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Tension Mounting on Day of Iraqi Elections

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As Iraqis participate in the December 15 general election, minorities in northern Iraq remain wary as attempts at their continued marginalization continue unabated. Assyrian Christians (also known as Chaldeans and Syriacs), among other minorities, have experienced a persistent pattern of intimidation, harassment and violence in the lead up to the election.

On December 6, 2005 the Assyrian General Conference (AGC) charged that armed KDP irregulars blocked AGC campaign workers from campaigning in the Kurdish occupied northern Iraqi province of Dohuk (AINA [12-7-2005](#)). According to the release, "While one of the groups of the Assyrian General Conference was posting election posters and hanging banners in the Assyrian county of Mangesh on the morning of Monday the 5th, 2005, they were stopped by armed members of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). The same armed militia destroyed all of the posters that were on the walls, confiscated 3000 posters, 25 banners and ordered the group to leave Mangesh."



Ankawa - Posters of Independent ChaldoAssyrian Christian groups covered by spray paint. Kurdish posters untouched.

On November 29, 2005, a group of four Assyrian Democratic Movement (ADM) members hanging election posters in Mosul was fired upon, killing Joseph Nabil Ishmael (19) and George Brikha Youkhana (25) and critically wounding Simon Edmond Youkhana (22) and Milad Zakkar Mansour (18) (AINA [11-29-2005](#)). In his address to the Council on Foreign Relations on December 7, 2005, President Bush recognized the shooting of the campaign workers as evidence of the sacrifice given by Iraqis yearning for real democracy. The President remarked "This past week, people hanging election posters were attacked and killed. Yet freedom is taking hold in Mosul, and residents are making their voices heard..." Although the assailants have not been identified, there remains a perception by some in northern Iraq that the KDP may be one possible suspect in a desperate attempt to suppress any independent opinion in the upcoming National assembly from northern Iraq. As one analyst noted, "The KDP knows that with full Sunni participation in the elections, the KDP stands to lose 20-30 seats compared to the January elections when Sunnis boycotted. The KDP is that much more intent on stifling any dissenting Assyrian Christian voice."

In early December, an interview conducted with a official of the KDP ominously complained that "we are uncomfortable with the fact that some Christians in Ankawa actually are contemplating for voting independently of the Kurdish list. . .this will not be tolerated.." A December 13th report by the BBC states that "Party officials describe those who do not plan to vote for the Kurdistan Alliance List as "traitors" and "non-patriots". Such statements are believed to be indicative of a general tone from the KDP policy of shutting down opposition of rival movements.

The execution of that policy turned bloody on December 6, 2005 in Dohuk when tens of KDP paramilitary irregulars attacked (AINA <http://www.aina.org/news/20051206131912.htm>>12-6-2005) the offices of the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU). An additional five KIU offices were also attacked by the KDP that day in other towns in the province of Dohuk, leading to tens of deaths and scores of injuries. One Iraqi reporter stated that "the KDP had correctly calculated that the KIU as well as other parties were likely to siphon off precious seats in the upcoming election. The KDP leadership had apparently ordered a bloody crackdown not only to serve notice to the KIU but to other communities and political parties as well."

The stark tone of intolerance of democratic dissent has also been heard from what was presumed to be the more moderate of the Kurdish leaders, Mr. Jalal Talabani of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). In the lead up to the October 15 referendum on the Constitution, Mr. Talabani, the President of Iraq, described anyone opposed to the Constitution as "terrorists." Almost universally, Assyrian Christian political parties had rejected the draft Constitution (AINA [10-5-2005](#)) because it artificially split the community into factions, did not specify the indigenous and administrative rights of Assyrians in the Nineveh plain, and relegated Christian Assyrians as well as other non-Muslims in Iraq to second class status by formalizing Islam as the official state religion.

The threats, violence, and intimidation has left many Assyrian undaunted and still refusing to give into KDP pressure. As one leader noted, "During the January elections, the KDP literally stole ballot boxes to prevent Assyrians and others from voting. The October 15 referendum also was fraudulently rigged by the KDP. We desperately want democracy to succeed here, but the KDP has become a dangerous impediment to democracy."

The October 15 referendum narrowly passed. According to referendum law, the referendum could be blocked if three provinces rejected the constitution by a two-thirds or super majority. Three provinces did reject the Constitution, but only Anbar and Salahuddin did so with the supermajority. The third province, Nineveh, rejected the constitution by 56%, missing the two-thirds mark.

However, a rigorous investigation (AINA [11-4-2005](#)) by independent journalist Gareth Porter outlined "a campaign of ballot fraud by Kurdish authorities in Nineveh Province, the key to the outcome of the Oct 15 Constitutional referendum." In that report, Kurds affiliated with the KDP were said to have "beaten up anyone who refuses to go along with their plans." The KDP had also "spread the rumor in Nineveh province that voters who did not vote 'yes' would lose their food ration cards."

Some examples of outright ballot fraud in the October referendum included:

1. In the Assyrian town of Bartilla, approximately 500 nonresident Kurds entered the polling center at 11:30 a.m. and demanded to vote. When the director refused, Mr. Khisro Goran, the KDP vice Governor of Nineveh, ordered the director to allow the illegal vote. Over 200 voted by the time Coalition forces intervened to stop further illegal voting.
2. In the Assyrian town of Alqosh, over 20 KDP transport vehicles brought Kurds into town where the Kurdish flag was illegally raised on the gasoline service station in the town center.
3. In the town of ain-Sifni in the Shaikhan district, KDP militiamen occupied the voting center while wearing badges that read "Security Committee for the Shaikhan District." The nonresident militiamen refused to leave when asked by the director.
4. In the Assyrian town of telkaif, voting center 313 had an entirely KDP voting staff including KDP secret security personnel.

Most troubling, though, was the ballot stuffing in Kurdish controlled areas. After the first Gulf war and the creation of the UN protected region, the portions of the nineveh districts of Shaikhan and Makhmur had been ceded to the provinces of Duhok and Arbil respectively. However, for the purpose of the referendum, these towns were included in the Nineveh Province since their numbers were not critical for the assured outcome in the Kurdish occupied province of Arbil. Even more telling was that out of an official registered voter population of 14,000 in Shaikhan, over 32,000 votes, respectively were tallied from these towns and added to the "yes" column in Nineveh. Commenting on the over 200% voter turnout in these Kurdish occupied areas, one analyst cynically referred to the KDP as "super-democrats."

For Assyrian Christians, the past election cycles have served notice that the KDP will not countenance any independent democratic expression. Facing the prospects of yet more marginalization, Assyrians, however, remain resilient. "We just have to continue to persevere and not give in," said one activist, adding "we have to hope that one day the coalition forces, namely the US, stop allowing tyranny by the KDP."

For other communities in northern Iraq, the reaction has been more embittered. Some analysts have suggested that brutal KDP tactics have in part fueled certain elements of the insurgency and have consequently contributed to regional instability and violence. As one observer commented, "In northern Iraq, the KDP is universally perceived as an obstacle to democratization."