

High Stakes in Kurdish Poll

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Looming parliamentary election could upset power balance in volatile region.

Iraqi Kurdistan is gearing up for an election that could reshape the semi-autonomous region's political landscape at a time of heightened tensions with Baghdad.

Some 2.5 million people are expected to take part in polls spanning three provinces of northern Iraq. They will elect the region's president and 111 representatives to its parliament.

In the first of two articles, IWPR answers some key questions about the vote on July 25.

WHY SHOULD THE WORLD CARE?

Iraqi Kurdistan is a resource-rich territory in a deeply unstable region. It has sizeable oil and gas reserves, largely untapped and potentially very lucrative.

Its relative stability, compared to the rest of the country, has brought foreign investment and vast construction projects to the cities.

However, that stability is under threat from a political feud with the Shia Arab-dominated government in Baghdad, which wants to curb Kurdish ambitions to expand their territory and consolidate their autonomy. Baghdad is also furious at the Kurds' efforts to manage independently the oil reserves on Kurdish territory.

The Kurds and the Baghdad government command separate security forces. As the United States withdraws its troops, the war of words between them could turn violent, sparking ethnic conflict in a country only just emerging from a debilitating sectarian war.

The Kurds' ability to contain tensions and pursue a negotiated settlement could depend on who wins this election – and by what margin. The new parliament is also widely expected to create legislation regulating the region's natural resources and investments.

In the short term, there is also a real risk of clashes between the supporters of rival political blocs. Skirmishes have already been reported between the security forces and backers of a new list campaigning on a reformist platform.

WHAT DO THE KURDS WANT?

Most Kurds support their leaders' plans to extend the territory under their control to include bordering areas with a large Kurdish population, notably the oil-rich city of Kirkuk. Many Kurds may yearn for an independent Kurdish state – but like their leaders, they recognise this is an unrealistic goal, at least in the

short term.

Instead, they want their current autonomy to be consolidated and if necessary, defended from possible encroachment by Baghdad. They also want control over their oil wealth.

While Kurds want a government that will fight their corner against often-hostile neighbours, they are also impatient to see changes within the region.

Local issues such as services and good governance are far outweighing regional or international concerns among voters. Corruption is a bigger issue than it has been in any previous election. Kurds are noisily comparing their government's performance against its promises.

Much development work so far has focused on eye-catching construction projects. Electricity, civic services, healthcare and education are in desperate need of investment.

Opposition supporters accuse the Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG, of monopolising wealth and power and failing to share revenues fairly. They also accuse the government of widespread nepotism, hampering the free press and intimidating political opponents.

The KRG rejects these claims, insisting it is responsible for the stability and prosperity the region enjoys, particularly compared to the rest of Iraq.

WHO IS TAKING PART?

Kurdish politics is dominated by the two largest parties to emerge from a decades-old guerrilla war against Baghdad.

The Kurdistan Democratic Party, KDP, is controlled by the Barzani family. Massoud Barzani is president of the Kurdistan region and is widely expected to win re-election. His nephew, Nechirvan Barzani, is the prime minister of the KRG. Both men are descendants of the revered Kurdish independence hero, Mustafa Barzani.

The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, is dominated by Jalal Talabani, another former guerrilla leader who is now also president of Iraq. An adroit politician with an avuncular manner, Talabani has fought off several challenges to his leadership, often emerging stronger.

In the 1990s, the KDP and PUK faced off in a vicious civil war for control of territory newly liberated from Baghdad. Now allies, they share power in the current government, with a roughly equal number of parliamentary seats and cabinet posts divided between them.

They are campaigning together again in this election under the banner of the Kurdistan list.

Their biggest challenge comes from the Change list, led by Nawshirwan Mustafa, who co-founded the PUK with Talabani.

The list is campaigning on a reformist anti-corruption platform. Its support is centred in the eastern city of Sulaimaniyah, a traditional stronghold of the PUK. Posters of a stern-faced Mustafa can be seen throughout the city.

The powerful media mogul lost a battle for control of the PUK to Talabani earlier this year. He has yet to form an official party, preferring to cast his list as a political movement.

Another opposition list, Service and Reform, is an unusual alliance of two Islamist and two leftist parties. It is led by the Kurdistan Islamic Union, a moderate Islamist party with ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Eleven of the parliament's 111 seats are reserved for minority groups and sects such as Christians and Turkoman.

WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

The election takes place on July 25. The Kurdistan list is widely expected to be returned to power.

However, gains made by the Change list may erode its majority, particularly in traditional PUK strongholds that now support Mustafa.

If it fares well in the election, Change could form a powerful parliamentary opposition, unprecedented in Kurdish politics.

It could also reduce the PUK's influence in its coalition with the KDP. The power-sharing deal between the two parties may have to be redrawn, with the PUK taking the role of junior partner. There is a small risk that the rivalry between the two parties – so bloody in the 1990s – could re-emerge in some form.

On the other hand, if the Change list's gains are relatively small, its supporters may take to the streets accusing the PUK of stealing the election.

The security forces are generally loyal to the KRG, although Mustafa, a former leader in the PUK's peshmerga militia, enjoys the support of many veteran fighters.

Tensions are already high. A confrontation between Change supporters and security forces or PUK loyalists could inflame them further.

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