

Kurdish Politicians Raise Civil War Fears

Political tensions escalate sharply as parliament and police investigate series of attacks on opposition figures.

Attacks on members of Kurdistan's main opposition group have raised fears in Sulaimaniyah that political tensions could spill over into "civil war" ahead of March elections.

The Change Movement claims that at least seven attacks on its members last month, including one fatal shooting and the torching of a lawmaker's office, were "organised political crimes", according to a statement released by the party.

"The incidents were planned against our members and happened in the places where Change list gained many votes in the July 25 [2009] election," the Change statement continued.

However, its main rival, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, has denied any involvement in the crimes, countering that Change has exaggerated the attacks for political gain ahead of the elections.

"The Change movement has sought to show the incidents as the consequence of political conflicts. Change wants to make the situation bigger and shows Sulaimaniyah as an unstable city," said Arif Rushdi, a member of the PUK leadership committee.

"In fact, the incidents were not related to political conflict. They were all personal."

According to Change, the first shooting occurred on December 4, when party activist Sardar Qadir was shot and wounded in his sister-in-law's living room in downtown Sulaimaniyah.

On December 12, Change member Rauf Zarayani was killed by gunmen in front of his home in the town of New Halabja.

That same day, bullets were fired into the home of Change member Bakhtyar Shekh Muhammad, who lives behind Sulaimaniyah's main police station.

A week later, Change members Yasin Abdullah and Burhan Hama Ramazan were shot in Shanadar village outside of Sulaimaniyah.

Then on December 30, the office of Change lawmaker Seewail Osman Ahmed was burned in the town of Koya.

"I just want to know why only our members were shot and threatened?" said Safin Mala Qara, a senior Change official. "Most of the people in Sulaimaniyah are frightened and alarmed about the destabilised situation in their city. These incidents have put the city on the verge of civil war."

Salahadin Babekir, spokesman for the opposition Kurdistan Islamic Union, KIU, told IWPR that although members of his party had been threatened in the past, "since the tension between PUK and Change, the threats [against KIU] have decreased considerably".

He said that the public was concerned about growing hostilities between Change and PUK.

"The situation between Change and PUK makes people very upset," he said. "If they continue like this there will likely be a civil war in the city."

Others warn that a period of calm that followed a January 10 call from Kurdistan region president Masoud Barzani to end the political tension may be short-lived.

"The political situation in Sulaimaniyah is almost ready to explode. The two sides (Change and PUK) are in a deep conflict over the attacks and I don't think this calm is going to last," said Yusuf Muhammad, a political science lecturer at the Sulaimaniyah University.

"As the election gets closer, the tension heats up. Neither side nor the government can guarantee that there won't be violence," Muhammad added.

Najmaddin Qadir, head of the Sulaimaniyah police directorate, said investigations into the incidents had not produced any arrests or identified any suspects.

A Kurdistan Regional Government, KRG, parliamentary committee assigned to investigate the attacks has submitted a preliminary report claiming the security forces were negligent in investigating the attacks, according to Samir Saleem, a KIU legislator who serves on the committee.

He said that security forces told committee members that the attacks were personal, without providing any evidence.

Sallem said that the five-member committee, which includes two PUK and two Change members of parliament, was itself trying to determine whether the incidents were political or personal.

However, Saleem said he felt it was unlikely that any action would be taken in the run-up to the elections. "If it turns out that a political party was behind these acts, people won't vote for that party," he added.

"The investigations are not complete and it is not yet clear whether [the attacks] were personal or political," Sulaimaniyah police chief Najmaddin Qadir said. "We are waiting for the results of the investigations."

But Qadir Hama Jan, director general of security in Kurdistan and senior to Qadir, told IWPR that preliminary police investigations indicated that the crimes were personal attacks.

"The incidents are not as you see in the media. The attacks in Sulaimaniyah were personal problems. The Change Movement has exaggerated the issue for their political purposes," said Jan, who is also a senior member of the PUK.

"We have not arrested anyone, but we are not careless about the security of our people."

Change was established last year by Nawshirwan Mustafa, a PUK co-founder who resigned from the party following a power struggle with PUK leader and Iraqi president Jalal Talabani. Mustafa has claimed the party was plagued by corruption and unwilling to enact reform.

Competition between the PUK and Change has been intense since the newly-founded movement won 25 seats in the 111-member Kurdish parliament and swept Sulaimaniyah province in the July 2009 Kurdish parliament elections. While tensions between the two groups ran high, that election was relatively peaceful.

Mustafa owns Wusha, a powerful and influential media company that includes local and satellite TV stations, a newspaper, a website and radio station which are enormously popular among Kurds, especially in Sulaimaniyah.

The recent attacks on Change members were widely covered by these outlets and sparked a fierce media campaign between Change and PUK that dredged up the PUK's history.

Talabani accused Mustafa, his former deputy, of betraying the Kurds by ignoring Baathist threats to use chemical weapons on Halabja in 1988. He also held him responsible for the bloody civil war between the PUK and Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party in the 1990s.

Mustafa denied the allegations and launched an attack on Talabani, blaming him for not standing up for Kurdish interests.

On the Change website, Mustafa recently claimed that Talabani's description of him as "anti-Kurdish" in an October conference was "a green light for attacks".

As the media battle grew increasingly personal, Barzani and other party leaders stepped in to mediate between Change and PUK.

The parties agreed to halt their feuding, but some worry that the tense truce will not hold as elections season approaches.

"I do worry that there will be bloodshed between the Change movement and PUK," said Hoshyar Karim Ahmed, a 70-year-old shopkeeper in Sulaimaniyah. "I hope things will be sorted out."

Some senior Change leaders feel the party is treated unfairly in Sulaimaniyah by PUK officials. For

instance, most members of Sulaimaniyah's security forces are PUK loyalists.

"We don't feel safe because the security forces and police are under the control of the political parties. We don't have a military and [security] forces. We are a civil movement. We want the government to protect all parties without exception," former Kurdish Peshmerga commander and senior Change leader Mam Rostam told IWPR this week.

"We have not exaggerated [the incidents] ... our activists have been killed, abducted, beaten and fired [from their jobs] and they want us to be silent? One of our activists killed and it is exaggeration to say he was killed?"

Some like Qadir, who was shot twice in the legs while drinking tea with his extended family on Iskan Street in Sulaimaniyah, are left wondering why they were targeted and by whom.

"I don't have any problems with the police, but I am concerned that they say it was personal assault. I don't think so," he said. "I know myself better than anyone and I don't have any problems with anyone."

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