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Iraqi Kurds Go to the Polls: Is Change Possible?

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On July 25, Iraqi Kurds go to the polls to vote in a joint parliamentary and presidential election. Although a heated competition in January produced massive change at the provincial level throughout the rest of Iraq, the electoral system produced by the incumbent Iraqi Kurdistan parliament prevents such sweeping changes in the north. Both the current coalition governing the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) and the current KRG president, Masoud Barzani, will most likely be reelected. Despite the lack of change, the postelection period will create an opportunity for Baghdad, Washington, and the KRG to resolve outstanding issues that cause increased tension between Arabs and Kurds. Resolution can occur only if all parties take advantage of new political openings, however narrow.

Impact of the Electoral Law

The KRG's 2009 amended election law combines the three provinces of Iraqi Kurdistan into a single district and presents a closed-list system that requires voters to select only lists, not candidates. This electoral system maximizes support for well-organized, well-disciplined parties; additionally, it prevents independent groups from gaining significant electoral ground, since would-be challengers to the establishment have to field candidates across the entire Kurdish region, even if they are only strong in certain areas. Treating the north as a single district also reinforces party leadership and discipline while undermining ties between elected parliamentarians and their constituencies. Coupling this with the predominance of the two main parties in the media and their access to capital and government resources, the stage is set for the incumbents to dominate.

Nature of the Competition

Parliamentary. Although twenty-four political entities are competing for 111 seats, only two groups are in real contention: the Kurdistan and Change lists.

The Kurdistan list comprises the two main Kurdish parties -- the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), headed by Iraqi president Jalal Talabani, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), headed by KRG president Masoud Barzani -- and is expected to win an outright majority. Although the Kurdistan list touts itself as the only one that can deliver services and protect Kurdish interests in Baghdad, it acknowledges -- if reluctantly -- that it has hurdles to overcome with the Kurdish electorate on issues of corruption and nepotism.

The only real competitor to the Kurdistan list is the Change list, an independent group headed by former PUK cofounder and deputy leader Nawsherwan Mustafa. He quit the PUK in late 2006 after growing dissatisfied with the corruption and lack of internal reform within the PUK leadership, and subsequently founded a media conglomerate, Wusha Corporation. The Change list is running on a platform of anticorruption, antinepotism, youth empowerment, and greater financial transparency. The list's stronghold is Sulaymaniyah, where it has gained traction with disillusioned youth, students, and members of the PUK.

Presidential. Barzani is running essentially unopposed. Only one candidate, Halo Ibrahim Ahmed, a former PUK member and brother-in-law of Jalal Talabani, poses a minor challenge. The Change list decided not to

field a challenger, likely because of its desire to concentrate all its resources on the parliamentary elections.

Media Access and Campaign Resources

Although numerous electronic and print media exist in Iraqi Kurdistan, the Kurdistan list has a greater natural advantage in pushing its electoral program. Both the PUK and KDP have access to a wide array of satellite and local television stations, as well as to numerous newspapers and magazines. In addition, the Kurdistan list exploits its many "personalities" and vast financial resources to influence voters, using government-owned reception halls and establishments to stage large rallies.

The Change list's main message, messenger, and resource, however, is Nawsherwan Mustafa, who promises better governance, improved services, and an end to nepotism to all segments of society. In addition to using his corporation's newspapers and radio stations, the Kurdish News Network (KNN), which Mustafa also owns, is responsible for daily defections from the larger parties.

Complaints

The Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) has received nearly two hundred complaints since the campaign began. While most violations have been minor, some have raised concerns about the role and neutrality of KRG security personnel, especially in Sulimaniyah, where competition has been the fiercest. During clashes early last month, for instance, the minister of *peshmerga* affairs in the KRG, Sheikh Jaafar al-Sheikh Mustafa (a PUK member), reportedly assaulted supporters of the Change list while they attended a campaign rally. According to health officials in Sulimaniyah, thirty-seven people have been hospitalized as the result of ongoing clashes.

Implications

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003, Iraqi Kurdistan has been perceived as more democratic than the rest of Iraq. Its leadership, therefore, has been able to claim greater legitimacy in dealing with Baghdad and Washington. Given the nature of the upcoming election, this legitimacy may no longer be valid. Polls consistently have shown throughout the campaign that Kurdish voters are predominately interested in addressing domestic issues such as corruption, nepotism, and lack of accountability, and are frustrated with the absence of available options. Nonetheless, the outcome of the parliamentary and presidential elections presents Washington and Baghdad with a challenge as well as an opportunity.

Barzani, when compared to Talabani, represents the uncompromising Kurdish line on critical national issues. Since the election will likely strengthen Barzani's position, Washington should challenge him to use his new mandate to reach important compromises with Baghdad and to step up the pace of political reform in the north. This is particularly important on issues relating to the provisions of the draft constitution, which affect both the executive branch and the contested areas of northern Iraq, such as Kirkuk.

Of course, electoral politics in Iraq cut both ways. Iraqi prime minister Nouri al-Maliki has been using anti-Kurdish sentiment to bolster his efforts to create a cross-sectarian, nationalist list ahead of the 2010 national parliamentary elections. Following the KRG elections, Washington should also move quickly to get al-Maliki and Barzani to the negotiating table to keep these tensions from bubbling over. Barham Salih -- deputy prime minister of Iraq, deputy PUK leader, and the Kurdistan list's candidate for next KRG prime minister -- should be an asset in facilitating such a meeting and finding creative solutions to numerous thorny problems.

Finally, the Obama administration should recognize that the democratic process in Iraq, both in the KRG and in the rest of the country, represents the best hope for creating the space and leadership needed to resolve many of Iraq's outstanding political issues. With the 2010 parliamentary elections just over the horizon, the U.S. administration should move immediately to put more diplomatic energy into assisting the Iraqis in their

efforts to broker a new electoral law. Thankfully, Washington still has a partner in the IHEC. The commission's reputation emerged largely unscathed following its work in Iraqi Kurdistan, and its decision to deny a last-minute request by the incumbent parliament to hold a referendum on a controversial constitution should enhance the IHEC's credibility as it prepares for national parliamentary elections next year.

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