

Beneath the Surface of the Kurdistan Independence Referendum

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Received: 06 November 2017

Accepted: 08 December 2017

Available online: 15 December 2017

ABSTRACT

This paper aims at providing an alternative view to the prevailing narratives on the timing, the underpinning reasons and actual outcomes of the Kurdistan independence referendum held in September 2017. It is argued that with regard to all above perspectives dominant international analysis of the referendum has failed to account for important socio-political and economic factors without which any objective evaluation of such a prominent regional even will be incomplete if not outright inaccurate.

Keywords: Independence, Iraq, Kurdistan, Kurds, Referendum

1. INTRODUCTION

Following recent events in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region, most observers have opted for a reductionist interpretation of Kurdistan's consultative independence referendum last October. These largely fall into two categories of those criticizing the referendum on the grounds of timing, and others seeing more sinister footprints of political opportunism by the leaders of the Kurdistan Region. Here are some reasons why such analysis is flawed due to their failure to appreciate several closely related socio-political elements.

2. THE KURDISTAN REGION'S ACHIEVEMENTS

The Kurdistan Region has come a long way since it was a beleaguered province of Iraq subject to regular military violence and systematic ethnic discrimination.

Now, it enjoys relative economic prosperity, resilient state institutions, and, most importantly, a vibrant civil society. Yet, paradoxically, all these achievements pose new challenges to the primeval aspirations of independence and statehood. Such achievements have risen the stakes for Kurds and given them much more to lose. Today, Kurds are on a totally different page of their history, and the principles of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, while celebrated, have paradoxically handicapped them. In a region where all other forces still actively embrace violence by promoting martyrdom and glory in the afterlife, treasuring life on Earth proves to be an ineffective strategy.

Hence, in such a social and political climate, it is not difficult to appreciate the rationale behind the move to hold the referendum despite the international community's lack of support. In the minds of the leaders of the Kurdistan Region, the referendum might well have appeared a long overdue process whose midnight trains were about to leave the last platforms of history.

Such a radical alteration of mindset has had tangible consequences, as seen in the cautious declarations of the Kurdish leadership in the run-up to the September referendum. Up to the very last moment, all doors to negotiation were kept open, and there were persistent calls by a considerable

Access this article online

DOI: 10.25079/ukhjss.v1n1y2017.pp22-23 E-ISSN: 2520-7806

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faction of the Kurdistan leadership to accept any meaningful offers and suspend or postpone the referendum. Subsequently following the offer to “freeze” the effects of the independence referendum, the Kurdistan Regional Government announced on November the 15th that it respects the Iraqi Constitutional Court’s verdict on the unconstitutionality of the referendum, which is yet more evidence of a prevailing climate of political pragmatism stemming from this radical socio-political atmosphere; all this despite the central government’s persistent rejection of dialog and insistence on a series of relentless collective punitive measures.

Hence, the central government’s long track record of violating minority rights each time it had means for doing so, would have undoubtedly added to the sense of urgency by the KRG leader to push through the referendum while the war on Islamic State was not yet over.

3. TIMING OF THE REFERENDUM

After the fall of Saddam, the Kurdistan Region had full-heartedly committed to the Iraqi project of rebuilding a devastated nation with no political infrastructure. Without the Kurds’ contributions, the Iraqi state as we know it would not exist. These contributions included developing a theoretical constitutional pluralism and the potential for democratization, which resulted primarily from Kurdish MPs’ influence. Furthermore, their physical contributions toward protecting the Iraqi political entity in the war against the Islamic State do not need further illustrations.

In addition to this, the Kurdistan Regional Government also made a concerted effort to achieve the best possible relations with its neighbors, in particular, Turkey and Iran, which was indeed unprecedented in the history of the nation. Yet again, the more liberal assumptions of the Kurdistan Regional Government regarding the mutual economic interdependence that should have prevailed over other geopolitical considerations proved to be in total discordance with the rudimentary political realism of the region.

The question becomes, if, in such a climate of deep economic interdependence and positive relationships with neighbors, all of them still reacted violently to even a basic non-binding popular consultation in Kurdistan, why would they be more lenient in the event of an actual process of independence at any other historical juncture?

4. QUESTIONS OF OIL

One more important aspect needs further elaboration, and that is the question of oil. The financial prospects of losing Kirkuk’s vast oil reserves to the Iraqi federal government have dominated political analysis around the world. Nonetheless, this major economic and sentimental loss for the Kurdistan Regional Government has other fundamental implications for the democratization processes in the Kurdistan Region. On a global level, one will struggle to identify a single democratic country whose state relies primarily on natural resources. As governments come to rely on their primary economic sectors rather than taxes and public contributions, the political machinery inches toward turning into a rentier state increasingly likely to waive principles of transparency, accountability, and distributive justice.

In light of all this, on purely speculative grounds, it will be uncontroversial to claim that the painful loss of control over oil reserves in Kirkuk might also have some unexpected positive outcomes. It might well prove to be a driving engine for launching wide-ranging democratization throughout the Region by building on important achievements of recent years. This could prove essential in forcefully demonstrating that the only way forward for the Kurdistan Region is to deepen its much-treasured values of openness, tolerance and genuine grassroots democracy, which are indeed a rare breed in the Middle East. Hence, despite the prevailing pessimism, Kurds could easily have the last laugh if important lessons of the recent course of events are learned.

In addition, this new episode of having been once more callously betrayed by their international partners, in particular, the USA and France, might prove to be yet another painful reminder that the most enduring and unwavering political systems are those looking inward for democratic consensus rather than those looking outward for support and legitimacy. This has indeed been the most fundamental lesson of the entire tradition of political philosophy throughout history.

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