

Referendum in Kurdistan - For the right of self-determination

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After the Iraqi army and the Shia militia Hashd al-Shaabi recaptured the areas around Kirkuk that have been controlled by Kurdish forces since 2014, Barzani's will to enforce the result of the independence referendum seems to have faded. The Iraqi Prime Minister, Haider al-Abadi, rejected Barzani's proposal to freeze the implementation of the results and start negotiations with Central Iraq. He would only accept a complete annulment of the referendum and is supported in this by the USA, Turkey and Iran.

Barzani then announced his resignation and new elections on 1 November. His nephew Neçirvan Barzani will presumably take over his post, so that power remains in the family. Barzani accused "traitors", meaning the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, of having abandoned the areas around Kirkuk too easily. That was certainly the biggest defeat suffered by the Iraqi Kurds in decades and has prompted Baghdad to try to restrict the authority of the Kurdish government to those parts of the country that Kurdish parties dominated until the US invaded Iraq in 2003. The Kurds are also threatened with the loss of the economically extremely important border crossing to Turkey, which Barzani's party has controlled since 1991. These events of the last few weeks are an open blow to the Kurdish people's right to self-determination, not only in Iraq, but throughout the Middle East.

Even though the Peshmerga fighters did leave Kirkuk quickly and without much resistance, the independence referendum leaves no doubt that the majority of the population of Iraqi Kurdistan wants state independence and is no longer willing to live under the rule of a reactionary regime of any kind in Baghdad. At the same time, the current debates also reveal that the leadership of the Iraqi Kurds is less concerned with the self-determination rights of the masses of the population, the workers and peasantry, than with their own business interests and claims to power. It is no coincidence that the units controlled by the two bourgeois reactionary parties, the Democratic Party of Kurdistan, DPK, and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, were unable to act jointly in defending Kurdish interests and quickly left their positions, while local Kurdish militias and Kurdistan Workers' Party, PKK, fighters stayed at their posts in Kurdish villages. The best expression of the two-facedness of the PUK is Fuad Masum, who is a member of the PUK on the one hand, and President of central Iraq on the other, and who did not oppose the invasion of Iraqi troops.

Imperialism and oppression

The Kurds are still the largest nation without their own state. After the Treaty of Lausanne (1923) had replaced the Treaty of Sèvres (1920) after the First World War and the colonial division of the Middle East was decided, the area once planned as Kurdistan was divided between Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. Today, between 20 and 30 million Kurds live all over the world.

Although the Kurdish population in northern Iraq was granted a partial autonomy as early as 1970, it took

until 1992 for the first regional parliament to be established. At the end of the 1980s, the Kurdish population suffered from the Iran-Iraq war and the attacks of Saddam Hussein's regime. Massacres such as the one in Halabja in 1988 contributed to the decision of the political leadership under the Barzani clan to side with the USA during the Iraq war, a position which it still defends.

With the outbreak of the global crisis in 2008, the revolutions in the Arab world, the permanent destabilisation of the Iraqi central state and the emergence of the Islamic State, the situation of the Kurds in Iraq also deteriorated. The drop in oil prices in particular had a massive impact on the region, with 95 percent of government revenue coming from the oil business. Foreign investors withdrew and infrastructure projects were left unfinished. The civilian population also voiced their displeasure in protests against the poor economic situation and massive wage cuts in the public sector among civil servants and academics. But these protests were banned, political opponents were threatened and forced into passivity. Some socialist activists were even forced to leave the country. The referendum on 25 September must be seen in the context of these events. It was not only an expression of the desire for independence from Iraq, but also a nationalist project of the DPK and the Barzani clan to reinforce their own claims to leadership.

Since 2011, there have been protests against the corruption of the two ruling parties, DPK and PUK, as well as for more freedom of the press and the expansion of public services. After the IS conquered the oil-rich Kirkuk and threatened the Kurdish capital Irbil, the need for greater security obviously grew. Instead of consistently attacking the positions of the IS together with the successful fighters of the YPG/YPJ (People's Defence Units) and PKK, the Peshmerga chose to be financed and trained by the German Federal Armed Forces and other NATO armies, but took almost no part in the fight against the IS.

The IS threat was used by President Masud Barzani as a pretext to prolong his term of office, which had actually ended. His opponents from the PUK and the Gorran party (the Movement for Change) spoke out against it. Gorran led the protests against the corrupt alliance of DPK and PUK, but also entered into alliances with the PUK against the DPK and the ruling Barzani clan. After they criticised Barzani's anti-democratic extension of office, the Gorran ministers were expelled from Irbil and the party's television station was closed. Gorran and a smaller Islamic party Komal (Islamic Community in Kurdistan) declared the referendum unconstitutional and demanded a postponement.

Despite all the conflicts between the two main parties, DPK and PUK, Barzani has undoubtedly achieved the goal of creating a unity held together by the referendum. In contrast to the DPK, PUK has so far argued more and more for a complete separation rather than just an autonomous area. The fact that Barzani has now taken this step shows that, on the one hand, before the actual end of his term of office, he is once again rattling the nationalist drum of populism and wants to be remembered as a hero of Kurdish history. On the other hand, the PUK had no choice but to take the side of the DPK and the referendum, as this is its own political line.

The threat of Kurdish self-determination

Iraq's integrity plays an important role for two reasons. The first is its formal status as a Middle East state, which was created on the drawing boards of British and French imperialism in order to define their power in the region. If someone were to attack this system and demand new, or no (!) borders, the question of power would be raised and this would put the right of self-determination of all the nations living in the region on the agenda. US imperialism, which now dominates the region, does not want to see its decision making power challenged. One might ask, why the US vassal, Israel, is not also opposed to the Kurds but is actually one of the few supporters of independence. The answer is that the Zionist state is acting out of self-interest; Kurdish independence would weaken both Iraq and Iran. For other states, however, complete separation could set in motion a strengthening of the Kurdish (independence) movement in the entire

region, which could lead to a Kurdish state in Syria, a division of Turkey and an attack on the Iranian government.

The vast majority of the pro-Kurdish parties in Turkey support the referendum and emphasise that the right to self-determination should be "defended by all means" (Osman Baydemir, Democratic Party of the Peoples, HDP). Only the Democratic Party of the Regions, successor to the BDP, Party of Peace and Democracy, DBP objected to the establishment of a Kurdish nation-state, as this would contradict its party politics. In fact, the DBP has already given up defending the Kurds' right to self-determination in the form of a state. The sister party of the PKK in Syria, the Party of the Democratic Union, PYD, also formally supported the right to a referendum in Kurdistan, even though it itself is still in conflict with the DPK.

The outcome of the referendum is clear, with around 93 percent of the votes in favour and over 70 percent voter turnout. Despite the boycott of the Turkmen and Arabs in Kirkuk, the vast majority of the people in the country have decided to go for an independent Kurdistan and complete separation from Iraq. The reactions to the referendum show how things could continue in the region, including for other Kurdish areas. Without a fierce struggle, there will be no Kurdish state of its own, the right to self-determination will be limited by the interests of the imperialist and regional powers.

The repression on the part of the central Iraq government is not only increasing in military terms. An Iraqi court issued an arrest warrant on 11 October against members of the electoral commission for acting unconstitutionally. Neither Iraqi security forces nor the military, however, have, yet, had permission to operate in the Kurdish territory. In addition, the government in Baghdad is trying to stop the Kurds from trading oil and has called on Turkey and Iran to close their borders. In addition, the Islamic state, which is on the verge of a military end, is also trying to exploit the situation and has at least temporarily brought some villages near Kirkuk back under its control.

USA and the West

For the United States and its allies, the "conflict" is extremely inconvenient, as both the Kurdish regional government and the Iraqi government are "allies in the fight against the IS". Now that the latter is practically on the verge of destruction, the battle among the "allies" is all the more intense. In addition, Iran's influence in the Iraqi state has increased enormously.

The United States has clearly taken sides by declaring Iraq's national borders sacrosanct, refusing to recognise the referendum "of course" and downplaying the advance of the Iraqi army as a "misunderstanding". The EU also criticises the efforts to achieve independence. The weapons that Germany, for example, supplied to the Peshmerga could only be used in the fight against the IS, certainly not for self-defence against an Iraqi army re-equipped, and much better armed, by the USA.

Therefore, the Western imperialists, and Russia, too, hope that the Kurdish leadership will agree to a "negotiated solution" - if necessary, by coercing it with economic pressure.

What next?

The current situation in northern Iraq and the struggle for Kirkuk show that the Kurdish right to self-determination is one of the key issues for the entire region. But they also show that the policies of the DPK and PUK can only end in disaster.

The recognition of the right to self-determination, including the right to establish a Kurdish state of their own, must be a starting point for all internationalists, for all revolutionaries. In this context, controversial regions such as the province of Kirkuk should be able to decide for themselves whether or not to join a Kurdish state. Security in the city must be organised by multi-national militias under the control of the

population in order to prevent attacks from all sides, or the return of the so-called Islamic State. In order to counteract a possible fragmentation of the region, recognition of the right to self-determination should be combined with the fight for a federation of Middle Eastern states.

However, the right of self-determination is only a framework for the fight against the oppression of a nation. It does not solve the question of which class, which social regime, should rule in a state or a federation. The bourgeois, reactionary parties, usually associated with US imperialism, such as PUK and DPK, ultimately regard the right of self-determination only as a pledge for their profit interests.

Our aim is not to create an autocratic but independent Kurdistan, whose government is corrupt and uncontrollable, but to lay the foundations for the class struggle for political power in the state. Therefore, we advocate the convening and election of a Constituent Assembly in the Autonomous Region. In order to prevent the opposition, and in particular the working class and peasants, from being intimidated or oppressed in the course of such a campaign, control over the convening of such an assembly must not be left to the government of the autonomous region, not to the DPK and PUK. Rather, it should be placed in the hands of committees of the workers and peasants.

The Kurdish masses, however, have another problem. There is no Kurdish party based on the wage earners, no real workers' party. It is time for a real socialist workers' party to organise and lead the protests against DPK and PUK. Only in this way can a joint fight against the oppression of the Kurdish nation in all states be fought and the cornerstone in the struggle for a federation of socialist states in the Middle East be laid.

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