

Marcin Rzepka

The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Krakow, Poland

Recalling the Past, voting for the Future. Reflections and observations after the Independence Referendum in Kurdistan, 25 September 2017

The aftermath of the Independence referendum organized by the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) on 25 September 2017 seems to eclipse its value and overshadow its historical meaning which was given by the Kurds who took part in it. Indeed, the referendum which resulted in the isolation of the Kurdistan region, caused the military actions undertaken by the Iraqi government and in consequence, the most symbolic city for the Kurds – Kirkuk was retaken by the Iraqi officials and subjected to Arabization. It also shook the Kurdistan political scene enhancing animosity between the two leading parties – Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). All of that is of great importance and undoubtedly remains a challenge for Kurdish political elites. However, trying to avoid assessments and interpretations of the referendum *ex post facto* I am aiming at analyzing briefly the live experience of people in the time when the referendum was held. It means that the local and social perspectives are prioritized rather than global and political. The opinions of the Kurds expressed during the referendum are taken into account rather than those done in hindsight. I believe that local perspective is important not only because “all politics is local” but rather as a chance to depict the people’s expectations for the future and their attitudes towards the past respectively.

While collecting the data during my short stay in Kurdistan as an observer of the referendum¹ I visited several poll stations monitoring both the procedure of voting and the vote counting. My observations are limited just to the Duhok province. It should be underlined that the support for the ruling party KDP in the province was relatively high and the idea of referendum caused no objections (like for instance in Suleimani). I visited the Bardarash and Sheihan districts with the largest oil reserves in the northern part of the Kurdistan region and also the pool stations in the city of Duhok. Generally, in the whole province, a significant number of IDPs from Mosul and Shingal found the rescue after the regions were invaded by the Islamic State. Moreover, in the province inhabited mostly by the Kurds, large communities of Christians and Yezidis live and conduct their activity. It is important to emphasize that in almost all the stations which I visited people expressed their concept of Kurdistan as a common place for all with no regards to ethnicity and religion. They postulated the necessity of building a unique country in the Middle East with no violence against the religious minorities. Such opinions expressed by Muslims, Christians, Yezidis, Kurds or Assyrians would be partly explained by the influence of the official KRG's policy (Figure 1), rather it should be analyzed in reference to people's experience of diversity on a local level. On such



Figure 1. The poster of ‘yes’ vote campaign (*bale bo serbexoyi*).

1 I would like to express my gratitude to Mr. Ziyad Raouf, the Representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government to Poland who arranged my trip to Kurdistan and offered an enormous help in collecting materials concerning the Kurdish issue.

a level the future, in fact idealized, was concern rather than the past. Of course, the referendum was perceived as a historic moment, but the idea of referendum as a step toward the revision of history of Kurdistan was conveyed not by ordinary people but by politicians.

Safeen Dizayee, the chief of staff to the Prime Minister and Kurdistan Regional Government spokesperson, during the meeting organized a day before the referendum on 24 September 2017 with the international observers argued the Kurds were able to define their own fate and choose the future by breaking with history. He referred to the artificial division of the Middle East rooted in the Sykes-Picot agreement from 1916. His statements might be treated as an attempt undertaken by the Kurdish politicians to revise the certain moments in the modern history of the Middle East: 1) the outcome of the First World War and failure of the Kurds to create an independent state; 2) the falling of the Saddam Hussein dictatorships in 2003 and the development of the post-Saddam Iraq. The main motif which was heard in pre-referendum speeches delivered by the Kurdish politicians was disappointment with both the situation of the Kurds in federal Iraq and the reactions of the international community toward the planned referendum. Dizayee referring to the accusations that the referendum would destabilize the whole region said that: "Kurds cannot be blamed for what is happening in the Middle East", and at the same time he pointed out that the main goal of the KDP was promotion of democracy and equality of all people living in Kurdistan Region. In this dimension, Kurdistan became a kind of social and political experiment, became of a certain idea which was promoted to vote for. Truly, the Kurds were voting for an idea not for a political solution. Nevertheless, the revision of history became a part of official political discourse. It is well seen in recalling Mahmud Barzinji and his struggle against the British in 1920s, who was included into Kurdish nationalist narrative (Figure 2).

On 24 September 2017 there was another meeting organized for the international observers. Handreen Mohamed Salih, the head of Independent High Electoral Commission, who took part in it, explained how the ref-



Figure 2. The referendum poster published in Xebat newspaper, organ of KDP, 21 September 2017.

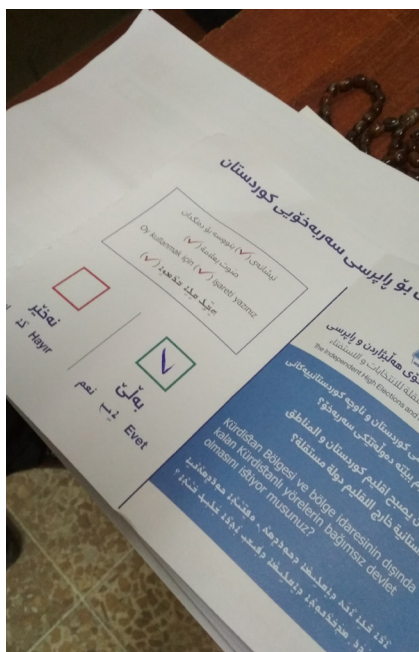


Figure 3. The referendum ballot with marked 'yes' (Marcin Rzepka).

referendum was prepared and how it would be conducted. The referendum was organized in four provinces of the Kurdistan Region: Duhok, Erbil, Sulaimani, Halabja and the regions beyond the administration of KRG (Kirkuk, Diyala province, a part of Nineveh province). A total 5 338 000 people were eligible to vote in the referendum. Around 17 000 workers were employed to organize the referendum and more than 2 000 polling stations were prepared with special centres for the Peshmerga forces and the IDPs. Locally, in the referendum centres the representatives of main Kurdish parties, it means KDP, PUK, Kurdistan Islamic Party and Gorran Movement were invited to monitor

the voting process. Generally, the referendum was observed by more than 4 000 local observers. The inhabitants of Kurdistan who took part in the referendum voted for independence or against it. The ballot was prepared in four languages: Kurdish, Arabic, Turkish, and Syriac. The ballot question was: “Do you want the Kurdistan Region and the Kurdistan areas outside the region’s administration to become an independent state?” (Figure 3).

On the local level in the places (Figure 4), I visited in the Duhok province where the frequency was around 90 % (in the whole in the referendum 72,16 % of the eligible gave a vote)² the referendum was defined as a turning point in the modern history of Kurdistan and at the same time the voting was categorized as instrumental power. When I was asked in Bardarah by Amraz, a member of a local referendum commission whether I was for the independence of Kurdistan, a simple question which evoked a discussion on feeling and emotions accompanying the voters, I realized that the moment of the ref-

² *The Independent High Elections and Referendum Commission. Primary Results*, http://www.khec.krd/pdf/173082892017_english%202.pdf (access: 12.11.2017).



Figure 4. Voting family in Sheikhan (Marcin Rzepka).



Figure 5. A Kurdish girl dressed in a flag (Marcin Rzepka).

erendum was much more important for him that the consequences it might bring. The participation was more important than political deliberations.

The referendum became for him a social and cultural event in which participation was equalized with obligation and responsibility for the nation he belonged to. The referendum became the end of a long process of collective struggle for independence and at the same time a starting point for a new individual and personal duty. The referendum was interiorized, familiarized and turned into a symbol of unity, the inter-ethnic and inter-religious unity and inter-generational solidarity as it was celebrated collectively by whole families. It helped to disseminate the symbols: the Peshmerga uniform and the Kurdish flag (Figure 5) and create new values. Susan, a Kurdish girl from a referendum committee from Duhok, persuaded me that the education would be a new patriotic value in the post-referendum Kurdistan. Thus, what a lesson did the referendum teach the Kurds? What an example did it give to the international observers?

Now, when Kurdistan is at a breaking point it is worth reminding the live experience of the people taking part in the referendum and their optimism that politics made from below really matters.