The Politics of the Kurdish Independence Referendum

How the Vote Could Provoke Crises and Silence Dissent

By Maria Fantappie and Cale Salih, September 19, 2017

On September 25, Iraqi Kurdish leader Massoud Barzani plans to hold a referendum on Kurdish independence. The results will not be legally binding, but in calling for a vote, the Kurdish leadership has put its own society and its foreign partners into a bind. Although the vote may extend the lifespan of a Kurdish leadership otherwise in decline, it calls for unity that mutes domestic dissent and risks provoking crises that will leave Kurdistan externally exposed.

PARTIES OVER INSTITUTIONS

The participation of Iraqi Kurdish forces in the campaign against the Islamic State (ISIS) over the last few years won the region’s leaders unprecedented foreign military assistance and expanded control over ethnically mixed disputed territories along its internal boundary with the rest of Iraq. With the campaign’s culmination in the capture of Mosul this summer, however, external military support and international attention may taper off. For instance, the Pentagon recently acknowledged that although coalition troops could be expected to stay in Iraq after the defeat of ISIS, the U.S. footprint would be smaller and would involve fewer bases. Some Kurdish leaders thus believe they have a limited window of opportunity to organize a referendum, the second such attempt since 2005.

The proposed referendum has provoked deeply mixed reactions among Iraqi Kurds. Although some, especially among the older generation, genuinely believe that the vote will reward the Kurds for their decades-long struggle for autonomy, others, mainly among the younger generation, see it as a cynical ploy by Kurdish leaders to remain in power. Many—perhaps the majority—feel uneasy, torn between a desire to seize the chance the referendum claims to offer and mistrust of the leadership that put it forward. Prominent civil society leaders, including some journalists and activists, have publicly opposed the vote, and some political forces have stayed silent or offered only conditional support.
It does seem apparent that the old guard—the generation of leaders that spearheaded the armed struggle for Kurdish autonomy many decades ago—has clung to power too long and is now the main obstacle to the emergence of a strong and independent Kurdistan.

These leaders reaped the rewards of their fight after Saddam Hussein withdrew his forces from northern Iraq in 1991. At that point, Kurdish political parties began establishing the foundations of self-governance. They held elections, created the Kurdistan Regional Government, and began professionalizing their respective Peshmerga military forces. Yet the fact that the parties had birthed the region’s institutions turned out to be an Achilles’ heel, creating an unhealthy dependency between the two. Infighting between the two main parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—soon led to the emergence of rival administrations within Kurdistan that split the historic achievement in two.
After Saddam’s fall in 2003, Iraqi Kurdistan made many gains, which fostered interparty cooperation and a measure of respect for democratic freedoms. Yet some party leaders resisted relinquishing control to the institutions, which remained hostage to their ever-shifting relations. For example, the Ministry of Peshmerga Affairs, which deals with defense issues, is undermined by myriad security forces that operate independently of it and respond instead to rival party figures. The latter have grown more powerful than the joint KDP-PUK Peshmerga units that report to the ministry. New political forces did emerge, but they did not manage to displace the KDP-PUK duopoly or offer a viable path to institutional reform.

Kurdish leaders should be willing to turn power over to a younger generation.

In 2012, regional turmoil undid whatever progress had been made between the KDP and PUK. The rise of ISIS left the parties internally divided and more reliant on their competing regional patrons, Turkey (KDP) and Iran (PUK). That foreign military support has disproportionately benefited parties over institutions, exacerbating the region’s core problem. Parliament, which had been paralyzed by a dispute over presidential term limits, only recently convened for the first time in almost two years.

In parallel, Iraqi Kurdistan’s economy has nosedived: since the sharp drop in oil prices in 2014, the Kurdistan Regional Government, dominated by the KDP, has repeatedly fallen behind on salary payments to the region’s outsize public sector. Meanwhile, the private and informal economies have both shrunk. Thousands of young Kurds have joined the waves of migration to Europe in search of better lives, casting a vote of nonconfidence in the system built by their elders.

BAD CHOICES

Rather than addressing the legitimacy crisis, the leaders behind the referendum push are doubling down on a poor hand of cards. The referendum purports to offer a choice, but in reality, it does the reverse. By invoking the unimpeachable cause of Kurdish independence, the vote’s advocates put their opponents—be they politicians, youth, civil society, or analysts—in a bind: support the referendum and, by default, the leadership that proposed it, or oppose it and expose themselves to accusations of betraying Kurdish nationalism. Some who have dared oppose the vote already feel under threat. One such activist recently told us he feels he would need to leave the country for fear of retaliation from “yes” voters if the referendum were to succeed.

The referendum also risks intensifying external threats that, in turn, would shrink space for domestic opposition even further. Although Kurdish leaders have indicated that the referendum will not automatically lead to independence, it spreads the perception that the Kurdish Regional Government is trying to secede—a precedent that neighboring states, home to sizeable Kurdish populations, will be determined to reverse. Turkey and Iran can exploit Iraqi Kurdistan’s fragile security and economy to pit their respective Kurdish allies against one another. For example, Tehran could leverage anti-KDP leaders in Sulaimaniya and Baghdad, pitting them against KDP and pro-KDP figures in Dohuk and Erbil, who have strong ties to Ankara. Such interference could also exacerbate fragmentary pressures within parties, making internal splits more likely.
These are risks that, after a long struggle for statehood, some Kurdish leaders may be willing to take. But those who put forth this referendum are not the ones who will live with its outcome. The referendum may magnify external pressure and, with it, Iraqi Kurdistan’s domestic woes, all of which chiefly will affect the younger generation. In the worst-case scenario, some Kurdish leaders could invoke increased external threats to justify more repressive rule at home, again primarily at the expense of youth who will feel unable to challenge a status quo that does not serve them.

The referendum could also put Kurdistan’s partners, especially the United States, in a bind. If Kurdish leaders use a “yes” result to embolden their claims to disputed territories, Iraqi Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi may have little choice but to rely on Tehran-backed Shiite factions, which have a strong military presence in those areas, to challenge Erbil’s upper-hand. In that scenario, the disputed territories would become fertile ground for a new chapter of post-ISIS
conflict. Shiite factions could burnish their credibility as defenders of Iraq’s unity in that battle, further undermining Baghdad’s authority. A shift in Iraq’s intra-Shiite power balance in favor of Tehran would, conveniently for the Kurdish leadership, leave the United States with few partners other than the Kurds.

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A strong and independent Iraqi Kurdistan is one that can stand on its feet regardless of what its neighbors do. To achieve that, Kurdish leaders, with the support of the United States and other international partners, should pursue the trajectory on which they embarked after 2003, strengthening institutions and not their own politburos. They should ensure that the parliament and the Kurdistan Regional Government, including the Ministry of Peshmerga, becomes a platform for intra-Kurdish cooperation and a check on the power of the two dominant political parties. At the same time, it will be important for the region to diversify its economy—for instance, reinvesting in agriculture and encouraging youth-led entrepreneurship—to break free of the dysfunctional rentier state dynamics that foster internal divisions and generate dependency on outside powers.

Most pressingly, Kurdish leaders should be willing to turn power over to a younger generation. Kurdish nationalism never has been merely about drawing the borders of a state, but, as its current leaders well understand and as they have long advocated, about that state’s founding political values. A shared sense of nationhood across localities and generations is a precondition for the emergence of an Iraqi Kurdistan capable of delivering governance and security to its people, whether that region is marked by hard borders or not.