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Party politics of Kurdish leadership engenders mayhem in Slêmanî

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Introduction

Soon after the creation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1992 in Kurdistan-Iraq, our people in Kurdistan have been trapped in the sordid politics of the major political factions. Unpatriotic partisan politics has ensnared every genuine effort of developing true social, political, and economic reform. Lack of “trust” among the Kurdish political parties has contributed to the weakening of the Kurdish power structure and tarnished the Kurdish political identity as another Middle Eastern “autocratic” entity.

A democracy cannot be measure up by mere slogans in a “controlled” press nor can it be determined by a “charade” in the form of narrations of social justice and freedom of expression. A democracy is a system that includes every aspect of human rights and human dignity and serves/preserves them. For a democracy to exist, there must be a free press to scrutinize the government’s policies and ensure quality governmental services. The “checks and balances” approach is used against corruption and government’s intrusiveness into the social and private life of citizens. It is a multi-party system in which the party that controls the government follows the rule of law and provides quality services to improve the life of citizens and treats opponents to the government with integrity. Opponents are equally bound by the rule of law to conduct their activities within the frame of reference of law and democratic principles.

Nonetheless, democracy has only been narrated in style. It has very little substance in Kurdistan. It has never been a concern of the dominant political parties to establish a functioning democracy. In 1996, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) were engaged in a dire all out war against each other. That war can only be measured up as treason “xyanet” against the people of Kurdistan and their interests; because it not only caused thousands of Kurdish lives, but also blotted the KRG reputation at the national and international level. Nothing in the world could be more treasonous “xyanetkarane” for the Kurdish leadership than sending thousands of Kurds to their deaths only to preserve a party base. These deaths and destruction of thousands of the Kurdish families were a price tag made by the KDP and PUK leaderships to maintain their power bases. As a result, thousands of Kurdish women became widows and their children were deprived of their fathers’ love.

Both sides murdered prisoners of war (POW). This was against every aspect and value of the Kurdish tradition. In the Kurdish social culture, when an enemy surrenders to you, his life is protected. However, leadership of both parties during the Kurdish war against the Iraqi occupying forces adhered to the Kurdish moral values and spared the lives of those Iraqi soldiers who were caught by the Kurdish pêshmerges. Conversely, they fell short to honor the same moral values with their own fellow Kurdish prisoners as they did with the Iraqi POWs.

Two administrations in the KRG controlled areas

The bigotry and distrust between the PUK and KDP resulted in the creation of two separate Kurdish administrations (Slêmanî and Hewlêr administrations). This divided the Kurdish psycho-political mentality and weakened the Kurdish base in the region and in the face of the Iraqi

government. It established a form of power structure, which was/is premised on nepotism and party affiliation that has contributed to widening corruption in the KRG and party establishments.

In 2005, after years of negotiations and talks about unifying the two administrations, the two Kurdish factions, finally ended the two-administration style of government. Nonetheless, due to the rooted culture of distrust, they could never come to terms and unify the entire KRG entities; as of today, there are still several KDP and PUK entities that have not merged (i.e., security forces and finance departments of both parties). Even so, in certain fields they were united to conserve their own “common” interests. The PUK and KDP signed the so-called “strategic covenant.” They claimed that the pact was to protect the interests of the people of Kurdistan. Ironically, no one outside the political establishment has been informed about the content of the agreement. To date, no ordinary citizen of Kurdistan knows what items/components were included in the “conceptual framework” of the KDP and PUK “National pact.” Consequently, one could ask if the agreement was about the people of Kurdistan, why have they been kept uninformed about such a strategic pact that was meant to protect their interests.

A new opposition in Kurdistan

The PUK and KDP continued to treat each other with skepticism—as a result, the lack of trust remained high between them—which contributed to strengthening the culture of disunity and broadening the gap between them in the Kurdish political establishment. Accordingly, public discontentment about the way in which the two major parties were behaving and handling national issues/concerns increased.

Public discontentment in general and serious disagreement in the PUK leadership in particular, created a conducive environment for a strong opposition to be born. The Change “Gořan” Movement was created and it was able to successfully secure 25 seats in the KRG Parliament during the regional election in 2009. The birth of Gořan was a great challenge to the KDP and PUK establishment. Before long, Gořan challenged the KRG establishment on some crucial issues (i.e., the Kurdistan National Revenue).

Yet, soon after Gořan joined the KRG Parliament disagreement between them and mainly KDP and PUK escalated. Gořan left the Kurdistan alliance in the Iraqi Parliament, which was a strategic mistake for Gořan to make. It was perceived as a step towards weakening the Kurdistan alliance in Baghdad. By doing so, Gořan not only weakened the Kurdistan voice in Iraq, but also isolated itself from effectively partaking in national issues. In short, Gořan's departure minimized its influence on national politics. Gořan decided to independently conduct its affairs in Baghdad. When its request for a ministry in Maliki's new government was rejected, it was a huge blow to Gořan in Iraqi politics. It was reported in Kurdish and other media outlets that the KDP President, Mr. Masoud Barzani had secretly asked Maliki to not grant the Change Movement any ministry in his new government. This further deteriorated the relationship between Gořan and the KDP.

Gořan and the KDP

The people of Kurdistan remember Mr. Masoud Barzani's role during the formation of Iraq's new government following the toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime, when he was pioneering the effort to give a voice to Turkmen, Assyrian and other minorities in Iraq. This was a patriotic move on Mr. Barzani's part to ensure that all various ethnic entities that constitute Iraqi society have their voices in the post-Saddam Iraq. However, such a patriotic approach was contradicted by Mr. Barzani's maneuver asking Maliki to exclude Gořan, a Kurdish political faction that happened

to be in opposition to his KRG government. Had Mr. Barzani put forth a similar effort for Gořan of Kurdistan to have a ministry as he did for other ethnic minorities of Iraq to have their voices in Baghdad, the situation in Kurdistan would never have reached such a dire level of antagonism. Had Mr. Barzani acted as the President of all people of Kurdistan including his opponents and helped Gořan in Baghdad (perhaps he would not have done it as much for Gořan as he would have for strengthening unity among the Kurdish political factions for a stronger Kurdish voice in Baghdad), he would promote his image as a national leader. The KDP President did not do that. Consequently, this angered the Gořan leadership and could possibly have triggered the incident in Slêmanî.

Further, in the wake of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, which ended the era of two tyrannical regimes of Ben Ali and Mubarak, on January 29, 2011, the Change Movement issued a statement in which it encouraged people to change the KRG political system including dissolving the Kurdistan Parliament. It was, by all means, considered to be a wrong move on the part of the Gořan Movement, because at the time it issued such a statement, it had 25 parliamentarians in the KRG Parliament. Thus, one could ask, if Gořan did not believe in the legitimacy of the KRG government why did it join the parliament after the 2009 election. If Gořan's purpose was to change the political system in Kurdistan, one would say the approach it used was defunct. Instead of encouraging people to go out on streets and demonstrate against the KRG government, Gořan could have adopted a policy of civil disobedience and tried to educate the people of Kurdistan about their rights and responsibilities. The change must take place through ballot boxes and not through havoc. Gořan's statement provided the KDP leadership with a means to galvanize support against Gořan and trivialize its effort with literally no opposition from other political and non-political entities in Kurdistan.

Uprising in Slêmanî and the KDP

The lack of a genuine effort to normalize the relationship between the KDP and Gořan further hardened the feelings on both sides. Sporadic, and for the most part, verbal expressions were exchanged between the two sides. As a result, on Thursday, February 17, 2011, a group of demonstrators, using stones (although KDP officials claim that demonstrators were armed), attacked the KDP's Branch Four in Slêmanî. While it is true that throwing rocks during a demonstration goes against the principle of civil disobedience decorum, the KDP's armed men in the branch building, immediately opened fire against the demonstrators. They killed a teenage boy, named Rêjwan, who (according to the live video taken at the crime scene, before and after he was shot) shows that the young man was not armed and had hidden behind a concrete buffer when the KDP's armed men found and murder him. Dozens more were wounded, some critically



Rêjwan before and after assassination

Furthermore, it is imperative for the KDP leadership to be reminded that going against unarmed citizens and murdering them will eventually create a cycle of popular hate and discontent against them. For every incident, they cannot take the liberty of murdering children of the people of Kurdistan who have given so much for Kurdistan. Especially, sending armed forces to confront

the valiant residents of the city of Slêmanî, with their proud reputation against Saddam Hussein's brutal regime, was wrong and disgraceful.

Sending a Special Force (Hêzî Zêrevanîy) to Slêmanî was KDP's strategic blunder. Whether this force entered Slêmanî or remained at the vicinity of the city, it does not matter, it was wrong. This force should never have left its base for Slêmanî. This was a provocative, combative, and irresponsible decision. Slêmanî is a city of Kurdistan not a foreign city. What the KDP leadership did was a decision solely based on a narrow political view, which showed no regards for the city of Slêmanî and its inhabitants.

When Mr. Masoud Barzani called for calm, it was a responsible move on his part, but one could ask, when he calls for calm, why would he send the KDP Special Force to become vanguards of the Branch Four in Slêmanî? If he really meant to normalize the situation, why didn't he pull the KDP's Branch Four out of Slêmanî? It would have been a wise decision on his part had he pulled out his men and let the situation calm down. By so doing, he could have prevented bloodshed and minimized people's anger. Had he done that, no one would have taken such a patriotic act as an act of weakness, particularly since the KDP has a stronger power base in Kurdistan. One might say, well he sent his forces to protect his KDP people, but the question is, if he is the president of Kurdistan, are not the people of Slêmanî also his people? Did he send his forces to protect "his people" against the occupying countries, against whom? As the president of the KRG, he should know that the stability of Kurdistan rests on his shoulders.

Instead of allowing KDP's media machine to go to all out war against one particular entity, and refer to the demonstrators as saboteurs (Ajawegêr), Mr. Barzani could use a dialogue with all the stakeholders to immediately end this rather shameful situation. Since Mr. Barzani carries the title of president of the KRG, he should have acted above the party politics. Hence, he should be reminded that due to the geopolitical sensitivity of Kurdistan and dire plots by the neighboring governments against the KRG establishment, Kurdistan is not any sovereign country faced with a popular uprising such as those in North Africa. Thus the KRG leadership should have taken a proactive measure and paid more attentions to people's needs and wants.

Additionally, what Goñan did on January 19th, by taking what happened in Slêmanî to the Iraqi Parliament was equally wrong and appalling. The event of Slêmanî was an internal issue and should have been discussed and resolved in Kurdistan. The Iraqi Parliament has no jurisdiction over such affairs in Kurdistan. The only time that the federal government can interfere in regional affairs is the time when both federal and regional governments have a "common interest" that is supported by both federal and regional constitutions.

Is Kurdistan Tunisia or Egypt?

In the wake of the uprising in Slêmanî, many people, particularly individuals in the intellectual community including journalists have to an extent, compared the uprising in Slêmanî with the popular discontent and national uprising in Tunisia and Egypt. A common comparison was that people in Slêmanî like people Egypt and Tunisia, have been ruled by an autocratic establishment and deprived of basic life necessity while people in power and their affiliates have lived in a luxurious life. Ordinary people are faced with a day-to-day struggle to provide for their families while the market is controlled by those in power.

On the one hand, Kurdistan is like Tunisia and Egypt, because people in Kurdistan like people in Egypt and Tunisia have been ruled by undemocratic establishment of the two major parties, KDP and PUK, which are controlled by two families of Talabani and Barzani. Every aspect of people's

life is controlled by forces including security apparatuses belong to these main parties. Nepotism and party affiliation has become a plague and paralyzed the political system. Corruption has become a pestilence and deteriorated the social health status and infected the Kurdistan society. This has contributed to the creation of a dysfunctional government. Moreover, a free press is under constant threats of the establishment. The only independent Kurdish satellite, Nalia Radio and Television (NRT), on February 20, 2011, after three days of broadcasting, was burnt to the ground by masked armed men in Slêmanî. Independent journalists occasionally have been harassed, beaten, or even murdered.

On the other hand, the KDP/PUK/KRG leadership and others are right, Kurdistan is not like Egypt and Tunisia, because when people in those countries poured into streets and situation got out of government's hand the future of those nations was not threatened by any of the neighboring countries that might interfere in their affairs, create chaos, and try to use the unrest to its interests. The sensitive situation in Kurdistan could easily get out of control, where even the KRG's future may be uncertain. The KRG leadership should know that if the situation gets out of hand—if a neighboring occupying country interferes and further provokes the state of affairs in the KRG—it may trigger a civil war and the situation may never be controlled again. Therefore, it is imperative for the KRG leadership to stay above party politics and act like a head of a genuine national government, and vigorously try to end this cycle of distrust against each other that has tarnished their reputation and might lessen support for the just cause of the people of Kurdistan.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is indispensable to say that these Kurdish political parties bear a historical responsibility for being so irresponsible towards preserving the national unity and promoting national interests. This cycle of hate, fear, and cynicism that has been created by the lack of a "culture of trust" among these factions has harmed national integrity. Therefore, this culture of distrust must be replaced by a working relationship approach. The culture of civil society that can tolerate open political debate and competition should be developed. They should establish a "conceptual framework" for all the active political parties to promote and protect the national agenda and interests of people. These political parties have to end their irresponsible behavior towards each other and adopt a principle of and "agree to disagree agreeably."

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