

Five Years of Disappointment

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One Iraqi Kurd's hopes that life would improve after Saddam have largely been dashed.

On April 9, 2003, as a crowd in central Baghdad's Al-Firdous square brought down Saddam's statue, I felt a rush of pure joy.

I still can't express my pleasure as I watched footage of the statue being pulled down, and people dragging Saddam's bronze head and beating it with their sandals. I watched those images over and over again, and every time my heart beat faster and my hopes grew bigger. My expectations had never been higher.

As I am a Kurd, the fall of Saddam meant more to me than merely the end of a dictator. It meant that, as I had been dreaming, we would finally get Kirkuk back and build a bigger and stronger region within Iraq. I hoped that we eventually would have our own independent Kurdish state.

I had nurtured these dreams, along with the hope that Iraq would be a new, peaceful and more prosperous country. There would be no more genocide, wars or authoritarian parties. People would be better off economically. The country would build a pluralist system in which human rights, freedom of the press and free speech would be respected and protected.

However, as we mark the fifth anniversary of the fall of Saddam's regime, I look back with a deep sense of disappointment. Too little has been achieved, and too much has been lost.

I had thought that Saddam was the source of all problems and that removing him would solve everything. While I still believe that the late dictator is the root of Iraq's problems, the past five years have proved that we have a lot more to deal with than we expected.

For example, I cannot go to Baghdad. Because I have a Kurdish name, I am a potential target for kidnapping and killing. When Arabs come to my province in Iraqi Kurdistan, they must register with the security services. Someone within the community has to act as sponsor for them because they are considered potential terrorists.

Five years have passed since Saddam was overthrown, and day after day, the ranks of those who still support the initial war are thinning. Dreams of getting rid of a dictator have turned to dreams of a peaceful and stable country. Our lives are more about survival than making change, and the shadow of death hangs over everyone.

As a Kurd, my frustrations are enormous.

I know that while the middle and southern parts of Iraq are engulfed in instability, my region has rarely seen acts of terrorism. Life in Iraqi Kurdistan is definitely safer - but otherwise, it is not better. Although the economy is booming, the standard of living is decreasing. While cranes and construction sites abound, many people have nowhere to live and inflation is at an all-time high.

Although the region gets billions of US dollars from the national budget and makes a great deal of money from regional revenues as well, the average citizen's quality of life is not improving.

Last week, the Kurdish press reported that a family had given their ten-year-old daughter to a friend to raise because they were too poor to look after her themselves.

When I go to wash my face in the morning and the tap is dry, or if I want to watch TV and the power is out, it makes me angry. I would never have imagined that I would think more about basic services like water and electricity than about democracy and freedom.

At the same time, democracy is retreating, not growing, and press freedoms are constantly being violated.

In contrast to past years, this year I will not be celebrating on April 9. I see no light in the future. Iran is becoming increasingly influential in the south of the country, al-Qaeda continues to attack in the centre; and Turkey has made repeated incursions into the north.

Iraq's political factions have failed to make peace among themselves, let alone create prosperity for the country's people. Religious extremism is increasing, and secularists are leaving the country.

What is happening in Iraq is not the fault of the United States alone.

Iraqis must take the lion's share of the responsibility because they have made huge mistakes in choosing the direction in which they want to take their country.

They could have chosen to unite, shun sectarian violence and revenge attacks, and build a new Iraq. But unfortunately they chose another direction, and the results are shocking. While it is the fault of the multi-national forces when they kill an innocent civilian, Iraqis themselves are to blame when they kill instead of embracing each other and accepting coexistence.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, where people face problems such as poor basic services, lack of democracy and restricted press freedom, the two ruling parties which dominate everything have failed to truly unite their own administrations. The region still has two centres of power - one in Erbil and the other in Sulaimaniyah - with separate interior and finance ministries, as well as two peshmerga military forces.

The problem with the dominant parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, and the Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP, is that they will not accept different points of view. They believe that because they fought against the Baath regime, they each have the right to the whole pie.

These parties have failed in everything I once thought they could accomplish. I am no longer hopeful that we will make Kirkuk part of Iraqi Kurdistan again. It has again become a dream, and one that I am not sure will ever come true.

The Kurdish parties - once advocates of freedom when they were in the mountains - now repress

opposition voices and independent media. They are afraid of losing the power they have held for the last 17 years since the region gained some autonomy from Saddam's government.

The Kurdish region was supposed to be a model for democracy for the rest of Iraq; it is no longer that.

Despite all these problems, I remain relieved about one thing – Saddam is no longer alive or in power. I am unwavering in my belief that life is much better without him.

Today, I am not afraid that I will be forcibly enlisted in the Iraqi army and made to fight for a dictator's lust for power. I do not worry that one day, my family will be arrested and will vanish into the deserts of southwestern Iraq, where hundreds of thousands of Kurds disappeared during the Baath regime's Anfal campaigns of the Eighties.

When Saddam was in power, I relied on my sense of hope to stay alive. I will never relinquish that hope. We waited for 35 years for Saddam to be overthrown. I can wait longer to see a different Iraq.

I'm hoping that in the next five years, things will be different. We have to decide what we want, and I believe we must choose tolerance, democracy, freedom and coexistence. Once we decide unanimously that these are our goals, then everything will change.

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