

Kurd Leaders Must Maintain Unified Front

By Joost Hiltermann

10 May 2006

The Boston Globe

He has a disconcerting facial tic and opens his cellphone with an odd jerk of the left wrist, as if barely controlling his muscles. Yet he is vigorous, razor sharp, and articulate, and holds a commanding presence. This is Kosrat Rasoul Ali, popularly known as Kosrat, a storied peshmerga (guerrilla) leader and now the incoming vice president of Iraq's Kurdish regional government. His ailment derives from shrapnel deeply lodged in his body. Its provenance: a shell fired by forces of a rival Kurdish party, whose leader, Masoud Barzani, is now the regional government's president.

On Sunday, the Kurds announced the formation of their government, 16 months after the January 2005 elections to the Kurdistan National Assembly. The main reason for the long delay was the inability of Kurdistan's two principal parties, Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party and Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, to reunify their parallel administrations, one in Erbil, the other in Suleimaniyeh.

The two parties fought each other in the mid-1990s -- the context to Kosrat's disability -- but under heavy pressure from Washington to put their differences aside in the run-up to the 2003 Iraq war.

Today, Kurdish leaders are choosing peace, but many Kurds, especially the young, are fed up with these leaders' wrangling, and time may be running out for this national-liberation-movement-turned-regional-government.

The movement was founded by Mullah Mustafa Barzani, Masoud's father, in the 1940s. It resisted central power for decades, facing village destruction and Arabization of the oil-rich Kirkuk region to which it laid claim. When an autonomy agreement with Baghdad broke down in the mid-1970s, Iraqi forces crushed the Kurdistan Democratic Party, sending its fighters into exile.

In 1976, young activists impatient with the Barzanis' tribal rule set up the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. Its leader was Jalal Talabani, who in 2005 was appointed president of Iraq in a strong vindication of the Kurds' long struggle.

These two parties have worked together to fight a common enemy, as during the Iran-Iraq war, when their escalating insurgency was met with brutal Iraqi repression. And they have fought each other when there was no enemy to distract them, as after the 1991 establishment of a US-controlled safe haven and parliamentary elections a year later.

The collapse of the 50-50 power-sharing arrangement that emerged from those elections led to armed conflict, which only Washington was able to halt in a 1998 cease-fire. Relations since then have gradually improved, but nothing did more to shape a common

vision than the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime. Suddenly powerful in Baghdad, the Kurds needed a unified front to convince their Arab partners they deserved a federal region of their own.

The two parties' greatest challenge will be to turn their one-party mini-states, which they have ruled with an iron hand, into a single two-party region, and -- over time -- to allow for multiparty democracy. To metamorphose from hardened peshmergas into able administrators will prove a tall order. Old animosities continue to divide them. Distrust runs so strong that the ministries of the interior and "peshmerga affairs" (defense), along with the finance and justice ministries, will remain separate for at least another year, with parallel headquarters in Erbil and Suleimaniyeh.

Other forces are tugging at the aging maquisards. A new urbanized generation of Kurds is pressing for their society's material progress while their elders bask in the glories of past struggles, some amassing personal fortunes through corruption. Moreover, the children of those who fled in earlier years are returning to Kurdistan, with technical skills, democratic ideals, and great aspirations. Grumbling about the two parties' rule has become widespread, occasionally breaking out into open violence, as during the recent commemoration of the March 1988 chemical attack on Halabja, when townspeople angered by government corruption dodged the bullets of local security forces of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and destroyed the Halabja monument.

Repression remains a serious problem, as editors of independent newspapers and opposition activists will attest. Late last year, mobs apparently spurred on by the Kurdistan Democratic Party attacked the offices of a competing party, the Kurdistan Islamic Union, killing several of its officials. But the Kurdistan Islamic Union's emergence as an Islamist alternative to the Kurdistan Democratic Party and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan's secular rule -- it won five seats in Iraq's national assembly -- may be difficult to reverse.

As Iraqis confront the specter of civil war, many look with envy toward the Kurds, whose region has experienced unprecedented growth and prosperity. But the Kurds' deep economic dependence on a disintegrating Iraq could undo these gains: oil may stop flowing, electricity from the national grid may be cut, the Kurds' 17 percent share of the national budget may evaporate.

This will offer an opportunity to the two parties' many critics, who have been mostly silent so far, to challenge their rule. If and when this happens, Masoud Barzani, Kosrat Ali, and other Kurdish leaders may face not each other's mortar shells but their nation's discontent, a spreading disaffection they may still be able to allay today through wise, open, and pluralistic governance.

Joost Hiltermann is Middle East project director of the International Crisis Group.