

## **KURDISTAN'S POLITICIZED SOCIETY CONFRONTS A SULTANISTIC SYSTEM**

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The Kurdistan region of Iraq enjoys more stability, economic development, and political pluralism than the rest of the country. And public opinion under the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) demands rule-of-law-based governance. But power is concentrated in the hands of the ruling parties and families, who perpetuate a nondemocratic, sultanistic system. These dynamics could foster instability in Kurdistan and its neighborhood, but could also provide a rare window of opportunity for democratization.

### **The Dynamics in the KRG**

- The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by current KRG President Masoud Barzani and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) led by former president of Iraq Jalal Talabani dominate the system along with two ruling families, the Barzanis and Talabanis.
- The KRG's security sector, intelligence services, and leading military units are divided between the KDP and the PUK.
- The KRG experienced an economic boom between 2003 and 2013 based on oil revenues and foreign investment. The economic windfall fueled the region's development but also enriched and empowered investors and the ruling elite.
- As of early 2014, due to corruption, mismanagement, disputes with Baghdad, and the fight against the self-proclaimed Islamic State, the KRG faces a severe economic crisis.
- Kurdish society is increasingly voicing its opposition to aspects of the sultanistic system. Social movements have brought about incremental and piecemeal but nonetheless critical changes.
- Parties once in opposition, including the strong Gorran, are now part of the government.

### **Capitalizing on the Window of Opportunity**

- Gorran and other former opposition parties face the challenge of producing an alternative model of politics and politicians that is not corrupted or co-opted by the sultanistic system. The former opposition's leaders and grass roots should hold their officials accountable and, if necessary, replace corrupt ones with trustworthy and credible officials.
- The KDP and the PUK have promised to reform the system. If that does not happen, Gorran and other former opposition parties should be realistic about the chances of reforming the system from within and explore alternative peaceful and civilian strategies to pressure the two parties to make good on their promises.
- Western governments can help spur change in the Kurdistan region by insisting on the establishment of national and nonpartisan military, police, and security services. They should also put pressure on the federal government in Baghdad to reach a final agreement with the KRG on the status of the region, with clearly demarcated borders, and to find a solution to outstanding political and economic issues between Erbil and Baghdad.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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