

Displaced Kirkuk Kurds Demand Vote

Author: [Ayub Kareem](#)

Returning refugees angered by law that prevents them taking part in elections for Kurdistan assembly.

Gathered around a table on a sunny autumn day, Kurdish refugees are playing dominoes in Kirkuk, seemingly oblivious to the insurgent violence that sporadically rages in the city around them.

The refugees live in Faiyalaq, in the northern Kirkuk neighborhood of Shorija. When they first returned to the city at the end of the Iraq war, most were living in tents. Now they are busy building their own homes.

Kak Waiys Aziz, who returned to Kirkuk a month after Operation Iraqi Freedom ended, talked to IWPR as he played dominoes with the other men.

However, as Iraq gears up for this month's national and local elections, these returnees are less than enthusiastic about their options.

"I am not going to participate in the elections because the rights of the Kurds are neglected - and if this is the case, why should we vote?" he asked.

Aziz is assistant commander of a battalion of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's Kirkuk forces, and one of the thousands of displaced Kurds who have recently been able to return to their old homeland.

After years of living in exile, many were eager to participate in elections they see as crucial to the region's future.

However, according to article 53 of the Transitional Administrative Law, TAL, only Kurds residing in the areas liberated in 1991 are eligible to vote in the Kurdistan elections - leaving those who have returned to Kirkuk, Khanaqin and Mousel out in the cold.

Khaleed Shareef, who runs the Mosul branch of the Roonahi charity foundation, believes all Kurds should be allowed to vote in Kurdistan's regional elections.

"Under the Baathists, there was a lot of discrimination between Arabs and Kurds living in Mosul. This discrimination is still felt," he told IWPR.

"The situation hasn't suddenly got better. I don't think you can call these elections democratic if you don't allow all Kurds to vote for the Kurdistan parliament."

"It is a mistake," agreed shopkeeper Khdir Jalal. "I really want to be able to vote, and I cannot understand why we are being separated from the rest of Kurdistan. We are all Kurds after all."

Some Kurds living in surrounding areas believe the Kurdish parties are to blame for not doing enough to allow them to vote. Others believe the decision was not in the hands of the Kurdish parties, and that there

are more sinister political elements at work.

“If the newly elected Kurdish government is not strong, and does not represent all Kurds, future rulers of Iraq could turn against us again,” said Farman Najm, a student from Kirkuk.

Another Kirkuk returnee, Na’eema Star, said that no matter what problems Kurdistan may face, the former refugees want to help solve them, adding, “There may not be electricity here, but we see ourselves as Kurds and we want to participate in the future of Kurdistan.”

Ayub Kareem is an IWPR contributor and the managing editor of the Liberal Education Newspaper.

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