Kurdish Background

The Kurdish Regional Government, (KRG), has a parliamentary system headed by a prime minister and a head of state called the president. So in name the Iraqi portion of Kurdistan is a democracy. In fact the two leading parties have united in such a way that they control the parliament and the presidency. The KRG consists of three governorates, Dohuk, Erbil and Sulemaniya. The KDP party led by President Masoud Barzani has support Dohuk and Erbil. The PUK party has Barham Saleh as the prime minister and his support is in Sulemaniya. However the real leader of the PUK is Jalal Talabani who is president of Iraq. These three men wield power as though they were dictators, handing out favours in their areas of support. Large amounts of government money are siphoned off to the party coffers where none of it is ever accounted for. It is almost impossible for people to get jobs without joining one of these parties. University students in particular object to this because they do not support either of the old parties. Both of these old parties have well armed militias which includes tanks and artillery. These are not national armies for the protection of the Kurdish people. The are private armies to enforce the will of the parties. Clearly, a large amount of government money goes to maintaining these party owned armies. These leaders are also taking large amounts of money from KRG coffers to add to their personal wealth. All public institutions including the judiciary are controlled by the parties. The KRG is a case study on how democracy can be subverted to dictatorship.

There are several other smaller parties that garner some support, including two Islamic parties. None of these parties have militias or the power to access KRG funds without accountability. The largest of these parties by far is Gorran party. Gorran has about twenty-five seats in the KRG parliament. The word gorran means change. In late January Gorran put forth a seven point plan for reform of the KRG that included an end to the corruption of taking government funds for private and party use, formation of an independent judiciary, the formation of a professional national army free from party control, and limiting the powers of the president to the ceremonial duties of head of state. The president and prime minister were given one month to announce meaningful reforms.

Then before the month was up things started to happen in Tunisia and Egypt. Ordinary people rose up to overthrow their oppressive regimes, and the process is ongoing in Libya and other Middle Eastern countries. Here in Kurdistan the people in the Sulemaniya Directorate, probably picking up on those cues have started protesting in the streets for change even before the month is up. Gorran leaders say they are not the leaders of the demonstrations but they expect that many of their members are in the streets. People in the Directorates of Erbil and Dohuk have not responded because Barzani the president has thrown them a few more crumbs. Barzani is clearly has the most power of any of the political leaders in KRG.

The first demonstrations began here on Wednesday February 16 at the Sulemaniya City Centre square. They have rapidly spread to other cities and towns in the directorate. On Thursday two of us attended the demonstration at he city center. As the demonstration broke up a confusing series of event led to the deaths of three people, one being a fourteen year old boy who was shot dead on the street. Utube videos show him lying on the deserted street pleading for his life before he was mortally wounded. At the end of the demonstration angry participants or provocateurs led several hundred demonstrators a few blocks down the street to Barzani's local KDP offices. A Utube video suggests that the first rocks were thrown from the office at the demonstrators. It is clear that the demonstrators threw rocks at the office and shattered many windows. Guards at the office opened fire on the crowd resulting in the deaths and injuries. By the next day military forces were moving in to the city from Erbil, including tanks and American Humvees armed with artillery. On Friday there were no demonstrations here in Sulemaniya because it was a day of worship.

The protests continued again on Monday, February 21 but we took the day to assess the situation. In the morning we went to the office of the Gorran party where we spoke with one of their legal advisers, Aram Muhamed. The KDP militia had threatened to burn the Gorran office in retaliation for the stoning of the KDP office. Gorran party leaders and staff remained in the building and informed the militia to come and arrest them and burn the building because they had no guns to go against the KDP militia. The Gorran party spokesman said the KDP leaders were so shocked by that response that they did not attack. He added that the old parties do not realize that parties do not exist as buildings but rather in the minds and hearts of party members. He reiterated that demands for reform had been made and the ruling parties had been told that people may start demanding change at any time but that Gorran had not organized the demonstrations so were not empowered to stop them.

In the afternoon we visited Mr. Awat the coordinator of the Sulemaniya federation of non government organizations, (NGO's). This is a federation of 15 groups in Sulemaniya and linked with about 120 groups all across Iraq that are calling for the same things:

1. to stop corruption
2. to establish true democracy
3. stop military violence

These demands have been made all across Iraq since 2006 before the formation of the Gorran party, although we agree with much of Gorran's policy. It was here that we learned for sure that there will be a national day of rage all across Iraq on Friday February 25 after Friday prayers have ended to demand these changes. We also learned that a group called Civil Liberties Protection Network was organizing the demonstrations. The federation of NGO’s was not totally comfortable with all their tactics so it has not become part of the organizing group. Up to that time Mr. Awat told us that up to that time three protestors were dead, more than 100 injured and more than 150 arrested. Of those arrested 50 had been released but all had been tortured. The rest of the arrested people were taken to prisons but no one knows where. They have a group of lawyers volunteering on behalf of those prisoners and also to bring the guards at the KDP office to justice for killing civilians.

It was from Awat that we learned of an initiative of theirs that has really come to focus our work here in the short term. He told us about the White Wall that has been formed by the white group. White is the colour of peace here. So on the first day of their action at the city square protest they had about 70 people in white scarves holding white ribbons of cloth between the demonstrators and the military. The group consists of people of all ages, men and women, but particularly students and staff from the university. White is the colour of peace here. The group also handed out flowers and Kurdish flags to soldiers and demonstrators. We asked if we might come and observe the work of the white group and the answer was definitely yes.

So on Tuesday February 22 we went to the demonstration at the city square. I would estimate that there were about 2000 soldiers surrounding the square and perhaps 5000 protestors. About 100 members of the white group were facing the protestors, clearly in position to prevent any violence against the military. Again flags and flowers were handed out. Many soldiers were busy taking pictures of each other with flowers in the muzzles of their AK47's. Any disruptive actions within the demonstration were quickly put down by the white group.

On February 23 we decided to ask if we could be of any help as part of the wall of peace and the answer was again an emphatic yes. So we joined the group with our backs to several hundred soldiers, many with flowers that had been distributed to them. On this day the soldiers were about 100 metres behind us because the white group had negotiated that space over night. Later in the day the wisdom of that decision was borne out when about 25 young men, perhaps provocateurs tried to rush into the white line we had formed. Very quickly several lines of protestors formed in front of us. Clearly many of the demonstrators appreciated the work of the white group and were here to support them when needed. If the soldiers had not been a good distance behind us stones may have been thrown by the unruly few.

Today, February 24, we will be going again to the demonstration to stand with the white group. This is a special day for teachers to attend. Tomorrow is the country wide day of rage in Iraq so we will be assessing the situation. Iraqi Prime Minister Malaki has given assurances that the armed forces will not open fire on protestors.