On the Election Campaign in Iraqi Kurdistan

With the ongoing date for parliamentary and presidential elections in the Kurdistan region of Iraq, scheduled for September 21, 2013, an active election campaign begins there. There are about 36 parties in the region, but the main struggle for parliamentary seats seemed to have erupted between Kurdish Alliance (the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), headed by M. Barzani, Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), led by J. Talabani) and the opposition represented by the “Goran” (change), the “Islamic Group” (Jamaa Islamiya) and the Islamic Union of Kurdistan, as well as a number of other associations. KDP strives to resolve conflicts with their opponents. Nechirvan Idris Barzani, Prime Minister of the Kurdistan region and Vice-Chairman of the KDP, held a conference in Sulaymaniyah with Bahram Saleh, the PUK leader and with Nawshirwan Mustafa, head of the movement “Goran”, with the aim of finding a mechanism to overcome existing differences. The KDP’s efforts are aimed at achieving political stability in order to create conditions for the holding of the referendum on the draft Constitution for the Kurdistan region.

In the run-up to the next presidential election, the idea of a Constitution for the Kurdistan region was once again on the agenda. The project, consisting of 122 articles was created by representatives of the ruling political coalition (KDP and PUK) in 2009.

Iraqi Kurdistan is defined in the current draft as "an autonomous federated state" which recognizes more than one identity, since its art. 15 recognizes the multi-ethnics of the region, art. 35 offers national, cultural and administrative rights to all non Kurdish nationalities. Art. 36 provides for freedom of religion, especially for Christian and Yazidi communities.

Kurdistan Constitution recognizes the right of all national languages of the people of Iraqi Kurdistan in the education system (from school to University), and their right to participate in local or regional governance and self-determination in areas under their national dominance.

Among Iraqi Kurdish the draft Constitution was controversial. The Kurdish community in and outside the region, opposed the haste of making such an important document that requires comprehensive analysis and discussion, while M. Barzani, the KDP leader, is interested in the rapid adoption of the Constitution in order to ensure future power and control.

The opposition declaims against the referendum, pointing out that the draft Constitution should be referred back to Parliament for amendment, since the approval of its current form will return Kurdistan to authoritarianism. Today, according to opposition, the President of the Kurdistan region has absolute power. "Goran" proposes to establish a Special Commission to amend. Opposition demands changes of the political system from a presidential to a parliamentary, administrative decentralization and guarantees of the rights of all citizens in the Kurdistan region.

KDP and PUK do not consider legitimate a return of the text back to the Parliamentary Commission. Yet a meeting of M. Barzani with opposition leaders - N. Mustafa (Goran), Mohamed Faraj (Secretary General of the Islamic Union of Kurdistan) and Ali Baber, Emir of the Islamic Group on their own initiative in Erbil, January, 17. They discussed the need for a mechanism to overcome the differences on the issue of reform of the power system on the text of a draft Constitution of Kurdistan.

Adoption of Iraqi Kurdistan Constitution is considered by Kurdish authorities as an important step of promoting the
independence of the region. KDP proposed to ratify the draft Constitution of the Kurdistan region, according to which M. Barzani would be able to run for President for a third term. He believes that this issue can be resolved through a referendum. M. Barzani has already taken up his post two terms, the first time he had been appointed by Parliament, and the second time by popularly election.

The opposition criticizes the policy of M. Barzani, arguing that it needs to be updated. M. Barzani and his family's alleged corruption and nepotism. Some time ago daily demonstrations and protests in Suleymaniyah were dispersed by the police. Most of the demonstrators were opposed to the reign of M. Barzani and his KDP party. In clashes with Kurdish security forces, several people were killed, hundreds injured and arrested.

Today the opposition says that if there is no national consensus on the text of a draft Constitution for the Kurdistan region, it will lead the people to the streets again to protest. However, these measures obviously do not lead to resolution of the problem.

Some Kurdish political activists suggest to set up a new draft Constitution, if a majority of the Kurdish population vote against the current draft. Others believe that KDP would conclude strategic agreement with the "Goran" for the management in the region. So far, however, neither the opposition nor the public associations have not nominated their candidates to compete with M. Barzani.

At a recent rally in Erbil, M. Barzani stated that the draft Constitution had already been approved by a majority of votes in Parliament in 2009. He stressed that those who protest against the existing power system, poorly studied the draft Constitution, the first paragraph of which specifies that "the system of the Government in Kurdistan is parliamentary". He also called on the Kurdish parties to think about its people and its future, and not to deprive the Kurdish people of the right of freedom of expression on the draft Constitution.

Meanwhile, the Kurdish parties and public associations are ready to put forward candidates for the post of the President of the Kurdistan region, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the independent High Electoral Commission has already started preparations for the holding of elections in a number of localities in the local municipal councils. It endorsed the presidential and parliamentary electoral system. But the opposition has heart set against nomination of M. Barzani for the Presidency for the third time, despite the variety of opinions on the legality of his nomination. KDP and PUK have reaffirmed the legitimate right of M. Barzani to take part in the elections, though, according to some analysts, the PUK has not yet agreed because of the illness of its leader J. Talabani.

In the run-up to the elections the fight between supporters and opponents of the existing system of power is likely to worsen. The opposition has agreed not to nominate an alternative candidate. Meanwhile Barzani clan holds a very strong position not only in the power structures of the region, but also controls the significant commercial and economic programmes, which income accounts several billion U.S. dollars.

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