Election Fever Rises in Kurdistan

Author: IWPR

Competition stiff for parliamentary seats in what many believe will be a hotly-contested campaign. Election fever has hit the Kurdish city of Sulaimaniyah ahead of a highly anticipated poll that could change the landscape of Kurdish politics.

A record 24 parties and coalitions will compete for parliamentary seats in the Kurdistan Regional Government’s July 25 elections, which will also elect the KRG’s president. Five candidates are running for the regional presidency.

Analysts and politicians are anticipating a hard-fought parliamentary campaign, especially in Sulaimaniyah - the largest of Kurdistan's three provinces - where an independent contender is challenging the supremacy of the two leading Kurdish parties.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, which have dominated Kurdish politics for the past three decades, are viewed by many as heroic defenders of minority Kurds and the north’s most experienced leaders. Others claim that the parties have failed citizens, who complain of widespread corruption, poor services and nepotism among party loyalists.

Campaigning has yet to begin officially in Iraqi Kurdistan, but in the streets, teahouses and private homes of Sulaimaniyah, people talk excitedly about the forthcoming polls. Party media feed the excitement by advocating their candidates and slamming their opponents.

The KDP and PUK led an alliance that won 104 of the 111 parliamentary seats in the KRG’s 2005 parliamentary elections. Thirteen parties and coalitions contested the election that year, with only three gaining seats.

The political scene in Kurdistan is vastly different today, said Aram Jamal, manager of the Sulaimaniyah-based Kurdish Institute for Elections.

"Because there are separate and independent lists, there is competition," he said. "The public seems excited."

Tahir Mohammed Amin, head of the elections commission’s Sulaimaniyah office, said a high turnout is expected.

"There seems to be a great response from voters who are eager to register," he said.

Sulaimaniyah is a PUK stronghold, with the region's personality-dominated politics clearly on display. Pictures of PUK leader and Iraqi president Jalal Talabani and KRG president Masud Barzani, who is widely favoured to win re-election, are plastered in shops and on buildings. Barzani is president of the KDP.
Photos of rival candidate Nawshirwan Mustafa – a former PUK leader who now owns a powerful media company, Wisha – are also prominently on display.

Mustafa, whose campaign centres on a single theme – change – is considered the primary challenger to the PUK- and KDP-led Kurdistani List. Mustafa led a failed push for reform within the PUK and created his slate after losing a power struggle for the party leadership with Talabani.

Talabani provided the seed money for Wisha, which was established in 2006. The company, which includes a television station, newspaper and website, is now independent and highly critical of local leaders.

Slates are only permitted to campaign in a set period of time, the dates for which have yet to be announced. But politicians are getting their messages across by reaching out to the public unofficially, including through party media outlets which are backing their candidates and reporting critically on their opponents.

Underdog candidates appear to be emboldened by the competition. Prior to Mustafa’s list, the leading opposition party was the Kurdistan Islamic Union, a moderate Islamic party that has been unable to win over secular voters.

The union has joined forces with another moderate Islamic party and two secular parties to form an alliance that is advocating a reform-based platform.

“The level of political awareness among the public is high,” Salahaddin Babakir, campaign chief for the Kurdistan Islamic Union, said. “People are expecting change and for things to improve.”

The incumbent Kurdistani List has yet to announce its platform but is highlighting the successes of its leaders and the government in its media. One story featured newly-paved roads and a hospital in Halabja, a Kurdish town in Sulaimaniyah devastated by a chemical attack by Saddam Hussein’s regime in 1988. Critics of the ruling parties frequently cite Halabja as an example of the Kurdish government’s neglect of its citizens.

PUK media outlets also report on party meetings where officials promise better services and democratic reforms. The gatherings are attracting an increasing number of supporters, including Kurdish peshmarga forces and prominent figures such as tribal leaders and artists.

Party banners, erected for the PUK’s 34th anniversary on June 1 and still hanging on party buildings, play on themes that have resonated with voters in the past, such as the PUK’s armed struggle for the Kurds and its pledge to protect Kurds from threats.

Mustafa’s list has “made the competition tougher and tougher”, said Aziz Shawkat, a PUK official. “We want the public to vote for us again because of our history of struggle and because we have achieved what we have now. We should prove to Nawshirwan that the public wants us.”

Mustafa’s supporters and media, meanwhile, are pressing for change by highlighting what they claim are the government’s shortcomings – most notably poor services and corruption.
The reform messages strike a chord with discontented voters. Along with PUK defectors, young people are considered a key voting bloc for Mustafa’s list.

Singers have produced pop songs encouraging voters to support Mustafa, depicting him as a hero and the sole hope for bringing about reforms. Pro-Mustafa graffiti is quietly sprayed on buildings in the middle of the night.

Mohammed Nuri Tofiq, a Wisha board member, said Mustafa’s slate will attract youth “who are inspired by change and want to work for it”.

Despite Mustafa’s passionate following, analysts predicted that his list would win less than 20 per cent of the parliamentary seats. Barzan Ahmad Kurda, a senior PUK official, predicted he would gain only five seats.

And the political drama that stemmed from the PUK’s infighting has not abated.

Mustafa’s media company frequently reports on party members who have been expelled from the PUK for supporting his breakaway faction.

Wisha manager Shwan Qliyasani told IWPR that 30,000 PUK members in Sulaimaniyah city have been dismissed for backing Mustafa, a figure Kurda dismissed as “inconceivable”. Mustafa supporters claim that some of his loyalists are at risk of losing their government jobs.

Kurda said that up to 200 party officials had been expelled but some had returned to the party.

“If we are a football team, one of our players must not score against us. Those who were expelled were working against PUK statutes” by supporting another list, Kurda said.

Critics also balked when Talabani called on thousands of party members to back Barzani at a PUK rally recently, claiming the speech was tantamount to campaigning and violated election rules.

Kurda said because Talabani was addressing party loyalists and not the public, he was not in breach of election policies.

Amin from the elections commission said the body is investigating claims of campaign violations. “I can say that the law has been broken and election campaigns were launched before they were allowed,” Amin said.

He declined to provide details because the investigation is ongoing.
Rebaz Mahmoud is an IWPR-trained journalist in Sulaimaniyah.

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