

Discontent grows against Kurdish nationalist regime in northern Iraq

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There are indications of growing discontent in the predominantly Kurdish-populated provinces of northern Iraq. Lack of essential services, social inequality and the suppression of political opposition are all fueling disaffection with the two nationalist parties—the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—which, with US military and financial support, have held power in the region since the end of the first Gulf War in 1991.

In the most recent publicised incident, thousands of people in Halabja, a town near the Iranian border, demonstrated on March 15 against Kurdish government officials who had come to preside over a commemoration of the 1988 murder of more than 5,000 Kurdish civilians by the Iraqi military. As part of its brutal operation, known as the Anfal campaign, to suppress a Kurdish rebellion, the Baathist regime of Saddam Hussein ordered that the town be bombarded with mustard gas and other chemicals as an example to other Kurds.

Eighteen years on, Halabja locals assembled during the commemoration to denounce the fact that the only new construction paid for by the Kurdish authorities in the poverty-stricken area was a museum dedicated to the gassing victims. The elaborate building was officially opened by then US Secretary of State Colin Powell in 2003. Meanwhile, the town's electricity and water services are dysfunctional, most of the housing is in serious disrepair and there is considerable unemployment.

Up to 2,000 demonstrators gathered outside the museum to denounce the Kurdish authorities for corruption and ignoring the conditions that face ordinary people in the town. One man told Reuters: "The Kurdish government exploited Halabja to draw attention to the plight of the Kurds and get donations that have never reached us." Another told the British *Independent* after the protest: "We don't even have streets in Halabja, just laneways of mud."

As passions intensified, elements of the crowd pushed their way into the building and ransacked it. A black stone memorial listing the names of those who died was smashed to pieces and the museum set on fire. Kurdish *peshmerga* militiamen and police ultimately broke up the demonstration with a volley of gunfire. At least one protestor was killed and others wounded.

The authorities, who routinely claim the Kurdish population is united behind the KDP and PUK, made desperate attempts to prevent news of the incident reaching the outside world. A cordon was thrown up around the town to prevent journalists leaving and

videotapes were confiscated from cameramen. At least seven journalists were reportedly beaten. Nevertheless, footage of the burning museum made it into the media across the Middle East and internationally.

According to unnamed security sources cited in late March by Amanj Khalil, a journalist in Suleymaniya, at least 80 people have been arrested. The organisers of the demonstrators are believed to have gone into hiding.

Compared with the guerilla war and sectarian violence taking place in Baghdad and other areas of Iraq, there has been relative stability in the three northern Kurdish provinces since the 2003 invasion. In general, commentators have claimed this is due to the ethnic homogeneity of the region and the popular support enjoyed by the KDP and the PUK.

The events in Halabja, however, make clear that behind the façade of ethnic and political unity, close to 15 years of rule by the Kurdish nationalists have generated considerable social and class tensions.

The KDP and PUK have effectively controlled the north since 1991. In the aftermath of the first Gulf War, the first Bush administration imposed a "no-fly zone" over the Kurdish provinces, with US, British and French aircraft attacking any Iraqi military forces that attempted to move into the area. The protection of the major powers enabled the Kurdish parties to establish de-facto mini-states. Suleymaniya province is PUK territory, while Irbil and Duhok provinces are controlled by the KDP.

The PUK and KDP have used their political control over the Kurdish north to secure wealth and privilege for those sections of the narrow Kurdish elite of landowners and businessmen each represents. Their rule has been marked by the suppression of political opposition and a willingness to enter into the most sordid alliances to pursue their interests.

Three times—in 1994, 1996 and 1997—the PUK used assistance from the Iranian regime to try and take over Irbil from the KDP, as it was the main route for a lucrative smuggling trade to skirt around UN sanctions. The KDP taxed the smugglers bringing goods into Iraq from Turkey and taking oil back out. To keep out its rival, the KDP invited Saddam Hussein's military into its territory in 1996 in order to dislodge PUK fighters from Irbil and win back control of the smuggling trade.

In the months before the March 2003 US invasion of Iraq, Washington prevailed on the two Kurdish factions to enter a ceasefire and unify the Kurdish provinces into a single Kurdish

Regional Government (KRG). In reality, the parties continue to maintain one-party states in the areas under their sway, while cooperating to invite transnational energy corporations to explore for new oil fields in the region as a whole. The KDP and PUK also formed the Kurdish Alliance to take part in national elections and to agitate for the oil-rich area around the city of Kirkuk to be included in the territory of the KRG by the end of 2007.

Oil profits are already beginning to flow. As well as receiving a 17 percent share of all revenues generated by the existing Iraqi oil industry, the KRG is signing contracts for new production. The Norwegian company DNO is drilling and contracts have been entered into with the Turkish firms PetOil and General Energy and the Australian company Woodside Petroleum. Under the terms of the Iraqi constitution, revenues from new fields flow to the Kurdish authorities instead of the national government in Baghdad.

DNO's Iraq project manager Magne Normann told *Time* magazine in February: "For anybody wanting to do anything in Iraq today, the entry point is Kurdistan. It's a stepping-stone for moving into the rest of Iraq when the time is right."

Increasingly, the northern Kurdish provinces are being seen by foreign investors as a stable base of operations and a gateway to the future penetration of markets in the rest of Iraq. As a result, there has been significant economic development. The airports in Suleymaniya and Irbil have been upgraded to international capacity and a number of major airlines are now operating flights into Kurdistan. New hotels, office complexes and shopping centres are being opened up in both cities to service transnational companies and their employees.

Most of the Kurdish population has seen no economic benefit, even as a small minority has become relatively affluent. A *Korean Herald* report last month noted: "The Irbil region remains underdeveloped with high rates of illiteracy, joblessness, and lack of infrastructure such as roads, electricity and water supplies." Under conditions of generalised want, however, members of the KDP and PUK reportedly receive preference for jobs, business contracts, university places and even hospital beds.

The extent of disaffection began to receive attention in the lead-up to the December 15 national elections. In the weeks before the ballot, the British *Guardian* reported: "The last few months have seen street protests and student strikes across Iraqi Kurdistan. Protestors have railed against everything from lack of electricity and fresh water in student dorms to corruption among local officials, spiralling housing costs and the control on daily life exercised by the two parties". A newspaper editor told the *Guardian*: "The youth are fed up. They feel they have no room to breathe."

As in other parts of the Middle East, the absence of any progressive alternative has seen the discontent flow into support for Islamic fundamentalists. The elections saw an organised opposition to the KDP and PUK emerge in the form of the Kurdish Islamic Union (KIU). The Islamic party stood apart from the Kurdish alliance and, despite reports of considerable intimidation of voters by the ruling parties, won 5 seats in the Iraqi parliament.

In February, *Time* magazine published a feature describing the political conditions in Iraqi Kurdistan. The magazine wrote: "The two parties monopolise power in their respective territories and

their despotic tendencies threaten civil liberties and the fledgling democratic process, creating an environment that is rife with corruption and repression... Kurdistan is a veritable police state, where the *Asayeesh*—the military security—has a house in every neighbourhood of the major cities, and where the *Parastin* 'secret police' monitors phone conversations and keeps tabs on who attends Friday prayers."

The media is also tightly controlled. In one of the most publicised cases, a Kurdish journalist and Austrian citizen, Kamal Said Qadir, was arrested last October and sentenced to 30 years imprisonment for allegedly defaming the KDP leader and KRG president, Massoud Barzani. In a series of articles on corruption within the KDP, he described Barzani's wealthy son as "a pimp".

The case focused attention on the persecution of opponents of the ruling parties in Kurdistan. Commenting on Qadir's sentence, Rebil Ismael, a former editor of a Kurdish newspaper, told the *New York Times* on January 25: "Generally any journalists or writers not connected to the party are under threats. If you write anything not in their interest, they will arrest you or call your cell phone and threaten you." Organisations such as Reporters Without Borders have issued condemnations.

The international criticism of the treatment of Qadir, the small electoral success of the KIU and the incident in Halabja have clearly provoked concern in the Kurdish establishment over the stability of the KDP's and PUK's rule—which is viewed as the precondition for the inflow of foreign investment.

Barzani announced in March that the priorities of the KRG were "welfare" and "special reconstruction budgets for deprived regions" such as Halabja. Last month, primarily due to the international protests, Qadir's sentence was reduced to 18 months. This week, Barzani commuted the sentence altogether and ordered that the journalist be released.

In what is most likely another attempt to placate the Kurdish population, the court trying Saddam Hussein has announced this week it will initiate a second trial against the former dictator for the massacre of Kurds during the Anfal campaign from 1987 to 1989.

Despite these cosmetic measures, the discontent among ordinary Kurds will only deepen, however, as the chasm widens between the elite profiting from the US invasion of Iraq and the bulk of the population.



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