

Research Article

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Ahmed Omar Bali*

The roots of clientelism in Iraqi Kurdistan and the efforts to fight it

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Abstract: This study examines the roots of clientelism in Iraqi Kurdistan and the effort to fight it. The clientelism system exists when a kind of deal is struck between those in power and clients in society who agree to exchange benefits. The political issues in Kurdistan particularly, corruption and lack of social justice have historical roots as a result of the accumulation of problems that have not been resolved by the client system that is adopted by the two political parties in power, namely the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP). The two political parties have monopolised the public sector, the Peshmerga and Security forces, as well as the economy, they have succeeded in controlling the larger part of society through clientelism. In hence, they used public funds, jobs and posts to buy people's votes and loyalty. The opposition parties have been unable to exert pressure on the ruling parties who can buy the affiliation of people through the use of public finance. The opposition and independent media began to play a large role in highlighting the corruption and the client system.

Keywords: Clientelism; Corruption; Media; Opposition parties; Iraqi Kurdistan.

1 Introduction

The two political parties in power in Iraqi Kurdistan, namely the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Democratic Party of Kurdistan (KDP) have monopolised the public sector (Bali, and Abdullah, 2017; Bali, et al 2018), the Peshmerga and Security forces, as well as the economy, they have succeeded in controlling the larger part of society through clientelism (Qani and Fatah 2012). In other words, the two political parties have used public funds, jobs and posts to buy people's votes and loyalty. Qani and Fattah argue that the decision-making in Kurdistan is conducted within the two main political parties rather than in the government departments

The clientelism system exists when a kind of deal is struck between those in power and clients in society who agree to exchange benefits. In this regard, Bardhan and Mookherjee (2011) note that clientelism is associated with the political parties in power and they argue that 'Clientelism refers to strategic transfers made by political parties and governments to poor and disadvantaged groups as a means of securing their votes, in an effort to consolidate political power' (2011, p 2).

The opposition parties have been unable to exert pressure on the ruling parties who can buy the affiliation of people through use of public finance. The economy of Iraq when began to grow and it led to an increase in people's income, for example the monthly salary of the average employee increased from 200 to 600 US Dollars by 2008 (Muhamed, 2008). Employees' salaries increased rapidly, particularly in the public sector although the price of basic needs rose as well (Nury, 2012). However, at the same time, unemployment increased especially amongst young people because the two governing political parties deprived

*Corresponding author: Ahmed Omar Bali, University of Human Development, Iraq, Head of Diplomacy and Public Relations Department, E-mail: ahmed.abdullah@uhd.edu.iq

many people of government jobs, whilst giving these jobs to their own followers in order to buy their votes (Hussain, 2015). In an interview in the Hawlati Newspaper with Ayoub Barzani, a Kurdish political analyst of the reform process, the government did not have any plans in place to tackle corruption and introduce reforms as the government itself was corrupt (Hawlati 2012a). Subsequently the opposition parties became much stronger, particularly the Gorran which was established some months before the election in 2009. Gorran is based on the promise to change the system in Kurdistan and its workers are mostly volunteers, whereas the members of the other parties receive a salary, particularly those in the ruling parties. At the same time the opposition parties became stronger because many people, particularly young people, attempted to find a job in different sectors instead of relying on financial support from the ruling parties. Young people started to support the opposition parties in order to enable the opposition parties to take power, introduce reforms and fight corruption. During the last election campaign the Gorran Movement Party relied on the media, particularly KNN TV and the Sbeiy website, to focus primarily on its agenda for political change, while the ruling parties depended on buying votes by using public funds. The opposition parties focused on fighting corruption and introducing reforms if they were to win the election, whereas the ruling parties argued that the Kurdish people should support them because they had struggled against Saddam's regime in the past and only they were able to keep Kurdistan safe. Alongside this, the ruling parties argued that the Kurds needed to solve their problems with Baghdad before introducing reforms in the KRG (Hussain, 2015). The Gorran Movement has introduced a new model of doing politics in Kurdistan which relies on the media and this is important as it has fewer active members compared to the other parties, particularly the ruling parties (Hussain, 2015.) The Gorran party's media remains largely focused on portraying corruption and the government's performance in a negative light and this appeals to young people who are the main demographic category affected negatively by the government. Consequently the opposition and independent media give importance to young people as their main target audience. From this stand point, the media has become much more effective in handling political communication and analysing the political issues particularly corruption, particularly the opposition and independent media. This research examines the roots of clientelism in Iraqi Kurdistan and the effort to fight it.

2 Theoretical Review

Al-Zaidi and Sadiq (2012) argue that the political system in Kurdistan is characterised by nepotism and the citizens are not treated on an equal basis. Therefore this section reviews the concept of political clientelism as a causality of the political issues in Kurdistan.

Since clientelism features in the political system this situation is supposed to create political issues, particularly corruption and the lack of government performance. This discussion reviews the clientelism model as a theoretical assumption that has repercussions on the political system of Kurdistan and it provides a suitable theoretical and conceptual framework for this study.

Roniger adopts the term clientelism from Richard Graham who characterised clientelism as an action-set built upon the principle of 'take there, give here', enabling clients and patrons to benefit from mutual support as they play parallel to each other at different levels of political, social, and administrative articulation' (2004, p 355).

Roniger (2004) further explains that clientelism in the political arena, particularly in the government context, leads 'to the distribution of state resources (jobs, contracts, and services) in exchange for political support and is associated with various forms of patronage and organisational brokerage. This implies that in the political clientelism system there is a form of deal between those in power and their clients to exchange benefits. In this regard, Bardhan and Mookherjee (2011) note that clientelism is associated with the political parties in power and they argue that 'clientelism refers to strategic transfers made by political parties and governments to poor and disadvantaged groups as a means of securing their votes, in an effort to consolidate political power' (2011, p 2). In this respect, Stokes et al (2013) argue that in clientelism system, the political parties distributes jobs, cash, credit, myriad and other resources to citizens in order

to vote in favour of them front of them either for the election campaign or at any other time . This secures and keeps the politicians in power.

The client system leads to lack of social justice because the whole population have no real opportunity to find jobs (Bellamy, 2013). Another feature of the clientelism system is that the government faces over-employment because the political parties in power need to distribute new jobs to people continuously (Warner, 1997). The two arguments of Bellamy (2013) and Warner (1997) show that the new generation, particularly young people, face the negative consequences of the client system.

3 Research Methods

The research uses a descriptive analysis and sourced from secondary sources including books, research articles and the data are published. This allows examining the roots of clientelism in Iraqi Kurdistan and efforts that seek to fight it, particularly by opposition parties and media.

4 Discussion

4.1 The Roots Of Clientelism In The Political Economy Of Kurdistan

The clientelism can apply to the political arena of Kurdistan where both political parties in power, the PUK and KDP, since the creation of the first government in 1992, started to construct their popularity based on the client system. On 19th May 1992, the election of the Kurdistan National Assembly (KNA) was conducted with the participation of eight Kurdish political parties and 4 Assyrian parties (Christian ethnic groups) who were competing for 100 parliamentary seats with 5 seats reserved for ethnic groups by quota, although subsequently 5 seats were retained for the Assyrians because the Turkmen withdrew from the elections. The Turkmen comprise the third minority group in Iraq and the majority of them live in Kurdistan, particularly in Kirkuk and Erbil, and most of them came from Turkey during the Ottoman Empire period. According to the election rules each list was supposed to obtain 7% in order to enter the KNA. Ultimately, the KDP obtained 51% and the PUK gained 49% of the votes (Dabrowska and Hann, 2008). Despite fraudulent incidents in this election, Stansfield (2003) stated that this election was one of the most democratic in the Middle East. The PUK did not agree to form the opposition because it believed that the KDP would start to buy the loyalty of the citizens through the distribution of public funds, as there was an old long-standing competition between the two parties about keeping and expanding their influence,

Which had sometimes led to armed conflict between them. As a result, the KDP and PUK formed a 50-50 coalition government and subsequently divided the government departments by making small concessions to the minor parties in order to ensure their support. According to Mustafa who was the PUK deputy leader, he suggested his party should form the opposition, nevertheless other members of the PUK preferred to enter the government because, as mentioned above, they did not have confidence in the KDP's undertakings (Mustafa, 2008). As the two political parties in power, the PUK and KDP, monopolised the public sector, Peshmerga and other security forces, as well as the economy, they could control the larger part of society on the clientelism basis through using public funds and jobs to buy votes (Qani and Fatah 2012).

4.2 Increasing Budget And Enhancing The Clientelism System In Iraqi Kurdistan

After 2003 the budget of Kurdistan started to increase due to the economic sanctions being lifted and the two political parties, PUK and KDP, started to monopolise the economic sector through establishing big

companies which dominated contract allocation without transparency (Salih, 2015). Salih (2015) notes that the client system in Kurdistan led to a lack of social justice, for instance a small sector of society became wealthy dramatically while large parts of society became poor as a result of inflation. In the same way, the public services were not developed and the opposition parties were weak (Al Zaidi and Sadiq, 2012). As a result, the civil organisations and independent media emerged to criticise the government. In this regard, Al Zaidi and Sadiq (2012) argue that the debate of corruption and demand for reform by the people, civil society organisations, opposition parties and opposition and independent media mainly started from 2004 when the budget of the KRG started to increase.

The most prominent intellectual group which criticised government policy was the Rahand, which translates as 'dimension' in English, and which appeared from 1994 to 2006. Most members of this group were living in the EU and through their journal of the same name they published articles focusing on questions of freedom and democratisation in the KRG (Bali, 2016). Rasul (2010) mentioned that the Rahand group developed a critical discourse which had an active impact on readers, particularly on young people, which contributed to change and helped the emergence of real opposition parties. As well as this group, other forms of opposition emerged, for instance the development of independent media, such as the Hawlati newspaper which started in Sulaymaniyah as a weekly newspaper in 2000 and then became a daily.

It is undoubtedly the case that, prior to 2009, some pressure groups and the independent media were more active in voicing opposition to the ruling parties than the smaller political opposition parties themselves. This was largely due to the fact that the two main parties stifled any open debate from the opposition parties and endeavoured to control any public criticism against them. This forced many Kurdish people to demonstrate openly, for example about the national budget which although it increased, still did not deliver improved public services. In this context, Ali (2009) claimed that the Kurdish ruling parties argued that they were the only legitimate organisations worthy of government because they had opposed the Saddam regime, and that therefore the Kurds should show them loyalty for patriotic reasons. Moreover, when the opposition parties criticised the government, the two main parties accused them of being new in the political arena and therefore not having played a part in the struggle against the former regime. This in turn implied that only the two parties in power were legitimate; the opposition parties were ignored even though they were willing to help find a solution to the issues of corruption and reform. Therefore, members of the opposition parties joined in the anti-government protests alongside ordinary citizens.

When ruling governments in a country do not allow opposition parties or individuals to propose different ideas this can lead to alternative forms of opposition, such as popular demonstrations and reports across the independent media. For instance, in Western democracies people and opposition parties usually have more rights to express their critical opinions against the performance of their governments compared with the people and opposition parties in a new democracy. All the revolutions during the Arab Spring were initiated by the people and encouraged by the opposition parties. Salah (2010) argues that group pressure and the independent media encouraged the public to ask their government to make reforms in public services through demonstrations at the end of 2005 and the beginning of 2006 in the KRG.

By the end of 2005, some of the PUK leaders formed a campaign to introduce reforms inside the KRG; these became known as the reform group in the PUK. This group made demands, such as reducing the power of the PUK leader, introducing reforms in the PUK, activating the Political Bureau of the PUK, conducting an election amongst the PUK members and ensuring the services provided to the public were improved (Mustafa, 2009). The PUK followed this up by taking steps to implement the demands of the Reform Group. In spite of this, the Reform Group refused the offer to join in the internal elections of the PUK, arguing that the PUK had no real intention of conducting reforms. In addition, the Reform Group was uncomfortable with the power-sharing agreement between its party (the PUK) and the KDP. Under these circumstances, Nawsherwan Mustafa, leader of the Reform Group, along with the rest of its members, resigned from the PUK. Subsequently, in March 2007 they established a Media Company called Wsha which means 'awareness', to inform the people about corruption and reform (Mustafa, 2008).

The company of Wsha had a considerable impact on the political situation of the KRG particularly in the PUK-influenced area because the Reform Group effectively became the opposition within the KRG, as

they had a large membership base. Accordingly, freedom of expression expanded for each of the other opposition parties as well as the media (Al Zaidi and Sadiq, 2012). The opposition parties started to develop a coherent programme against the ruling parties, with the four opposition parties, the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU), the Islamic Group (IG), the Toilers Party of Kurdistan (TPK) and the Socialist Party of Kurdistan (SPK) entering the last election in July 2009 under a single list named 'Service and Reform'. The Media Company, Wsha, formed its own list in the election and called it the Gorran list meaning 'change'. This group focused on reforms and corruption and a call to change during the election campaign. As a result of all these oppositional activities and the competition amongst the two traditional parties, the other political entities became stronger in the last election campaign.

Ultimately, the traditional list (KDP and PUK) gained 59 seats out of 111 seats while the Gorran list took 25 seats with only 13 seats for the Service and Reform list. The results were declared by the independent High Electoral Commission of Iraq. This was a significant transition in political life in Iraqi Kurdistan because the two main parties had controlled the elections since 1992. Hardy (2015) argues that the real opposition party started from the election in 2009, as people started to find an alternative party, particularly young people because the new generations demanded a better level of public services and accountability. However, the older generations still appreciated the struggle of the two main parties which they had conducted against the Saddam regime. Also most of the older generations kept a strong affiliation to these parties because they stood to gain financially through pensions or bribery (Qani, 2012a).

Criticism of civil society and the opposition party increased when oil production restarted and people found that although the national budget increased, the level of ordinary people's income did not change (Hussain, 2015; Salih, 2015). The arguments of both researchers imply that the KRG did not have an effective economic strategy or strong economic policy. In this regard, Qani (2015) argues that the two families in Kurdistan who dominated the PUK and KDP parties sought to transform the political system to a rentier economy system, such as those in the Arab Gulf countries, which is administered by families and ignores democratisation which is opposite to this system because in a democracy people play a big role in policy-making and decisions. Chaudhry (2011) explains that much of the Saudi state is based on the rentier economy system, where, for example, construction has relied on patron-client relationships through corruption of individuals by providing them with jobs in both the private and public sectors. Qani (2015) justifies his argument through four points, the first is that the two families monopolise the economic system through adopting the rentier system which relies on protecting the oil without transparency and using the income of this in their companies' favour. Secondly, the religious dimension gives credence to the Salafist ideology which states that ruling families should be obeyed in any way, therefore the people do not have any right to demonstrate or seek to shape political parties or change the power base, even if the rulers become an authoritarian regime. As a result, the whole political process gradually comes under the families' control and the people will be forced to support the system even if they do not receive good quality services or are forced to suffer because of unemployment. The third point is that the families seek to form an intellectual group which does not criticise the political system through providing its members with higher salaries and privileges.

In the light of the above discussion, it can be concluded in this section that the political economy of Kurdistan has been monopolised by the two political parties based on the system of clientelism (Hussain, 2015), and through adopting the rentier economy model (Qani, 2015; Salih, 2015). Such a system leads to corruption, bureaucracy, over-employment and general lack of social justice. The sector of society most likely to be affected by the client system are the young people because this system is based on the rentier economy which is unjust and creates over-employment, which particularly affects young people.

4.3 The Role Of Opposition Parties To Fight Corruption And Clientelism System

The opposition parties became stronger particularly following the emergence of the Gorran Movement which means "change" in English and which appeared formally in the elections in July 2009. The Gorran Movement was led by Nawshirwan Mustafa (2009-2017), the deputy leader of the PUK party, which he

left arguing that he could not fight corruption and introduce reforms because the party would not allow him, therefore he established firstly a media company and then the Gorran party. According to many political observers and researchers, the real opposition party emerged from this election as they believed it was an important period of transition in the political and civic life of Kurdistan (Haji, 2015). This party, before announcing itself, established a media company in 2007 called Wsha (meaning “word” in English) which mainly focused on corruption and reform by arguing for change in the power structure. The Gorran Movement mostly relies on its media, particularly KNN TV and the Sbeiy website, to deliver its political discourse to people and remains focused on young people as they have received little attention compared to other demographic categories. The traditional political parties, such as the political parties in power, relied on recruiting large numbers to their membership on the basis of clientelism. In turn, this meant the two main parties did not focus on the media in elections before 2009 because they already controlled the people. By contrast Gorran relied on the media because it had no budget to buy votes and was not in a position to use jobs and posts to buy support. From this standpoint the media began to play a large role in political communication as Gorran pushed the two political parties to give importance to the media in the political communication process.

5 Conclusion

The clientelism model as a key theoretical assumption to review the Kurdish political system since the first government was formed in 1992. It is clear that the current political issues in Kurdistan have historical roots as a result of the accumulation of problems that have not been resolved by the client system adopted by the two political parties in power. The political system in Kurdistan may be considered as unique, as is the lack of academic research in Kurdistan in general, due to the historical background of the region. As Kirmanj (2013) notes, Kurdistan is not an independent nation-state although it does have many elements of a country’s profile.

In relation to theories of clientelism, the study found that young people believed that political issues, particularly corruption and the lack of government performance are rooted in several traditions, nepotism alongside handing out of positions, jobs and public funds to buy votes in order to buy votes to stay in power (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2011; Roniger 2004). Alongside, clientelism, which is deep-rooted in Kurdish society, is supported by an economic system which is based on rentier state often intrinsic to oil-rich countries. (Hussain, 2015; Qani and Fatah 2012; Qani (2015)

Chaudhry (2011) argues that the rentier economy system tends to lead to the client system. Future research may need to look more in-depth at the KRG’s specific political economy and potential implications for democratic practices.

Alongside this study found that corruption and the lack of government performance originate in the client system which is in turn based on the rentier system. However, there was no opportunity to explore this dimension in depth as the present research is the field of media studies which do not allow wider analysis of clientelism. This would be valuable in any future research on clientelism. The outcome of this thesis can be taken as a starting point by future researchers of political science to investigate further and in more detail the issue of clientelism and its implication in Kurdistan.

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