

INTRA-PUK RIVALRY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE IRAQI KURDISH POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

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Abstract: The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), a major centre of power in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), has witnessed a significant confrontation between its co-presidents since July 2021, further dispersing power and widening the leadership vacuum in the region. The events within the PUK will have significant implications not only for the party's internal leadership, but will and already has affected the whole region's political landscape and power structure. Through the authors' personal observations as well as unstructured interviews with politicians in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil, this brief argues that Bafel Talabani's decision to weaken and ultimately remove Lahur Sheikh Jangi from the party in July 2021 has temporarily brought the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the PUK closer together, but has further fragmented leadership and authority in Kurdistan's Sulaymaniyah region.

Background of the Power Struggle within the PUK

Fragmentation and factionalism have always existed within the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan since its foundation in 1975,¹ though Jalal Talabani's leadership style kept the divisions in check and under control. Yet, the party did sustain some seismic and momentous rifts in the late 2000s. The most significant one was the decision of Nawshirwan Mustafa, a major power and charismatic leader within the party, to leave and form the Gorran (Change) Movement along with some other well-known partisans in 2009, such as Omer Said Ali, Hama Tofiq Rahim, Kader Haji Ali, and Osman Haji Mahmood. In the 2009 parliamentary elections in the KRI, Gorran won 25 seats out of 111, with most of these seats coming from previously PUK-dominated areas in the Sulaymaniyah governorate. The loss of votes and seats to a then nascent splinter, seemed to have harmed the PUK and may have initiated the start of the KDP-lead reconsideration of the balance of power that came about after 2003. The KDP and PUK signed an agreement to share power between Masoud Barzani, the President of the KDP, and Jalal Talabani, the Secretary General of the PUK, and to unify the two separate administrations created after the end of the KDP-PUK fighting in 1998. The agreement resulted in a coalition government after 2005. As a result, Barzani became the President of the KRI (2005-2017), while Talabani became the President of Iraq (2005-2014), as it is a tradition for the Iraqi presidency, a mostly symbolic office, to be held by a member of the Kurdish ethnicity.

Though the PUK seemed to have stood resistant to that and some other momentous shocks, the party was destined for more fragmentations as fault-lines grew to the surface. Importantly, Talabani's health took a turn for the worse in 2012 and his subsequent death in October 2017 gave way to intense power rivalry between various factions within the party. As a result, the PUK grew all the more incapable of making effective and unified decisions. This was clearly reflected, for instance, in the PUK's stance concerning the referendum in 2017, as PUK officials made conflicting statements on the referendum. Lahur and Bafel were in favour of postponing the referendum, while traditional PUK leaders such as the First Deputy for the Secretary General of the PUK, Kosrat Rasul, the Governor of Kirkuk, Najmadin Karim

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and the Head of Peshmerga's 70th division, Sheikh Ja'far, were all supportive of the referendum's timing and approach.² Such divisions raised doubts if the PUK could maintain the balance of power, and importantly, the power-sharing agreement with the KDP.

The PUK congress in December 2019 paved the way for a co-presidency system for the party. In February 2020, Bafel Talabani and Lahur Jangi were elected as co-presidents of PUK, following years of rivalry between various factions within the party and a leadership vacuum caused by Talabani's ill-health and subsequent death in October 2017. The congress, however, did not remedy the party's internal fragmentation and conflict. At that time, there were three main factions within the PUK: a Lahur-led faction, a Bafel-led faction, and a faction led by Kosrat Rasul and Iraq's president Barham Salih. These divisions were not driven by different ideological or organizational disparities, but were rather a struggle for power and control of the party. Altogether, such dynamics have further fragmented the party to the point that confrontation, possibly even violent, between the two co-presidents has never been closer. Adopting the co-presidency system was not a reflection of an ideological or organizational change within the party, but the outcome of a dilemma: how to maintain Talabani's rule while accommodating the emerging power of Lahur. In other words, the new system was a reflection of a new rivalry within the party.

In early July this year, Bafel Talabani and his brother Qubad Talabani, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)'s Deputy Prime Minister, changed the heads of the PUK's intelligence agency and counter-terrorism units. Reflective of a KDP-Bafel convergence of interest, Nechirvan Barzani, the President of the KRI, quickly signed their appointment decrees. While in practice, PUK's intelligence and counter-terrorism do not respond to the KRI President, officially they are part of the KRI system and their members are government employees. While the former heads were closely affiliated with Lahur Talabani, as his control over these two institutions was fundamental for his power, they were replaced by new heads loyal to Bafel. In addition to this transfer of political authority to Bafel, the offices of a new media channel iPLUS affiliated with Lahur were also raided on July 13 by security forces that broke and seized equipment and detained some employees.³ The channel was scheduled to start working soon. Moreover, Bafel also accused Lahur of poisoning him and some other PUK leaders, including Mala Bakhtiyar, his father-in-law. Mala Bakhtiyar's poisoning was confirmed, and he was sent first to Jordan, and then Germany for treatment.⁴ In early November, PUK's Political Bureau confirmed Bafel's decision to expel

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Lahur and three others close to him: Ala Talabani, former head of the PUK's faction in the Iraqi parliament, Zhino Muhammad, member of PUK's Leadership Council, and Shadman Mala Hassan, a member of PUK's Leadership Council.⁵ Now, Bafel's next step is to officially abolish the co-presidency system. The new system is likely to be led by Bafel with two deputies, one from Erbil and one from Kirkuk.⁶ Since July, Bafel has not only acted as president of PUK, but also as a high-ranking administrative official in Sulaymaniyah. For example, as a response to public university students in the city demanding monthly allowances, he promised to support students and construct new buildings and dormitories "at his own expense."⁷

The KDP stance in the Rift

Lahur has viewed an anti-KDP discourse as central to his struggle for power and base in Sulaymaniyah, capitalizing on the PUK's entrenched presence as a ruling and governing force as well as the PUK's historical antagonism towards the KDP. In addition, he has also used this line to undermine the popularity of any PUK leaders who believed in cooperation with the KDP, and presented himself as a barrier to the Barzanis' takeover of the KRI. He also combined his anti-KDP discourse with anti-Turkish rhetoric, blaming Turkey for encroaching on Kurdistan and fighting the PKK while also enjoying favorable ties with the KDP. Traditionally, such discourse has had a hearing in this region. Lahur used his control over the PUK's intelligence and media⁸ to construct such a discourse and build patronage among members of the PUK, especially younger members.

It is a common view within the KDP that Lahur and some others close to him were central in handing over Kirkuk to the Iraqi forces and Hashd al-Shaabi (a pro-Iranian Shia militia powerful in Iraq due to its role in fighting Daesh) in October 2017, following Kurdistan's 2017 referendum for independence. Lahur, however, has fiercely rejected this claim. While Bafel was in favour of postponing the referendum and had to explain and defend what happened in Kirkuk,⁹ he pursued a less hostile relationship with Barzani and KDP. For the KDP, Lahur's clandestine dealing with Baghdad did not just mean the defeat of the Peshmerga in Kirkuk, but also the entire project of the referendum: the most important project of Masoud Barzani, the then president of the KRI. Since then, Lahur has become a barrier to cooperation between KDP and PUK at all levels, specifically in Baghdad. An example of this was Barham Salih's appointment to the post of Iraq's president following Iraq's 2018 parliamentary elections without Barzani's agreement or approval.¹⁰ While Lahur was promoted to co-president of PUK, Masoud Barzani, the President of KDP, refused to meet him.

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As much as the internal precarious dynamics within the PUK may sound favorable to the KDP, its historical rival, a closer look might prove otherwise. Whilst true that a weak and divided PUK may mean an opportunity for the KDP to gain and exert influence in the PUK's backyard, the KDP also realizes the difficulty of maneuvering in such territory. The current political system in Iraqi Kurdistan is the outcome of a territorial division that emerged after 1998, with the KDP largely controlling the north, and the PUK largely controlling the south. While post-2003 power-sharing and unification agreements through the power-sharing arrangement progressed a great deal during this time, they eventually failed to unify Kurdistan's state-like institutions. In other words, despite the development of government institutions, the government has only partially reunified, and the two parties have maintained the key power structures of the two-administration period.¹¹ Years of opposition to KDP rule not only by the PUK, but also the Gorran Movement and the new actor of the New Generation Movement have created a rough ground for the KDP. The KDP may realize that a deterioration of circumstances and the propping up of violence in the areas controlled by the PUK may impact the conditions in its own area of influence and therefore put its interests in jeopardy. The KDP would rather prefer stability not only in its areas of power and influence, but also within the PUK and its territory.¹² Stability in Erbil is essential for KDP's continued power and as such it has actively sought to keep protests outside its sphere of influence.

In addition, a lack of leadership and authority in Sulaymaniyah might also further invite the KDP's main rival, the PKK, to the region, which already wields influence there. PKK has no official presence in Sulaymaniyah, but has been enjoying fewer restrictions in this region, compared to the KDP-controlled areas of Erbil and Duhok. PKK has also been able to influence public opinion in Sulaymaniyah through journalists and writers, sharing its political thoughts and agendas. A weaker and overwhelmed PUK might also mean more space for PKK, an outcome the KDP views as a threat.

Scenarios Ahead of the PUK

A more gradual convergence between the KDP and the PUK is likely provided that Lahur is pushed out of the picture. Bafel and his brother Qubad could facilitate such a convergence, which has the support of major traditional PUK leaders including Kosrat Rasul Ali, Sheikh Jaafar, and Mala Bakhtiyar. Other officials have remained silent: a position not appreciated by Lahur. These political and military elites have chosen this position 1) to protect their interests, and 2) if a fight breaks out between the family of Talabani and Lahur, they would choose Talabani for their historical intimacy

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and allegiance. This is no easy task, however. Internal violence within the PUK could still carry on before reaching a standstill and Lahur's possible total removal from the PUK's ranks. It is important to remember that Lahur has harbored considerable support within the PUK's organs, lower classes, and bases, especially in Kirkuk, and may be able to cause damage. However, an armed clash would be catastrophic and would mean a very serious blow to the party, which is already buckling under internal fragmentation and unsettled leadership. The PUK would, therefore, want to avoid such a scenario under current circumstances. Alternatively, Bafel may use any violent move by Lahur as a justification to clamp down on him and steer the power completely to his own side.

Further Frustration of Sulaymaniyah's People

Public frustration in Sulaymaniyah and its environs is growing, with the recent student protest only one example. This is arguably not only in reaction to the internal dynamics within the PUK, but also the culmination of dynamics such as power rivalry between the KDP and PUK; the Gorran Movement's formation and deformation; the rise of new powers such as the New Generation; corruption and mismanagement; economic underdevelopment in comparison to Erbil; the presence of vocal and critical media as well as a historic tendency towards activism and desire for change, among others. It is unlikely for Lahur to be able to move public sentiments to his advantage not only due to the public's high level of frustration, but also due to his alienation of many in Sulaymaniyah through his approach of favoritism when previously in power.

It is likely that public frustration will at least remain at the current level, if not worsen and morph into public apathy. Dynamics within the PUK might continue to become more complicated before taking a different turn. Given that the PUK still remains a force with a considerable economic, political and military influence, internal complications within the party will play out in the public. The question is whether the PUK and the conditions in Sulaymaniyah would tolerate more protests and public frustration or not.

Regional Implications of the Intra-PUK Power Struggle

Dynamics within PUK and KDP also have regional implications and/or are driven by regional interference. Iran, for example, is the main external actor with an interest in maintaining the status quo in Sulaymaniyah. Iran does not want instability and uncertainty in Sulaymaniyah, which has been its area of influence since the KDP-PUK internal fighting (1994-1998). According to our interviews with PUK officials, Esmail Qaani, the commander of the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, has

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recently informed PUK leaders to not escalate dynamics further. However, while Lahur and people close to him, such as Ala Talabani, have developed strong ties with pro-Iran armed groups in the rest of Iraq, it seems that Iran does not want to antagonize its relations with the Talabani family. For many local observers, the Talabani family enjoys broader acceptance in the eyes of external actors, and importantly, are more a source of continuity than an unknown rupture.

While Turkey is mentioned in Lahur's speeches as part of a "plot" against him,¹³ there is no evidence of their direct involvement. Nevertheless, it is possible to argue that the change within the leadership of PUK is viewed positively by Ankara, as during Lahur's power PKK activities and influence have increased in Sulaymaniyah. Lahur has built good relations with the leaders of PKK and the leaders of the PYD/SDF in Northeast Syria.¹⁴

What is next?

Since the first Kurdistan elections in 1992, the balance of power between the KDP and PUK has never been so skewed in favor of one party, that is the KDP, as it is today. The most recent Iraqi parliamentary election results have accentuated this imbalance. The KDP won 31 seats, while the PUK won 18 seats,¹⁵ though the numbers are subject to change until the final counts are officially approved. Excluding the seats and votes in disputed territories, PUK has come in third in the KRI. Shaswar's New Generation won nine seats, and Kurdistan's Islamic Union came forth by winning four seats. Gorran, for the first time since its foundation in 2009, failed to win any seat.

However, with the possibility of mitigating these differences, recent changes within the PUK may increase the chances of convergence between the two rival Kurdish parties.¹⁶ Both the KDP leadership and the PUK's current leadership are united in opposition to Lahur. His removal from the equation may open the door to a resolution of some of the significant challenges facing the two parties. Another example of the convergence in this period was the KDP's decision to not attack the PUK during the campaign for Iraq's parliamentary elections.¹⁷ However, the potential convergence may remain fluid as anti-KDP voices will remain loud within the PUK.

Since the events in July, PUK officials' discourse has significantly changed, from a rhetoric of opposition to the KRI political system to a more of a rhetoric of founder and defender of the system.¹⁸ This does not mean that KDP and PUK can restore the post-sharing arrangement of the

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early years of the post-2003 phase, which was a reflection of a balance of power on the ground. The KDP currently has a lead of 23 seats in the Kurdistan Parliament over the PUK, and 14 in the Iraqi parliament. It retains the KRG Premiership and the presidency of the KRI, as well as the majority of seats in the Kurdistan Parliament (with quota seats for ethno-religious minorities which are aligned with KDP).

Bafel may continue minimizing Lahur's influence by ousting more of his supporters in the party. Lahur would be increasingly confined and would be less likely to be able to move his base to counter Bafel's future moves against him. Moreover, while cooperation between the two centres of power, especially the two ruling families, will stabilize the KRI's political system, Sulaymaniyah will remain vulnerable to instability and ruptures. Bafel and his brother need time and charisma to unify the PUK command, and importantly, regain the support of the PUK base and members who are still under the influence of their main rival, Lahur.

Endnotes

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