



Some Ba'athists Make It to Kurdish Election List

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KIRKUK (IPS) -- Iraq's two main Kurdish political parties have put aside their differences for the Jan. 30 election. Like the Shias in the South, they have organized a single, sectarian ticket that they hope all Kurds will vote for.

Surprisingly, that list includes some prominent members of the Ba'ath party of Saddam Hussein's regime.

Ask any Kurd in northern Iraq whom they plan to vote for Jan. 30 and they will give you the same answer as peshmerga (Kurdish freedom fighter) Ali Karem Mohammed, who lives in a refugee shantytown on the edge of Kirkuk in the Kurdish north of Iraq.

Like so many refugees around Kirkuk, Ali is a victim of Saddam's brutal campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Kurds. "I am Kurdish," he told IPS, as he cocked the pistol in his left hand. "Till I die, I'm Kurdish and I vote for Kurds."

Like all election lists in Iraq, the identity of the Kurdish candidates remains officially a secret for security reasons. Unlike other election lists, however, the contents of the Kurdish one became known when it was obtained by the independent Kurdish weekly Hawalti.

The list revealed that about a dozen Kurdish candidates were former Ba'athists.

"These are people who helped Saddam in his campaign against the Kurds," says Zirak Abdullah, managing editor of the newspaper's office in Arbil in northern Iraq.

"Remember that 182,000 people were killed in the campaign which was carried out by Saddam in the 1980s, including what happened in Halabja [where 5,000 Kurdish civilians were gassed with chemical weapons]," he said. "These people -- they have the blood of the Kurdish people on their hands."

Among the former Ba'athists on the Kurdish election slate are people who were once known as "Rafiq Hizbi" or the "Comrades." These were high-ranking members of the Ba'ath Party. Mustashars, the heads of Saddam's Kurdish paramilitary and mercenary groups, are also on the Kurdish election slate, according to Hawalti.

The newspaper published the names of some of them, along with the positions they held in the former Ba'ath party.

On the list of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which controls the area north and east of Kirkuk along the Iranian frontier, are Faiysal Karim Khan Mahmum, a former Mustashar; Abdul-Bari Mohammed Faris from Mosul, also a former Mustashar; and Faris Younis Krido from Duhok, a former Ba'athist.

The list of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (PDK), which controls the cities Arbil, Zakho, and Dohuk, and the areas along the Syrian and Turkish border, includes Namiq Raqib Mohammed Surchi, who was the head of the committee responsible for banning the Kurdish language in the Kurdish city Mosul; Jawhar Muhedin Jihangir from Mosul, who was head of Saddam's mercenaries; and Omer Khizir Hamad from Arbil, a Mustashar.

Many Kurds are taken aback by the inclusion of these names, since they will be voting for the Kurdish list to put Saddam's dictatorship behind them.

"You know Kurds are living in squalor," said refugee Zorab Hussein. He was forced to leave Kirkuk in 1974, when the first Kurdish revolt against the Ba'ath collapsed. Now he lives on the outskirts of Kirkuk in a squatters camp with no toilet facilities. His 8-year-old son plays amid human excrement.

"I don't have a door," he says. "I just have a curtain to act like a door, so how can you allow a Ba'athist to be on our list at election time? If you were in my situation, would you allow a Ba'athist to be on my election list?"

Zirak Abdullah of Hawalti says he is not surprised that Ba'athists have made it to the Kurdish slate. In the 1990s, the two leading Kurdish factions -- the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan -- fought a civil war against one another. Both sides desperate to rule the entire Kurdish region called on former Ba'athists for help. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan called on Saddam's local

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supporters, while the Kurdistan Democratic Party invited the Iraqi army to Arbil to break the stalemate.

"The PDK and PUK are the most powerful parties in Kurdistan," Abdullah says. "In the past, there was a conflict between them. And each one went to the devil to deal with the other. So those former Ba'athist people, they have killed thousands of people, but because the two parties wanted to have more followers, they tried to work with their enemy so their enemy wouldn't join the other side. Now it's payback time."

On election day, Kurds will have little choice but to vote for these Ba'athists. All the Kurdish candidates are running on the same list, the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan.

by Aaron Glantz

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