YOUTHFUL ANGER AND THE CRISIS OF LEGITIMACY IN IRAQI KURDISTAN

K A M A R A N   P A L A N I

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Abstract: Youth disillusionment with the heavily politicised system of governance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is not new. What is new is that young people's anger and frustration now present a serious challenge to the KRI's internal legitimacy, a pillar of the region's de facto autonomy and sustainability for nearly thirty years. The current generation, unlike their forebears, have no direct memory of the decades-long repression by the Ba'ath regime before 2003. Young Kurdish millennials have only known the Kurdistan of the current ruling class, characterised by a rigid two-party system and mismanagement. Hence, addressing the youth's concerns means not only responding to their demands of employment, greater opportunities and better services, but also reconsidering the political legitimacy that Kurdish dominant parties have claimed for three decades.

Introduction

The protests over unpaid salaries and unemployment which erupted on December 2, 2020 in the KRI's governorate of Sulaimaniyah spread to other districts and towns in the governorate of Halabja. Hundreds of angry public employees have taken to the streets to demand their full salaries and that the KRI authorities put an end to government corruption.[1] Ten young people have been killed and dozens injured by the security forces since the start of the protests. While initially the protests mainly involved public employees demanding their unpaid salaries, they have evolved into a complex situation, revealing deeper frustration and the rejection of the whole political system by angry and frustrated youth.[2]

There are two groups among the protesters: public employees and angry youth who are mostly aged between 16 and 24. The demands of the former, the immediate payment of their delayed salaries, are clear, and there are prominent activists and existing channels through which the government can communicate with them. The latter is different: the hundreds of young protesters have no leaders or specific demands and, importantly, no communication with the older activists who used to organise and promote the protests. In short, they represent a huge challenge, and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)'s response has been one familiar to the region: violence and intimidation.

The protests have significant implications for the sustainability and future of KRI, as will be explained below

The KRI has become increasingly polarised in recent years, with rising youth dissatisfaction with the authorities. Explanatory factors include the post-2014 financial crisis, a lack of effective anti-corruption government reforms, insufficient policies to empower youth,[3] and increasing political divisions. Kurdish youth are under tremendous pressure given KRI's current socio-economic climate.[4] In the short-term, the current protests seem unlikely to have a fundamental impact on the KRI's system of governance as, firstly, they are not yet widespread, and the numbers of protestors are comparatively few; and, secondly, the KRI's dominant parties the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) are complacent in their belief that they possess the effective tools to protect the status quo. Nevertheless, the protests have significant implications for the sustainability and future of KRI, as will be explained below.

The dominant geopolitical-oriented analysis of the region's problems has long obscured the dynamics of the relationships between authorities and the people and have thus failed to predict major social and political changes. An example of this is the October 2019 wave of protests in Iraq, which forced the prime minister to resign. In the case of KRI, an analysis of the youth's frustration should not only include this component of society, but also wider questions of the politics, legitimacy, and future of the Kurdistan Region.

Further complicating the analysis of the youth's disconnect with authorities is that this is happening in the context of a *de facto* independent entity. Popular support and internal legitimacy are important for all types of states, but particularly so for entities such as Kurdistan, whose lack of external legitimacy has made claims of internal legitimacy integral to their existence and struggle for international recognition. In addition to international support for its security and existence, high levels of domestic support and legitimacy, as well as relatively effective and functioning governance especially compared to the rest of Iraq, have been central to Iraqi Kurdistan's political sustainability. However, current

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and recent developments indicate a diminishing sense of *kurdayati* (Kurdishness) among youth, and therefore the erosion of a factor which had been central to the stability and development of Kurdistan over recent years.

Though the politics of KRI and of the rest of Iraq are interlinked, the protests in Kurdistan do not seem to be obviously influenced by the recent protests in the south and middle of Iraq nor responses to the socio-political dynamics in other parts of Iraq but are concerned with Kurdistan's own dynamics and context.[5] Nevertheless, the youth's frustration responds to a larger crisis in the wider Middle East: the crisis of legitimacy.

Behind the headlines, the defining feature of people's priorities and dreams today is not the historical independence struggle against the Iraqi state, but youth dissatisfaction and anger towards the Kurdish authorities. A new identity is thus emerging among many young Kurds, with the political class becoming viewed as "the other". There has been a consequent decrease in the salience of political identity among younger people, as well as an increase in youths considering themselves outside the political establishment. There is a notable pattern of disengagement from the political process across the KRI, with a significant proportion of youth feeling they are not represented in local politics. This anti-authority sentiment can translate into different varieties of resistance or disengagement with political processes, ranging from emigration to Europe[6] to protest movements.[7]

The youth responses: resistance or resignation

This section draws upon qualitative data gathered by the author from 2019 to 2020 as part of separate research projects on youth politics and identity in KRI. Youth dissatisfaction with the authorities is common across KRI, but takes several forms and results in different outcomes in different areas. Youth responses and outcomes can be categorised into *resistance* and *resignation*.

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A- Resistance

Within this category lie several different outcomes.

1- Migration

As a form of resistance, the most common response of the frustrated and angry youth is the decision to migrate. There are no official statistics for the number of young Kurds who have left Kurdistan hoping for asylum in a European country; however, since 2014, the desire to migrate has become a widespread phenomenon. Interestingly, this desire is most common among the youth in areas where protests are currently being held.

2- Protests

Since 2011, there have been multiple waves of protests, with youth expressing various demands, calling for an end to corruption, KDP-PUK rule, and, recently, unemployment. The protestors have expressed common themes against corruption and poor governance, but have remained largely confined to Sulaymaniyah province (explained below). Unlike the previous episodes of protests, the current wave is characterised by unprecedented disconnect between the authorities and youth, with the potential to further divide the society into two opposing camps: "the people" versus "the authorities". The protests of last summer led to the arrest of dozens of journalists and activists by the KRI security forces.[8] The current protests have been largely confined to smaller districts and towns, not big cities, highlighting the failure of the KRG's economic policies in creating equal opportunities between urban and rural areas with opportunities being concentrated in large cities such as Erbil. Hence, an analysis of the protest movement(s) should be located within a broader analysis of both youth and governance issues.

3- Joining civil society organisations

This is a new form of resistance among Kurdish youth. Over the past six years, KRI has seen more young people showing interest in establishing youth platforms and organisations and joining established local non-governmental organisations. Interestingly, this is more common among young women, who have limited options to express their resistance, compared to young men.[9] This change may be a response to the decrease in public employment over the past six years, forcing young people to seek opportunities elsewhere.

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4- Violent radicalisation of youth

This has not been a common response among the youth so far but concerns over youth violent radicalisation are on the rise. The use of violence and attacking public and party buildings and properties by the protesters justify the concern over youth radicalisation leading to violence in the future. This is mainly due to the emergence of an environment conducive to radicalisation and extremism, including youth unemployment, frustration, polarisation, corruption, and perceptions of injustice.

B- Resignation

Resignation refers to youth disengagement with politics and society while remaining frustrated and disappointed. As stated above, youth frustration is common across the KRI's provinces, but in general it is possible to say that there is a sense of youth *resignation* more in KDP areas, and a sense of *resistance* in PUK-controlled regions. A possible explanation lies in the different social and political spaces developed in these different regions. Other explanatory factors indicating why youth resistance is greater in the PUK-controlled areas of Sulaimaniyah, Halabja, Rania and Garmian, include the presence of other political actors in these areas, such as the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK), which wields significant influence; other parties such as the Change Movement, New Generation, Islamic Movement, and Islamic Union, which see these parts of Kurdistan as their strongholds; pro-Iraqi government actors present in academic institutions; and, above all, the PUK's historically less centralised form of control compared to the highly centralised administration pursued by the KDP in Erbil. All these factors contribute to the creation of an environment conducive to youth resistance.

The above analysis has shown that youth resignation is not an individual problem, but a structural and political one. Additionally, neither youth resistance and resignation are linear processes, and as conditions change, young people move in different directions, and towards different outcomes. Hence, understanding both youth participation and disengagement or resignation requires a continuous assessment of the changes and dynamics on the ground.

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Structural challenges to youth demands

The fight against the so-called Islamic State (IS) beginning in 2014 and the financial crisis starting early that same year put an end to Kurdistan's economic growth and progress experienced in the decade after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq. A collapse in oil prices, Baghdad's decision to freeze the KRI's budget (costing the entity nearly one billion dollars a month), and an influx of 250,000 Syrian refugees and 1.5 million internally displaced Iraqis fleeing IS, further overwhelmed Kurdistan.[10] This has had significant implications for the well-being of its population, especially the young, ever since.

Since then, the KRG has been unable to pay its government employees, around 20 percent of the whole population, on time, or provide job opportunities for thousands of university graduates. The Covid-19 pandemic and the government's required responses (such as the imposition of curfews) have further strained the economy. High unemployment and economic deprivation pose structural barriers to youth empowerment, meaning that many of Kurdistan's youth are preoccupied with accessing the most basic needs. The lack of systematic reform to address the root causes of the KRI's fragility and mismanagement has created further disappointment and frustration.

Since the KRI's emergence in 1991, a fierce rivalry between the KDP and PUK has been at the heart of Kurdish politics. Rather than creating a democratic and inclusive political process, power-sharing agreements signed since the end of the KDP-PUK civil war in 1998 have institutionalised divisions and reinforced party dominance over Kurdistan's governing system. A defining feature of this system has been a two-party duopoly, constraining the Region's democratisation and state-building. The private and public sectors, access to government contracts, and positions in the security forces are all tightly controlled by the political elite.[11] The excessive influence of the two parties on governance forms a structural and administrative barrier, effectively precluding the participation of an increasingly unaffiliated and independent youth constituency.

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Implications for Kurdistan's future

The youth's frustration and anger create three main sentiments, which may shape the future significantly.

Less attachment to sense of "Kurdishness"

Unlike the protests in other parts of Iraq, which reject the ruling authorities but not the notion of the Iraqi state, in the case of Kurdistan, the young protesters do not (or cannot) differentiate between the authorities and the political entity of Kurdistan. The more anti-authority they become, the less attached to the ideas of Kurdish nationalism they correspondingly become, seeing it as a political tool used by the dominant parties. The angry and frustrated Kurdish youth question the very meaning of Kurdish nationalism, and do not raise Kurdistan flags during the protests. A possible explanation is that since 1991, the two dominant parties have controlled all aspects of society, politics, governance, and above all, territory. The separate "KDP zone" and "PUK zone" have made it difficult for the younger generation to perceive Kurdistan as a single entity, rather than two different zones. Moreover, an external actor such as PKK has also recently contributed to this sentiment by, for example, providing media support to the protests and describing them as an "uprising" against KRG. Such influence is not only relevant for the dynamics of protests, but also broader state-society relations in the long-term. PKK's influence on street mobilisations in KRI takes place against the backdrop of its increasing geopolitical tension and power rivalry with KRI's main centre of power KDP.

A broken social contract

The protests also reflect a serious disconnect between authorities and the younger generation, highlighting a crisis in the "social contract".[12] The first waves of protests did not question the social contract, as their demands for accountability, transparency and better socio-economic services could be dealt with within the existing system and power structure. The current disconnect between authorities and youth calls for a renegotiation and redesigning of the social contract, which has underpinned state–society relations for almost three decades. In a polarised society such as KRI people will not have a unified perception or reaction to the existing social contract. Hence, further polarisation is a likely scenario in the future.

Change not reform

A greater gap between the youth and the authorities has also contributed to the sentiment that what is needed is not "reform", but "radical change" or a "complete change of order". This is mainly driven by the youth's sentiment that the ruling political class is not willing (or capable of) changing the system. However, what the authorities will and can offer is only slow-paced reform. It is unlikely that this outcome would satisfy the younger generation who will likely continue with their anti-authority activity.

Conclusion

Youth protests are a response to and outcome of youth frustration and disillusionment. The KRI's authorities should understand that the protests concern the issue of youth as a whole, not only the obvious protesters. Without viable recourse to mechanisms that might allow youth to transform their difficult circumstances, young people are growing increasingly hopeless, and are eager to resist in different forms.

Since 1991, the Kurdish governing parties, which have portrayed themselves as both bastions of nationalism and safe hands for effective government, have dominated the region's politics. Yet the discontent of the young people poses a challenge more formidable than any other to the dominance of the KDP and PUK. Never before have the sources of their internal legitimacy been so acutely threatened, with the potential to weaken Erbil's standing *vis-à-vis* Baghdad. As a reaction to the Kurdish authorities in general, young Kurds show less negativity towards Baghdad than do older generations. Yet, they have not been pulled by a perception of better governance in Baghdad, but rather pushed by their anger towards the ruling Kurdish elites.

The KDP and PUK have much to lose if the status quo, already shaken and fragile, collapses. While the collapse of the system is unlikely to happen in the near future, given the international support to KRG, the continuing effectivity of KDP-PUK hard security measures as well as their patronage networks, incremental change in the long term is a significant possibility. It is clear that support for the political authorities can no longer be managed by policy adjustments or superficial changes in leadership. Therefore, the young generation's anger will continue. As Kurdistan's survival and sustainability is highly dependent on international support, mainly from the US and European powers,

international pressure may be an effective tool to apply pressure on the KRI leaders to undertake reform and avoid violent responses.[13] However, if the will does not also come from within, this international pressure will only support the region in adopting certain reforms, but not the radical change demanded by the youth. The problem is that the dominant parties continue to believe this is a temporary crisis, and that the people's grievances can be addressed within the context of the status quo.

For Kurdistan to survive as an entity, its leaders should understand that this generation requires a different form of governance, and the old sources of legitimacy, namely senses of victimhood and ethnic solidarity, are no longer enough to ensure popular support. Functioning, inclusive, and legitimate governance must replace the discourses of fear and external threat previously adopted by Kurdish political actors.

Endnotes

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9- An example of this is a project currently being implemented by the Dutch organisation SPARK in KRI called "Networks of Change: combating youth radicalisation through positive community-based and digital approaches in the KRI". Around 1300 young people between the ages of 18-25, applied for the establishment of the project's Youth Digital Workforce, which aims at supporting a peaceful participation of youth in society. Girls constituted around %60 of the applicants, and constituted 70% of the successful candidates. Author's conversation with Raheil Aziz Qaradaghy, SPARK's Kurdistan Region/Iraq Country Manager, December 24, 2020.

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