C commentary

THE KURDISH BLOC: POST-ELECTION CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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When the first elections were held in Iraq in 2005, two years after the fall of the Saddam Hussain regime, the political landscape in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) was dominated by two major parties: the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). By the following elections, in 2010, a new political force, "Gorran" (Change) had split from the PUK and secured 25% of the local (KRI) parliamentary seats in 2009, and 8 seats in the national (Baghdad) parliament. They consolidated their position in 2014's local and national elections and entered a coalition to form a new government in Erbil alongside the KDP, PUK and the Islamists. These parties, the Kurdish bloc, collectively secured a total of 65 seats in Baghdad's parliament in the same year and appeared united in subsequent negotiations that denied Prime Minister Noori Al-Maliki a third term and lead to the formation a new government under Haider Al-Abadi.

The year 2014 was a disastrous turning point for Iraq: as the Islamic State (IS) emerged and occupied almost a third of the country's territory: the KRI was being shaken by an IS-lead security crisis as well as by many subsequent financial and internal political crises. The local coalition government did not last long, and divergences led to a political deadlock between the KDP and Gorran, entailing the suspension of the KRI parliament. As a result of these crises, all Kurdish parties lost in popularity and a series of sporadic demonstrations followed. Today, on the eve of the fourth national elections since the regime change, the Kurdish bloc appears more fragmented than it has ever been.

Moreover, these crises coincided by growing divisions between Erbil and Baghdad, which were downplayed by both sides while everyone's focus remained on the war on IS. Following the military defeat of IS, the KRI held a referendum for independence, the timing of which remained controversial and worsened the internal divisions before and

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after the referendum. Importantly, the plebiscite in favor of Iraqi Kurdistan's independence caused Erbil and Baghdad to diverge even further, provoking an Iraqi military campaign to reinstate control over Kirkuk and other Kurdish-majority areas that remain disputed between Baghdad and Erbil. Baghdad also imposed financial and international flight embargoes on the KRI. Relations remain tense and politics are yet to be normalized between the two sides.

In the run-up to this month's parliamentary elections (12 May), the Kurdish parties are running individually, but in the Iraqi-controlled disputed territories they act differently. There, the KDP and PUK will run individually, whereas Gorran and the Kurdistan Islamic Group (Komal) have formed a new alliance (Nishtiman, Homeland) with the newly established 'Coalition for Democracy and Justice' led by former KRI Prime Minister Barham Salih, after he recently broke away from the PUK. Other smaller parties have joined their ticket too, because critical mass is vital for smaller parties who need to overcome the Modified Sainte-Laguë election formula, which does not favor small parties running alone. Interestingly, the KDP refused to form a list in Kirkuk but is running in Nineveh. Clearly, one should not judge post-election behavior by pre-election dynamics. It would be interesting to see if these parties can at the end get over their differences after the election and face future negotiations in Baghdad with one voice.

Beyond divisions, these elections may also represent an opportunity for the Kurds to restart dialogue with Baghdad. So far, the Baghdad government and various Shiite parties have adopted a populist approach and been reluctant to formally engage Erbil, in case this may cost them votes in their Arab and Shiite constituencies. Therefore, despite the recent stabilization in Baghdad-Erbil relations, no promises will materialize until after the elections. As for the Kurds, they can potentially play critical roles in shaping the new government in Baghdad and help normalize relations, if they can presented a united front. Indeed, various Shiite leaders have already started informally reaching out to the Kurds, in anticipation of post-election horse-trading.

Despite the heavy Kurdish participation in Iraq's elections, the aspiration for Kurdish independence remains strong. Far from being forgotten, the referendum results will probably be put to the side, subject to Baghdad's sincere efforts to re-embrace the Kurds. At this moment, the debate about independence has virtually disappeared from the Kurdish election campaigns and the party manifestos. Instead, they have focused on Kurdistan's constitutional rights and emphasized their collective adherence to this binding social contract.

If the Kurdish parties wish to avoid future crises, they need to do their part in making Iraq work for all, engaging other stakeholders and investing in power-sharing in power. Conversely, their Shiite counterparts need to embrace the Kurds as well as Sunni Arabs, engage them in genuine power-sharing and avoid sectarian majority democracy. All sides must be serious in translating the constitution into a roadmap to Iraq's recovery.

Unfortunately, Iraq remains a fragile country with its sovereignty grossly undermined and its state institutions weakened by armed non-state actors. Also, Baghdad remains ill focused with little signs of committing to serious state and nation-building processes. Corruption is still thriving while rule-of-law

and good governance remain elusive across the board. Importantly, rivalries between regional and global powers, including Iran, Israel, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, alongside the United States, Europe and Russia, are also undermining efforts to keep Iraq united. If Iraq ends up by failing or descending into a never- ending crises and conflicts, the Kurds may go back and ask themselves again whether they wish to remain 'Iraqis' or not.