

Why Iraqi Kurdistan could be on the brink of revolt

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After years of misrule and repression, the people of Iraqi Kurdistan have had enough. In March 2018, protesters began taking to the streets to demand deep reforms from a government they can no longer tolerate. Led by teachers, university lecturers, doctors and the like, and including large numbers of women, these peaceful demonstrations soon spread across the region.

They began when the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) drastically cut public sector salaries in the name of reform - but there are deeper issues at work in Iraqi Kurdistan. 15 years after the US-led invasion toppled Saddam Hussein, the region is plagued by unresolved internal political struggles that have arisen from what protesters call the KRG's undemocratic, unconstitutional and illegal actions.

Iraqi Kurdish politics reached a critical point in September 2017, when the Kurdish region held a long-awaited independence referendum. The KRG and the then-president of the Kurdistan region, Masoud Barzani, used the referendum to dispel a mood of dissatisfaction and indignation by stirring up a hopeful Kurdish nationalism and dreams of nationhood, something in which all Kurds are invested. But the hopes they raised have since been dashed: despite an overwhelming vote for independence from Baghdad, Iraqi Kurdistan seems no closer to full statehood than before.

As the referendum's promise faded, attention turned back to the failures of the Kurdish ruling elite. The KRG is dominated by two nepotistic ruling parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The two have been siphoning off oil revenue since the inception of the KRG. Their corrupt misrule has financially crippled Iraqi Kurdistan; they govern the region undemocratically, and in defiance of the values of the 2005 Constitution of Iraq. Both parties control their own security forces, and both have abused them for political ends.

Dirty politics

To take one example, in 2015, the KDP used its personal security forces to obstruct its rivals from government buildings. Parliament Speaker Yousif Mohammed, a member of the main rival opposition party Gorran, was prevented from entering Iraqi Kurdistan's capital city, Erbil; other Gorran ministers were blocked from entering government buildings. The incident saw the region's parliament closed for nearly two years.

A few years later, the KRG is still incompetent and stubborn. It introduced its new austerity measures despite the fact that civil service salaries had not been paid in full since July 2015. The KRG had hitherto blamed Iraq's central government for the ongoing wage crisis, accusing Baghdad of withholding the Kurdish region's required 17% budget allocation.

For its part, the Iraqi government accused the KRG of corruption, stating that its oil revenues should be sufficient to cover civil servant salaries. Baghdad even offered to pay the outstanding civil

salaries in return for taking control of the oil revenues in the region. The Iraqi prime minister, Haider al-Abadi, called on the KRG to release data on its finances, pointing out that his government shares its figures with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

The latest protests are part of a bottom-up movement for change since 2011 - one that's met with not just government intransigence, but violent repression.

Iron fists

While Iraq's 2005 constitution protects freedom of speech, the reality of everyday life in Kurdistan falls far short. Those who dissent, whether in print or in the street, are targeted and often killed.

Journalists who criticise the KRG have been attacked and in some cases killed in the Kurdistan region. Amnesty International called for investigations into the deaths of journalists by the KRG in 2011, and 2013. In 2015 it also requested that in addition to investigating deaths of journalists, armed political party militias should also be investigated. This was also the case in 2016 and 2017.

The UN Human Rights office of the High Commission recorded unfair imprisonments and killings of journalists in their year-end reports of 2011, 2012, 2013 (featuring the big case of the death of Kawa Garmyani, who was gunned down in front of his mother for his anti-corruption journalism) and 2014.

Over the years, KRG security forces have violently attacked and killed many protesters demanding an end to corruption. In 2011 alone, ten people died in protests that lasted 62 days. Among them was 15-year-old Rezhwan Ali, who was shot in the head when security services fired live rounds into the protesting crowds. On February 17 2012, around 200 peaceful demonstrators and protesters were approached by civilian-clothed security services who violently attacked them with batons, while KDP security forces watched without intervening. In 2015 and 2017, the security service opened fire on protesters again.

But memories of these incidents haven't quelled the protests; instead, they have fuelled them. With two failed ruling parties, violent repression of dissent, no democracy or justice, and a redundant constitution, it's no wonder the Kurdish region's residents are up in arms. To try and defuse the crisis, the opposition leaders of Gorran have called for free and fair parliamentary and presidential elections. The corrupt and ruthless KRG is hardly amenable - but if the crisis isn't immediately addressed, then a full-scale revolt could be on the cards.

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