

Barzani's speech: Discrepancy between words and reality

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After the Kurdish community's long wait for unification and a united regional government, the PUK and PDK finally agreed on a unified form of government. The government consists of 42 ministries, many of which are powerless and unnecessary. The Kurdish parliament enacted the cabinet unanimously, with no criticism. Despite both administrations suffering under vast corruption, the unified government includes almost all the former ministers from both sides.

I will on this occasion comment critically on some vital subjects mentioned in Kurdish Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani's speech. The speech included colorful statements, many beautiful words and big promises concerning democracy, freedom of speech, women's rights, the free market and so on. Precision and punctuality, however, were missing. The speech indicated the implementation of this administration's aims and promises for the near future. In other words, Barzani is aware of the need to undo the 14-year past of his and his colleagues' administrations. That rises big questions and uncertainty about the possibility of realizing the declared aims. Kurdistan has no democracy, no equal rights or freedom for its citizens, and no free market as such.

Barzani points to allegations of corruption inside the government and promises to investigate the issue with a special committee. The puzzle here is that he has no doubt about his ministers' and his purity. The corruption involves not only low level civil servants, but also many officials from the top to the bottom of the administration. What use is firing some small officials, when the big fish are still powerful? The widespread corruption grew drastically under Barzani's and Omer Fatah's administrations. Now they are establishing a new government consisting of both the old and corrupt administrations. How can a corrupt administration eliminate corruption? It's simply unfeasible. Because the leaders are masters of corruption, they operate far above the law. Does any ordinary Kurd in Southern Kurdistan dare to ask any top leaders about the legality of his huge capital, grounds and business connections? I doubt that anyone would take such a gamble with his life. In addition, the two administrations have never published a budget of their revenue and expenses. The ruling parties possess all the national revenue and use it at their own whim.

Barzani points out the supremacy of law, and underlines the need for the rule of law, but the Kurdish administration couldn't write or enact a democratic constitution that guarantees the rule of law during the last 14 years. The rules are either old Baath rules, or regulations, many of which are not democratic. Due to the two political parties' dominance and a sort of one party system in

their areas, the rules do not apply to the top politicians, their friends and their families, but only to the powerless ordinary and poor people. The local courts of law are powerless vis-à-vis the two major parties, as well as their top leaders and chiefs. The courts are controlled by the dominant parties and don't dare to oppose the party's demands. We have witnessed this clearly in Kamal Said Qadir's case. How can the rule of law prevail when the rules do not include people at the top, and the courts are powerless? If the rules are undemocratic (as they are now), then the prevailing law is the imposition of an authoritarian system. Thus everyone except the party chiefs has to obey the law!

Barzini underlines the importance of freedom of speech and individual freedom, but neither exists in Kurdistan. All is controlled by the ruling party and everyone has to do what the ruling party appreciates. This has been the daily reality for the past 14 years. If journalists and writers criticize a negative phenomenon, they have to respect the party's unwritten limits and censorship. No direct criticisms toward the party leaders are tolerated. Even indirect or general critics risk punishment, besides encountering sanctions and ill treatment in different ways. Consequently those who prize the party and its historical "victories" are increasing in number, while realistic and honest people are decreasing in number.

Women's rights are mentioned and underlined in this speech. The Kurdistan regional government has passed some laws that forbid honor killings; this is a positive step. However, the law has some holes that leave space for exceptions. Honor killings still take place frequently, oppression of women remains widespread, many of the top chiefs have several wives, religious and conservative interpretation dominate society and finally, the few women in minister posts gained their power by nepotism and family relations, not because of their ability.

In addition to widespread violations of human rights everywhere, ordinary people either don't know what their rights are or are powerless against their abuses. The KRG established the Ministry of Human Rights, which is administered by party members. The ministry is not impartial and closes its eyes to violations or abuses by party and governmental officials. In fact, the ministry was formed partly to control this issue, to prevent the appearance of non-governmental human rights organizations in Kurdistan.

Barzani underlines the role of a reliable and experienced media to promote the government's aims. Free media are limited in Kurdistan. The powerful media channels such as TV, radio and newspapers are owned by the two ruling parties. The poor, private, independents newspapers have to operate within the unwritten limits and work with sensitive issues very carefully. The two leading parties have established huge media channels and imitate the undemocratic styles.

Dominating the media channels are stories prizing the leader, the party, the party's achievements and activities, or activities supported by the party.

The PM stressed the necessity of a free market and improvement of the private sector. But who possesses huge private businesses in Kurdistan? Who controls and dominates the market? Undoubtedly it is the ruling parties' leaders. There is no free market in Kurdistan; investors have to share their revenue with the top leaders, if they dare to invest at all. Faceless men monopolize the market, and no one dares to investigate who they are. No one can invest without the party leaders' permission. Thus Barzani's goal of improving the "free market" is merely to give further support to his and his cronies' own businesses. Kurdistan's market is monopolized by those men without faces and other party leaders; consequently, a few capitalists, as well as those around them, become richer and richer, while ordinary people suffer under huge inflation and frustrations.

Barzani emphasizes the necessity of democratic improvements and of establishing a democratic system and government. There has been no democracy in Kurdistan, and the reason for that is the two ruling parties' dictatorship and tribalism. They practice a sort of one party system in their own regions, they control all of the country's channels, parts and life resources. No single, small authority of any kind escapes their control. It's not surprising that the government has to have the party's permission and blessing. The party, not the government, is ruling the country, and the party works hard to achieve the wishes and desires of its unique president.

Let's examine the PM's performance toward his goals and promises. The Kurdish people heard and learned about all these sorts of colorful talks during the last 14 years. The promises were only empty words and nothing more. They haven't been able to secure even primitive services such clean water and electricity.

Let's suppose Mr. Barzani means every word he says. If the government fails to implement its promises, which democratic mechanisms are there to observe the executive authority? Which democratic means are there to questioning the implementation steps? And which democratic mechanisms can contain and resolve the obstacles? Kurdistan's Parliament is controlled by the two ruling parties. It is powerless vis-à-vis the ruling leaders. The Yellow faction – KDP – will not and does not dare to criticize the presidents. And the Green faction – PUK – has the same posture toward the top government officials and the president. Thus no matter the outcome, all of parliament's members will give tacit support to the government officials, and will behave passively.

In addition there is no opposition party in the parliament; everyone is involved in the government in one way or another. The small political parties are powerless and do not dare to oppose the ruling parties' politics on important cases. Besides, the small parties' leaders are using the party

organization as a monetary enterprise. It's not surprising that the new government has 42 ministers. The ruling parties do not accept opposition parties, and as a result they give only powerless and unnecessary ministries to the small, vague political parties. As Masud Barzani, the regional president of Kurdistan, mentioned, one cannot participate in the government and act as an opposition party.

There is no democratic mechanism to control the government's performance on its promises and claimed goals. Nor is there a democratic system to enable a peaceful and democratic power transfer in the near future. Without opposition there will be an absence of constructive criticism, which paralyzes Kurdistan's natural democratic development and improvement.

The Kurdish people have suffered and are still suffering under injustices, and they wish to have a fair, democratic system and an uncorrupt government. These are not there yet, and under this administration and the party-monopolized environment, there is a long way to go before they will be.