

Why Kurdish Media Must Reform

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The recent election in Iraqi Kurdistan ushered in a new era for the region's media, posing fresh challenges for news organisations, the government and the parliament.

In the past, the ruling parties were the driving force in the political process. But a formidable opposition emerged on election day, and the political game seems to have changed forever. The main player in the Iraqi Kurdish political scene today is the voter.

Winning the trust of the voter will be everyone's goal over the coming years.

This imposes new responsibilities on the Kurdish media, which is essentially divided into two camps - one for and one against the political establishment.

Most Iraqi Kurdish political parties have their own media outlets that usually include websites, newspapers and radio and TV stations.

Most of the top parties also have their own influential satellite television channels, which the public widely turns to for regional news. These channels have traditionally been monopolised by the region's two most powerful parties: the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

More recently, the new opposition group, Change, established its TV channel, the Kurdistan News Network.

Traditionally, party media have put their political agenda and their leaders' activities ahead of news that is most important to the public.

On the other hand, private media have always claimed independence but in reality function as the voice of the opposition. In their case, the criterion for news is whatever that does not appear in the party media.

This division has clearly created a big gap, and at times tensions, in Iraqi Kurdistan's burgeoning media scene.

No single outlet is providing comprehensive coverage of most stories, which does not help citizens to understand the political situation. In order to obtain a complete picture, one has to go through five or six media outlets.

It is quite rare these days to find a news report that has both sides of the story. Instead they are split, with the independent media representing the opposition and the party media representing the government.

Following party media alone, one would think that Iraqi Kurdistan has no problems whatsoever. The non-party media suggests that Iraqi Kurdistan is one of the most corrupt, inefficient and failed regions.

The reality is somewhere in between, and balance can only be obtained if media outlets adopt professional standards of objectivity and fairness.

Looking ahead to the next four years, neither type of media can afford to stay the same. Iraqi Kurdistan has a plurality of political perspectives that the region has never seen before, and both party and non-party media will have to work to win the trust of the audience.

For this to happen, it requires a change of heart on behalf of the political parties. They must accept that a party leader may not always headline the news. The top story should instead reflect what impacts the largest number of people in the region.

The first step that they must take is to separate news from opinion. Content needs to be divided into two clear, distinct sections – one that provides news and information and another that provides views and opinions.

Professional news editors also need to be appointed. They can ensure that standards of objectivity, impartiality and fairness are upheld.

Similar values need to be upheld by editors and reporters in independent, or opposition, media news organisations. These media outlets must stop ignoring the government's perspectives and start including in their output some stories that are not critical of the government.

In short, both sides need to be credible sources of news and information, and must resist falling back on their traditional biased content.

As a journalism trainer, I have found that most Iraqi Kurdish journalists agree with the idea that there are two camps for each story – government and opposition. Their challenge is to build an audience of people from both of these camps.

Students are usually eager to learn new methods and understand the concepts of objectivity and impartiality in journalism. But when they go back to their newsrooms, they hit a brick wall with their editors.

What is most needed in Kurdish media today is a change of heart on the part of media managers in political parties and so-called independent outlets.

Media development organisations can support fair and impartial journalism by employing a top-down training approach that targets editors.

This is especially crucial given the new political landscape which has emerged from the election. If the current political situation continues, the opposition is likely to be strong which will create a vibrant and

unpredictable parliament.

The need for public affairs and governance reporting has never been higher. Stories that may appear in a reliable media outlet could complement the political process. A story about corruption may lead to the downfall of a government official.

The relationship between the government and the non-party media is quite unhealthy these days. This has paved the way for the emergence of some outlets with extremely poor standards, and libelling government officials has become one of their objectives.

One editor once told a visiting press delegation that his news organisation deliberately publishes lies and waits for government officials to correct them.

On the other hand, non-party media widely complain that they are not given access to government institutions.

The new government, including ministries, will need a strong public relations and communications campaign and will need to treat all news organisations equally.

The government will also need to strengthen their press offices and the skills of their spokespeople to ensure that the information reaches the public.

Legislatively, the next four years will also be crucial for media. The existing laws that govern the work of the media are regarded as archaic and vague.

The press law that was passed last year primarily regulates newspapers, and was largely seen as a way to counter non-party press outlets that are highly critical of the government. The law did not take into account broadcast or online media, in part because members of parliament did not think that the likes of the opposition television news station Kurdistan News Network would emerge.

Sections of the law dealing with libel and slander also lack clarity.

Media regulation may soon become an issue that requires the parliament's attention. The parliament needs to set up a media commission as a professional body that sets standards for good journalism and settles disputes outside the court system.

In this nascent democracy, the elections gave birth to a new opportunity for all. While the government needs to have better communications and the legislature has to come up with a better framework to regulate the media, the media needs to seize this opportunity to professionalise and become a true Fourth Estate.

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The views expressed in this article are not necessarily the views of IWPR.

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