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Protesters gesture during a demonstration at the Azadi (Freedom) Park in the centre of Sulaymaniyah in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region on August 22, 2020, [File: AFP/Shwan Mohammed]

On December 2, teachers and public employees peacefully demonstrated in the city of Sulaymaniyah in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) demanding their

aymaniyah in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan region of Iraq (KRI), demanding their

long-overdue salaries. The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has been unable to pay civil servants in full for months due to an ongoing financial crisis.

Instead of heeding their calls, the local authorities sent security forces to disperse the crowd. This angered the people and caused the protest to spill out of Sulaymaniyah into other towns in the region's southeast. The ensuing crackdown resulted in the death of at least seven people, including a 13-year-old boy, as well as the injury of dozens and the arrest of hundreds.

The KRI has witnessed such violent scenes before. Since 2011, there have been demonstrations and crackdowns, as the main political parties in the region – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – have continued to maintain a strong grip on power.

As in the past, the party leaders have accused Baghdad of withholding the KRG's budget and causing financial difficulties. The truth, however, is that the current crisis has much more to do with decades of corruption and mismanagement of Kurdish resources by the two ruling parties. The Kurdish people know this very well and their disillusionment and anger are growing stronger by the day.

A year of state violence

The December protest was not the only one this year. Over the past 12 months, Kurds have taken to the streets over various socioeconomic grievances.

In January and February, even before the pandemic hit and damaged the Kurdish region's economy even further, people staged a demonstration to demand better electricity provision and distribution of kerosene for heating in Sulaymaniyah, which is controlled by the PUK.

In May, a group of teachers and public employees called for a peaceful protest over unpaid salaries in the KDP-controlled city of Duhok. However, ahead of the scheduled event, security forces raided the homes of the organisers and blocked entry to the park where it was supposed to be held. Journalists were also arrested pre-emptively.

In August, truck drivers in Zakho, also in the KDP-controlled northwest, came out in protest against a KRG decision to allow Turkish truckers to continue to operate across the Turkish-Iraqi border. Security forces were immediately deployed to forcefully disperse the crowd and prevent any media coverage of it. The crackdown on the media was particularly harsh, with offices of the opposition-funded NRT channel shuttered in Dohuk and Erbil and several of its reporters being detained.

In the aftermath of the August protests, about 100 people, most of them activists and journalists, were detained, according to local media. Intimidation campaigns against opposition-minded youth, activists and media workers have continued over the past few months in both KDP and PUK-controlled areas.

Human rights organisations and press freedom watchdogs have sounded the alarm, with New York-based Human Rights Watch calling on the Kurdish authorities to “listen to critics, not arrest them”.

A corrupt system

While the unpaid salaries and inadequate provision of utilities were the trigger of this year's wave of protests in the KRI, the roots of public discontent go much deeper. There is growing public anger at the current dysfunctional system in the Kurdish region, dominated by the Barzani family of the KDP and the Talabani family of the PUK.

Since the inception of the KRG in 1992, government institutions have been dominated by these two parties and debilitated by them. Government posts have been distributed along patronage network lines, making officials and governance processes dependent on the two parties. High-level posts are almost exclusively reserved for members of the Barzani and Talabani families and their loyalists.

This set-up has also undermined the electoral process and skewed it in favour of the KDP and PUK. The two parties have secured votes and loyalty by providing jobs within the civil service and by bribing tribal leaders. Each of them has separate Peshmerga forces that take orders only from the party leadership.

The KDP and PUK have also embezzled the region's resources and used them to their own benefit, distributing lands to their members, supporters, relatives and friends and allocating lucrative projects to companies tied to the ruling elite.

The nepotism, corruption and mismanagement of the two ruling parties have stunted the growth of the Kurdish economy and made it almost entirely dependent on oil and gas. As much as 90 percent of government revenue comes from the sale of hydrocarbons while other sectors remain underdeveloped. Public infrastructure is also weak and poorly maintained, resulting in regular power outages and water shortages.

The vast clientelist networks of the ruling elite have bloated public expenditure to such an extent that under the present conditions – low oil prices and a budget dispute with Baghdad – the government can no longer afford to regularly pay civil servant wages. More than half the KRG's revenue is spent on public expenditures, including public employees' salaries, pensions and social support.

This and the limited economic opportunities available have deepened the social and economic disparities in the Kurdish region. Today, one-third of households earn \$400 or less a month.

The new generation is bearing the brunt of this economic mismanagement. Although there is no reliable data on the current rate of youth unemployment, a 2018 survey found that more than 20 percent of the population aged between 18-34 who were unemployed in 2018 had lost hope in finding a job. This partly explains why the youth have been at the forefront of the recent protests and will remain the driving force in future ones.

Echo of the October protests

People in the KRI have protested over unpaid salaries, bad public services and corruption for years. But it seems the dynamics in the streets are changing.

What distinguishes these protests from the previous ones is their spontaneous and organic nature. They are not organised by opposition parties – as they have been in the past – and are mostly leaderless and dominated by the youth. They are quite similar in their aspirations to the protests that erupted in Baghdad and southern Iraq in October 2010

protests to the protests that erupted in Baghdad and southern Iraq in October 2019.

Kurdish protesters have ignored KDP's and PUK's attempts to blame the central government for the current situation and insisted that the solution lies within the KRG. These protests show that there is an urgent need for the overhaul of the system – a demand frequently raised during protests since 2011.

The KRG in its current form is unlikely to embrace genuine political and economic reform, just as the political establishment in Baghdad is unable to fulfil the demands of the protesters. What is needed in the Kurdish region is a fundamental change of the political system that puts an end to the hegemony of two ruling families and their parties.

The Kurdish political elite has to understand that these protests are not just a small disturbance over unpaid salaries. And the usual solution – violence, arrests and intimidation – will not work in the long run.

It is increasingly clear that the young generation of Kurds refuses to live like their parents, on the empty promises of Kurdish politicians. It demands real change and it has the resilience and willingness to fight for it that previous generations may not have had.

The crackdown may have quelled the protests for now and this battle may have been lost, but the war for the future of the Kurdish region of Iraq continues.

The views expressed in this article are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect Al Jazeera's editorial stance.



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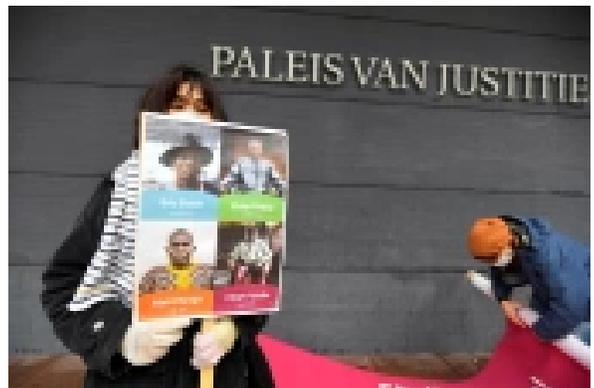
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