

Ex-Kurdish Leader Takes On Old Allies

IWPR :Author

Former PUK leader steps up media criticism of Iraqi Kurdistan's political elite
A prominent Kurdish political figure who co-founded the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, is using his
influential media company to challenge the party and the Kurdish political establishment

But it's unclear for now whether Nawshirwan Mustafa's is seeking to establish a rival party or push for
greater reform within the PUK, one of the two principal parties in Iraqi Kurdistan

Mustafa, who set up the PUK with incumbent Iraqi president Jalal Talabani in 1975, stepped down from his
post as deputy secretary-general in December 2006 following a power struggle within the party

While he remains a PUK member, Mustafa has become increasingly outspoken in recent years against the
Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG, and his own party, which he criticised for adopting a "one-man
leadership" system

Immediately following his resignation, Mustafa established Wusha, which has grown to become one of Iraqi
Kurdistan's most powerful media companies. It publishes one of Iraqi Kurdistan's leading newspapers, a
widely-read news website and is also developing a satellite television channel

Mustafa, whose faction in the PUK was dubbed the "reform wing", said he stepped down from his senior-
level post after losing hope that substantial democratic change would occur from within the party and the
Kurdish political system

He repeatedly expressed concern over the independence of the KRG judiciary and criticised the lack of
political willingness for reform

I left because I lost hope in bringing about change within the party with the conventional tools available"
within political parties," said Mustafa

Mustafa's populist reform message has resonated with Kurds in the northeastern province of
Sulaimaniyah, which has been under PUK control since the Kurdish region split from the rest of Iraq in
early Nineties

Mustafa has echoed the complaints of Kurds in the region who say that corruption, poor services and the
party's domination over business and government are hindering economic and civic development as well
as quality of life for residents

In a series of articles recently published in Wusha's daily newspaper, Rozhnama, Mustafa slammed the
Kurdish leadership for mismanagement, laxity and acting in self-interest. While he has criticised the parties
before, this latest fusillade sounded like a rallying cry, referring to adherents of reform as "us" and
supporters of the status quo as "them

We want to keep political parties' interference out of the daily affairs of government institutions," universities, court houses and civil society organisations," he wrote. "They want to extend their ."[influence]..into every aspect of people's life

Although he gave up his leadership post, Mustafa is still seen by many as the PUK's second-in-command after Talabani and enjoys wide popular support in Sulaimaniyah. Some have speculated that 64-year-old .Mustafa could one day succeed Talabani, who is 75

The question remains as to whether Mustafa, who has been a critical voice in the PUK for decades, is creating an independent opposition movement or is simply establishing himself as a critic who has largely – .but not entirely – stepped out of the political system

Mustafa's recent criticisms have not sat well with PUK spokesman Mala Bakhtiyar, a fierce Talabani loyalist. Bakhtiyar asserted in a statement last month that Mustafa and his sympathisers were "creating public .”propaganda with their eye on antagonising the PUK

Along with the PUK, the Kurdistan Democratic Party, which controls the western half of Iraqi Kurdistan, dominates political power in northern Iraq, an oil-rich region that has largely escaped the violence that has .plagued the rest of the country

Mustafa told IWPR that he is not currently forming an opposition, insisting that one of his goals is to publish .”articles “to give rise to a fruitful and intellectual debate

In his recent articles, Mustafa has portrayed himself as a populist leader with an array of reformist ideas. For the moment, however, he seems intent on promoting them through the media rather than the political .arena

Perhaps I do not have the ability to lead [an opposition],” he said. “But we have a media establishment“ through which we can shape public opinion, which in turn can become a pressure group and a force for .”change

Renowned Kurdish writer and critic Rabin Hardi believes Mustafa could lead a substantial alternative political movement because he has already proven himself as a leader in the PUK and continues to enjoy .strong support. He also noted that Mustafa's reputation has not been stained by allegations of corruption

Still, Hardi said it is unlikely that Mustafa will break entirely from the party, noting that Mustafa's personal relations with Talabani continue to influence him. “Being one of the founders of the party is a great .”obligation that he wants to honour,” said Hardi. “So he wants to stay put within the PUK

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