induced Maliki to make his first visit to the KRG on August 2, where he publicly congratulated President Masoud Barzani on his re-election and made a well-received symbolic speech at Halabja, the site of 1988 chemical weapons attacks that killed more than 5,000 Kurdish civilians.

On August 18, Multinational Forces commander General Ray Odierno proposed a temporary increase in the presence of U.S. forces along the federal-KRG disputed internal border. This force would form tripartite U.S.-federal-Kurdish security headquarters along the disputed areas to coordinate security and reduce the risk of clashes between Arab and Kurdish security forces. Though smaller in scale, the idea resembles the U.S. surge of forces deployed to reduce sectarian violence in central Iraq in 2008.

Looking Ahead

The next year will be a critical moment in Iraqi federal-Kurdish relations. Some hard line advocates of an independent Kurdish state in northern Iraq believe that the KRG will eventually be better off without Iraq and will instead form military and economic ties with Turkey, providing Ankara with a stable southern border and an interlocutor in its struggle with Kurdish nationalism. Other Kurdish leaders such as KRG Prime Minister Barham Saleh have consistently looked to Baghdad as the KRG's long-term partner. The new parliamentary balance in the KRG has potentially given more strength to Kurdish advocates of a compromise with Baghdad. Strong U.S. pressure is pushing towards a federal-KRG deal. The major Arab factions will probably need a Kurdish political ally to form a national government. These factors, combined, suggest that there may be hope for the beginning of an Arab-Kurdish compromise in 2010.

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