



Why Did Protests Erupt in Iraqi Kurdistan?

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Introduction

On December 2, 2020, small groups of protests formed across the eastern portion of the Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI). The initial protests in Sulaimani city were organized by teachers and civil servants demanding the release of their delayed salaries.¹ At first these demonstrations did not provoke alarm, as small-scale protests with these demands have become a feature of politics in the Kurdish region. However, reports soon emerged of party buildings in flames in Sulaimani's districts of Sayyid Saddiq, PiraMagrun, Darbandikhan, and Bazyan.² Youths descended into the streets and chanted slogans for demands that went beyond the standard calls for better services and the payment of salaries. Protestors chanted against the ruling parties and the Kurdish political system with slogans such as "end the rule of families," referring to the Barzanis and Talabanis who control the two ruling parties, and "equality between independents and party affiliates."³

Compared to previous demonstrations in the KRI, the rhetoric of the December 2020 protests was more absolutist and its geographical scope was unprecedented. Far-flung mid-sized towns such as Kalar and Kifri witnessed some of the largest gatherings as well as the destruction of political party offices.⁴ Meanwhile, the response of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was swift and heavily securitized. Residents of Sulaimani city woke up to government Humvees deployed around the governorate headquarters in a strong show of force.⁵ Reports of the deaths of nine demonstrators in Sulaimani's periphery and Garmian area led to calls across the region and country for security forces to be held accountable for their actions.⁶

Why have these protests emerged at this moment? When mass demonstrations erupted in Baghdad and the south between October 2019 and April 2020, the streets of the KRI remained utterly quiet. However, under the surface of this tranquil picture, the political scene in the KRI was already becoming increasingly fraught along multiple fault lines. This brief examines three fault lines: (1) the divide between the youth and the political class; (2) the divide between the urban areas of the KRI and the periphery; and (3) the divide between the dominant ruling parties in the KRG, which in turn has fractured the relationship between the KRG and the federal government in Baghdad. Finally, this brief explores the future of the Kurdish protest movement in light of local, national, and regional developments.

¹ "Iraq: Demonstrations in Sulaimani demand the releases of 50 employees," *Anadolu Agency* (Arabic), December 3, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/ar/موظف/عن-50-موظف/السليمانية-للمطالبة-بالإفراج-عن-50-موظف/الدول-العربية/العراق-مظاهر-في-السليمانية-للمطالبة-بالإفراج-عن-50-موظف>.

² "An official in Barzani's party comments on the burning of political offices in Said Sadiq," *Nas News* (Arabic), December 7, 2020, <https://www.nasnews.com/view.php?cat=47015>.

³ Zaid Salim, "Sulaimani Protets: Erbil mimics Baghdad in suppressing popular movements," *The New Arab* (Arabic), December 10, 2020, <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/الاحتجاجات-السليمانية-أربيل-تقلد-بغداد-في-قمع-الحراك-الشعبي>.

⁴ "Clashes between security actors and protestors in Kifri, Sulaimani," *Draw News*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=434391194408672>.

⁵ *VOA Media* (Kurdish), December 11, 2020, <https://web.facebook.com/watch/?v=222417826151830>.

⁶ "Human Rights: Civilian death toll rises in protests in Sulaimani," *Sky Press Agency* (Arabic), December 10, 2020, <https://www.skypressiq.net/2020/12/10/السليمانية-في-الاحتجاجات-في-السليمانية-الاحتجاجات-ضحايا-الاحتجاجات-في-السليمانية>.

The ninth civilian victim from Sayyid Saddiq passed away in the hospital on December 18, 2020, https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/1712202017?fbclid=IwAR3XYLr1EgLNMPuO1Z_0E_t3xwVRFGGGE3HOaXCeRobvWB60Dk50zb1U208.

The youth and the political class

Unlike previous protests in the KRI with demonstrators composed mostly of teachers and government workers, the social composition of the recent demonstrations was mostly young people without any clear institutional or party affiliation.⁷ Their rhetoric reflected a deep sense of disillusionment and despair with the ruling elite, coupled with a desire for a broad political transformation. A young protestor from Garmian encapsulated these dual sentiments during a television interview, stating, “there is no solution, nobody listens to us...but we are not leaving Kurdistan to you [the political parties]; you are dreaming of it. You can shed our blood as much as you want.”⁸ The audacity to call out the violence of the political establishment and to suggest the need for its removal represents a departure from the more limited and cautious political rhetoric of the older generations.

Instead of addressing youth grievances in their response, the Kurdish political leaders from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) offered a confused mixture of platitudes and accusations. KRG Prime minister Masrour Barzani of the KDP ruling party stressed that the destruction of public property will not benefit people or put an end to the salary crisis.⁹ The PUK co-president Lahur Talabani expressed explicit support to protestors’ demands,¹⁰ even though PUK security forces allegedly contributed to the violent crackdown against demonstrators.¹¹ Finally, Masoud Barzani met with the family of a slain KDP member of the KRG military known as the *peshmerga* and offered his condolences and promises of support,¹² a move that many youth interpreted as further proof of one of their core grievances: unless you are a loyal party member, you do not receive the support and patronage from the KRG.

This disjuncture between the discourses of the youth and political classes suggests that they operate under opposing sets of assumptions. The leaders of the political parties evidently still believe that appeals to Kurdish symbolism and nationalism, coupled with the extension of salaries, will appease the Kurdish public and provide a convincing narrative to maintain the status quo and perpetuate the politics of the dominant ruling blocs. The youth, on the other hand, do not see the Kurdish parties through the lens of Kurdish nationalism. Instead, they view the parties through the prism of political economy and accuse them of dividing up the

⁷ Judit Neurink, “Iraq’s young Kurdish protesters are desperate, a violent crackdown could spark a full uprising,” *Al Araby*, December 17, 2020, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/Comment/2020/12/17/Violence-will-only-incite-desperate-young-Kurds-even-more>.

⁸ See the interview posted on journalist Renwar Najm’s social media account, December 9, 2020, <https://twitter.com/RenwarNajm/status/1336429406328401920?s=20>.

⁹ Speech delivered by KRG prime minister Masrour Barzani in response to the protests, December 9, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJayaBI3U6I&feature=youtu.be>

¹⁰ Statement from PUK co-president Lahur Talabani posted on official social media account, December 3, 2020, https://web.facebook.com/LahurTalabany/posts/4710239025714016?_rde=1&_rdr.

¹¹ Dana Taib Menmy, “Iraq: Kurdish security forces kill six protesters,” *Middle East Eye*, December 8, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-kurdish-protesters-killed-security-forces-fire>

¹² See pictures from the meeting posted on Rudaw Kurdish social media account, December 14, 2020, <https://twitter.com/Rudawkurdish/status/1338558545730686978?s=20>.

economic spoils of the KRI for personal gain at the expense of the public.¹³ Lacking any memory or direct experience of Saddam-era violence, the youth's adolescence and young adulthood have been defined by the post 2003 political order in which two dominant Kurdish political parties provide the only route to employment and progression in life.¹⁴ This party-dominated system has alienated and frustrated the region's youth to the point that they now demand change.

Urban and periphery

While Sulaimani and Erbil are typically the loci of political activity and activism in the KRI, the latest protests were centered largely in rural mid-sized towns far removed from these cities. Towns in the far eastern areas near Iran witnessed demonstrations and the destruction of party buildings. All of the young people killed in the protests were from these peripheral areas.¹⁵ Reports of the government response suggest that the Kurdish security forces were more direct and aggressive in their confrontations with protestors in the peripheries than those at the urban centers, as they forcefully quelled these demonstrations through violence and mass arrests.¹⁶ In Sulaimani city, in contrast, security forces were relatively restrained and limited their response to the deployment of teargas and rubber bullets.¹⁷

This disparity in restraint speaks to local and geopolitical considerations on the part of the ruling parties. In addition to the presence of large voting blocs in the urban centers, Kurdish parties have always been sensitive to the presence of international media in Sulaimani and Erbil cities and the implications that negative coverage could have on the public stances of the KRG's Western patrons. Notably, the U.S. Consulate in Erbil did not issue any statement condemning the violence against protestors.

The strategies of the Kurdish ruling parties vis-à-vis the population at the peripheries are failing. Since 2003, the two main political parties have attempted to extend patronage networks across Kurdistan's urban and rural areas, doling out jobs and government contracts in exchange for loyalties, including votes in elections.¹⁸ In areas with a large population density in the periphery, such as Garmian and Raparin, the KRG has also set up special administrative apparatuses dedicated to servicing these areas because of their importance

¹³ Saman Majeed, "Who will win? Pubg generation or Brrnaw generation?," *Hawlati* (Kurdish), December 16, 2020, https://hawlati.co/page_detail.php?smart-id=17038&fbclid=IwAR0eLyr9_zWvv9uikMloF-IDACRmu_0Pk_5_XcxXQe0PziibF5HH4Nt6cnM.

¹⁴ Zmkan Ali Saleem and Mac Skelton, "Assessing Iraqi Kurdistan's Stability: How Patronage Shapes Conflict," *Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS)*, July 2020, <http://auis.edu.krd/iris/frontpage-slider-publications/assessing-iraqi-kurdistans-stability-how-patronage-shapes-conflict>.

¹⁵ Pictures of the protests' victims and their area of origin, <https://justpaste.it/88kfo>.

¹⁶ Video of security forces beating protestors in Chamchamal district posted on social media, December 11, 2020, https://twitter.com/Mira_B_Maliky/status/1337471631090921472?s=20.

¹⁷ "Do the violent protests in northern Iraq signal a 'Kurdish Spring'?" *Deutsche Welle English*, December 11, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/do-the-violent-protests-in-northern-iraq-signal-a-kurdish-spring/a-55906950>.

¹⁸ Zmkan Ali Saleem and Mac Skelton, "Assessing Iraqi Kurdistan's Stability: How Patronage Shapes Conflict," *Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS)*, July 2020, <http://auis.edu.krd/iris/frontpage-slider-publications/assessing-iraqi-kurdistans-stability-how-patronage-shapes-conflict>.

as loyal bases to the ruling parties in terms of votes and patronage.¹⁹ Despite the existence of these informal and formal mechanisms for extending services and jobs to people living in the peripheries, loyalty is no longer guaranteed. As economic crises have disproportionately affected rural areas far removed from the urban centers, the sentiments of these communities towards the Kurdish political parties have increasingly soured. They perceive an asymmetric distribution of wealth and power by the dominant political class between center and periphery. They also perceive the ruling parties as less accountable in the peripheries, ready to employ overt forms of violence through their security forces to contain expressions of discontent among the region's most vulnerable members.

The PUK and the KDP

Iraq's Kurdish region is segmented between west and east, with the KDP presiding over the west (Erbil, Dohuk) and the PUK presiding over the east (Sulaimani, Kirkuk, Halabja).²⁰ The latest protests were concentrated in areas under the control of the PUK, which set the stage for a high-stakes political game. The parties' divergent responses to the demonstrations are a reflection of KRI internal politics and rising tensions between the PUK and KDP. At the start of the protests in Sulaimani, the PUK leadership attempted to get ahead of the public narrative by issuing statements in support of the demonstrations. PUK co-president Lahur Tabalany stressed that the KRG should "not criminalize the protests but meet their demands."²¹ He suggested that the party under his direct control would be a "different PUK" and enter into a new social contract with the people.²² This alignment of the PUK's rhetoric with the protests was widely interpreted as an attempt to differentiate the party from the KRG government and KDP member Masrur Barzani's premiership. Meanwhile, Barzani struggled to deflect the crisis onto the PUK as both parties' local offices were attacked and razed by the protestors.²³ Barzani resorted to blaming external actors, mainly the PKK and Baghdad,²⁴ for the region's political turmoil and economic difficulties.

¹⁹ Megan Connelly and Mike Fleet, "Living apart together: Decentralized governance in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq," *Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS)*, November 2020, <http://auis.edu.krd/iris/frontpage-slider-publications/living-apart-together-decentralized-governance-kurdistan-region-iraq>.

²⁰ Zmkan Ali Saleem and Mac Skelton, "The Kurdish Duopoly: The Political Economy of Two-Party Rule," *Institute of Regional and International Studies (IRIS)*, August 28, 2019, <http://auis.edu.krd/iris/publications/kurdish-duopoly-political-economy-two-party-rule>.

²¹ Statement from PUK co-president Lahur Talabani posted on official social media account, December 21, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/LahurTalabany/posts/4783224151748836>

²² Dana Salih, "Seven days after the end of the protests: What do we see now after the smoke cleared (Kurdish)," *Politic Media*, December 18, 2020, <https://politicmedia.net/detailnewsपो.аsрх?jimare=9956&cor=10&related=2&fbclid=IwAR0fTTQLoa8fKYZUrQAYr74liVDkMMikkBkEwxLbOWm-ya946irtT0ESwFI>

²³ Other KDP members, however, implied that the PUK is behind the protests. A KDP provincial council member from Sulaimani saw the protests as an attempt to divert attention from the PUK's governance failure in the province, see <https://www.kdp.info/a/print.aspx?l=13&smap=010000&a=81899>

²⁴ Statement from KRG prime minister Masrour Barzani posted on official social media account, December 14, 2020, https://twitter.com/masrour_barzani/status/1338567633013264384?s=20, and Sofia Barbarani, "Kurdish leader blames Iraq for economic woes," *Al-Jazeera*, December 9, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/9/kurdish-pm-blame-iraq-for-economic-woes>

Since the ill-fated Kurdish referendum for independence in September 2017, the two parties have been at odds with one another in increasingly public ways.²⁵ The KDP has accused the PUK of betraying Kurdistan by handing Kirkuk over to the federal government in October 2017, and the KDP subsequently placed obstacles in the way of PUK obtaining key appointments (i.e. the governorship of Kirkuk and the federal presidency).²⁶ The PUK in turn has responded in a number of ways, including through the strategic deployment of public protests to undermine the leadership of Masrour Barzani over the KRG administration. It is generally understood that PUK factions quietly supported a series of contained, organized protests in Sulaimani over the past months – all of which cited the failure of the KRG to deliver on salaries and infrastructure. Amidst this PUK-KDP spat, the message of the youth-led protests over the past two weeks has been clear. They view both parties as one and the same, with neither protecting nor caring about the lives of Kurdistan’s increasingly desperate and disenfranchised youth.

Conclusions: Future of the protests

While the streets of Kurdistan were quiet during the October 2019 protests that erupted in central and southern Iraq, fault lines in the Kurdish region were already growing and deepening that ultimately set the stage for the outbreak of protests in December 2020. Growing youth disillusionment with the political class, a widening gap between central and peripheral populations, and the ongoing PUK-KDP conflict have converged together at a time when the country is facing the worst economic crisis of the post-2003 era as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and low oil prices.²⁷ Though these fault lines will remain, it is too early to determine whether or not these youth-led protests will sow the seeds of a broader reform movement in the Kurdish region.

On the one hand, it would appear that the security crackdown has achieved the goal of silencing the protests temporarily. Security forces made mass and arbitrary arrests of protestors who were later released on the condition that they do not stage unlicensed demonstrations in the future. One major complaint from activists is that such licenses are nearly impossible to obtain.²⁸ Certainly, it is a well-documented fact that the Kurdish security forces in both Erbil and Sulaimani do not tolerate dissent and will not hesitate to use force when their interests are threatened. On the other hand, recent experience illustrates how protests in Kurdistan have been quelled only to rise up again. It appears that the younger generation no longer accepts the proposition that a mixture of Kurdish nationalism and the

²⁵ Christine van den Toorn, “Internal Divides Behind the Kurdistan Referendum,” *Sada, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 2017, <https://auis.edu.krd/iris/publications/internal-divides-behind-kurdistan-referendum>.

²⁶ Mera Jasm Bakr, “Kurdish Failure in Kirkuk,” *The Washington Institute Fikra Forum*, August 2, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kurdish-failures-kirkuk>.

²⁷ “COVID-19 and Low Oil Prices Push Millions of Iraqis into Poverty,” *The World Bank*, November 11, 2020, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/11/11/new-world-bank-report-calls-for-urgent-fiscal-stimulus-and-economic-reforms-to-help-the-poor-and-the-most-vulnerable-in-iraq>.

²⁸ Statement from *VOA Media* journalist Rebaz Majeed posted on his social media account, December 14, 2020, https://twitter.com/Rebaz_Majeed/status/1338534091201929217.

often elusive promise of patronage will suffice. Kurdish youth, much like their counterparts in federal Iraq, desire a new kind of political order in which the parties are no longer at the center.

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