

Kurdistan's Troubled Democracy

Apr 20, 2009



Articles & Testimony

Shortly after taking office, President Obama congratulated Iraqis on successful provincial elections. "Millions of Iraqi citizens from every ethnic and religious group went peacefully to the polls across the country to choose new provincial councils," he declared on Jan. 31. But this was not quite the case. In the three provinces that comprise Iraqi Kurdistan, the regional parliament postponed the vote until May 19. Only recently have plans been made to hold the elections.

In Iraq, elections are critical. They improve security by legitimizing power relationships while allowing people to vent frustration. In the Jan. 31 provincial elections, Iraqis chose for the most part to "throw the bums out," selecting candidates who they thought would abandon narrow sectarian objectives and best address their problems at the local level. The question now is whether a similar degree of freedom will exist in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Iraqi Kurdish officials have long touted their region as democratic. In January, regional President Massoud Barzani declared, "The culture of democracy has to be promoted and deeply rooted." His son Masrour, head of the region's intelligence service, wrote that Kurdistan's "commitment to democracy and tolerance made us natural U.S. allies." The Web site of the region's investment arm describes Iraqi Kurdistan as "a place that has practiced democracy for over a decade."

And before Saddam Hussein was ousted, Iraqi Kurdistan was certainly more democratic than the rest of Iraq. But this is no longer the case.

Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the party of Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, refuse to compete in open elections, choosing instead to divide power equally. While more benign than Hussein's Baath Party, Kurdish authorities have adopted the Baathist model, requiring party membership to guarantee university slots, qualify for the best jobs or win lucrative contracts. Independent candidates report intimidation and threats.

In the past four years, there have been three competitive elections in Iraq, more than Syria, Egypt, or Saudi Arabia have managed in the past four decades. With each election, Iraq's democracy has solidified. In January 2005, voters selected parties from a nationwide list. Such a system undercut representative democracy by divorcing politicians from local concerns and making them dependent on party bosses to whom they had to pledge fealty. The system evolved by the next round of voting, in December 2005: While still based on proportional representation rather than individual constituencies (as in the United States), candidates ran by province, forcing them to be more responsive to constituents. The provincial elections this year heralded more reform: Iraqis could choose individual candidates from lists or even choose independent candidates; they did not have to vote a party slate. And while in the 2005 elections the parties coalesced along ethnic and confessional lines, in January, Shiite parties ran independently of each other, allowing voters rather than party bosses the ultimate say in their representation.

In contrast to the rest of Iraq, Kurdish parties have already cemented alliances and power-sharing agreements. Voters in Iraqi Kurdistan will not have the benefit of real competition or open lists. Nor will they be able to choose

among individuals.

In a region where corruption and party abuse of power have become dominant issues, this undercuts accountability. Furthermore, the Kurdish parliament -- dominated by the parties of Barzani and Talabani -- has forbidden independent monitoring, which contributed so much to the success of the elections in the rest of Iraq.

After five brutal years, the rest of Iraq is developing real electoral politics that is helping to defuse conflict, create accountability and foster stability. It is possible that, in time, other institutions of the democratic system, including a free parliament and media, will strengthen as a result. This would be a welcome development not only in Iraq but in the rest of the Middle East.

Once, Iraqi Kurdistan touted itself as a model for the rest of Iraq. Now, the Obama administration should do everything it can to ensure that it is not left behind. Absent reform in that critical region, the rest of Iraq may become the model for it.

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