

Abbas Vali: Kurds need a wise leader

"He is only responsible for the destruction who brings to his people and himself" says Prof. Dr. Abbas Vali talking about Mesud Barzani's referendum decision: "Kurds need a wise leader, a visionary capable of thinking beyond today, a leader who could see today and plan for tomorrow."



[Vecdi Erbay](mailto:vecdi.erbay@gazeteduvar.com.tr) [vecdi.erbay@gazeteduvar.com.tr/Published](mailto:vecdi.erbay@gazeteduvar.com.tr) by Gazete Duvar site, on 12 December 2017.

DİYARBAKIR – Events in Middle East and Turkey are going fast. Some topics are postponing even without debating. It has not been long time since the referendum about independence in South Kurdistan. Besides, after the referendum, Kurds and Turks are following closely. Because of that for a while, the referendum and the echoes were the most important event in politics. Even since long time there is not talkings about this subject, its still important. The diversity and intensity of the actuality, does not mean that the essential problems of the Kurdish people is done, maybe only delayed.

We asked Prof. Dr. Abbas Vali, who follows closely whats happening in Kurdistan, Middle East and who wrote important books about Kurds, to evaluate this referendum in South Kurdistan. Vali, expressed his critics of the way on organization of the referendum, even before the referendum. In this interview, he shared with us his thoughts on the referendum decision, participation to referendum, latest news after referendum, the withdrawal of Kirkuk, taking back the controversial regions from Kurds, and the political crisis in South Kurdistan. Of course he showed the way out from this crisis...

Mr. Vali, we are here to talk about the independence referendum in South Kurdistan and the latest developments. But first, we will begin with the referendum. The views of the dynamics in southern Kurdistan were ignored when it was decided to go to the ballot box. Now it seems that that was not the right attitude. So Why do you think that the decision for the independence referendum was taken despite the opposition?

The referendum was a personal decision made for specific political reason. The DAESH had been defeated and Mr Barzani needed to consolidate his power before the advent of the new era in Iraqi and regional politics. He was aware of the fact that the post-DAESH era will be grounded in a new balance of forces and this meant a new configuration of powers in the Middle East in general and Iraq and Syria in particular. Mr Barzani and his foreign and domestic advisors knew that the restoration of sovereign power in Iraq was on the agenda and that Iran

will play a key and decisive role in it. It was clear that the Iranian backed sovereign state in the post crisis Iraq will display very strong centralising tendencies, directly encroaching on the authority of the Kurdish Regional Government in Erbil, and internal conflicts and territorial disputes were very likely. In order to be able to deal with these conditions he also needed to consolidate his power and boost his legitimacy which had been seriously damaged and were in decline since 2014.

The KRG under the leadership of Mr Barzani had embarked on avowedly illegal processes and practices in order to save and protect his authority in the face of rising internal opposition and discontent. These acts, exemplified by the forced closure of the parliament, the exclusion of democratically elected ministers from the government, silencing critical journalists and academics and imposition of restriction on the freedom of speech and assembly, had seriously damaged the basis of his political legitimacy. It was no longer possible to claim democratic legitimacy when the legal foundation of his power had been eroded.

In a parliamentary system legality of power is the measure of the legitimacy of power. But Mr Barzani extended his presidency without the consent of the parliament which the principal law making body in the system. This means that for the past 2 years his presidency was not legal and therefore not legitimate. It lacked popular democratic legitimacy. Mr Barzani was aware of this and tried to cover it up using the pretext of the war against the DAESH and the necessity of national unity to defend the motherland. But when the war came to an end his excuses also lost credibility. This was the time to the declining legitimacy of his presidency. This of course could have been done by opening the parliament and calling for fresh election. But Mr Barzani was not sure about the outcome of elections, the deteriorating economic and financial conditions and the near bankruptcy of the government had dented his popularity.

The people expected to benefit from the oil export, but they saw nothing. They were kept in the dark about the oil revenue, they did not understand why the government had no revenue to meet its financial obligations, to pay salaries etc. He was afraid of going to the people and asking for their mandate for another term. Nor was sure about the solidity of his alliance with the PUK which was being sustained by two factors: first sharing the oil revenue and secondly keep out the Gorran/Change (the new party which successfully challenged the PUK to second place in parliament in the last elections) from the formal political process, and hence deny it the opportunity to play a decisive role in the political field.

The political organisation of leadership and command in both KDP and the PUK is pre-modern, it is grounded in primordial relations of tribe and clan in which the chief of tribe and head of clan hold supreme status. Power is personal and usually absolute and unassailable, as exemplified by the power and influence of Barzani and Talebani clans at the head of these two parties. These in part explains Barzani's instrumentalist approach to the referendum as the culmination of the civil and democratic rights and liberties of the people. He wanted their mandate to renew and consolidate his declining legal-political legitimacy. He had absolutely no intention of implementing it as he said several times very clearly. He wanted the people's mandate as a means of boosting political legitimacy and a bargaining chip in the process of negotiation with the central government in Baghdad in the post-DAESH era. This instrumentalist approach to referendum and indeed to the civil and democratic rights and liberties of the people of southern

Kurdistan in general signified the authoritarian character of power and the personal nature of rule in the KRG.

The articulation of primordial relations with oil revenue in the structure of political power had created a specific form of domination which I call “Tribal Petro-Patrimonial Domination” in which political authority is sustained and reproduced through patron-client networks based on exchange of oil revenue for political loyalty. These client networks run parallel to the formal structure of power in the government evading formal structures of authority and democratic legitimacy. In a government based on Tribal Petro-Patrimonial Domination power is intensely personal and authority is fundamentally primordial. In my opinion Mr Barzani’s project of a non-binding referendum, his quest for popular democratic mandate to extend and consolidate his personal power, should be seen in this context. His strategic miscalculations leading to the “debacle” were matched by his fear of the consequences of the democratic mandate given to him by the people in the referendum.

Although the referendum participation was below the desired level, the number of voters who said yes for the independence was very high. What are your views on this?

Some people had reservation, they did not support the referendum for a variety of reasons, either individually or collectively, that is, as part of a social or political collective, but then they came out and voted for it in the last minute. This was due entirely to the nature of the case in point: referendum on independence is a very emotive political issue, it is very difficult disagree with it in principle or refuse to take part in it on strictly logical grounds. In fact, the very logic of living independently in your territory, your own historical habitat, is so powerfully enticing as to overlook logical political objections, considerations and reservations, that is, even if some people find the referendum mistimed and misconceived and misrepresented they still decide to vote for it on emotional grounds. Referendum for independence is a nationalist objective, it is by definition embedded in political romanticism and emotional feeling of making your home your own, your own belonging. That was precisely the case in Southern Kurdistan explaining the high level of yes votes in the referendum.

The letter written by the US Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson to Masoud Barzani for postponing the independence referendum has been made public. Despite this letter, how do we explain the implementation of the referendum without considering the US proposals? Why did Barzani ignored the United States?

It seems Mr Barzani’s conception of the letter, and indeed the US position on the referendum as a whole, was based on a series of fundamental miscalculations. In my opinion Mr Barzani seriously misunderstood the long term political strategic objectives of the United States in Iraq on the one hand, and largely overestimated the conflict of interest and hostility between the US and Iran in Iraq. He thought that the US’s fear of Iranian political and military hegemony in an Iraq unified under the Shia majority rule is the decisive factor in the US strategic thinking about Iraq.

He thought that despite what the American statesmen may say in public, when it comes to the crunch in the critical moment they will support a pro-American Kurdish region in Iraq to

counter-balance a pro-Iranian Shia government in Iraq. The vocal support for referendum by Saudi Arabia and Israel, two major US allies in the region, may have also been important to convince him that his reading of Tillerson's letter was correct. As he said after the debacle the US support did not result in help. This means that Mr Barzani assumed that the tacit US support will lead to active help. But clearly it was a wrong assumption based on a wrong reading of the long term strategic interests of the US in Iraq and the region in general. Mr Barzani should not have underestimated the American commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of a unified federal Iraq.

He should have taken into consideration the fact that the US cooperated with Iran for no less than ten years to support and consolidate Mr Maleki's government in Iraq. This cooperation continued unabated after the DAESH's invasion and the fall of Iraqi army and the collapse of Maleki's government.

The US gave Iran free hand to Iran to create the Hashdi Shaabi, the massive Shia militia under the command of Iranian Qods army, the external branch of the Revolutionary Guards Corps, to support Mr Ibadi's government and the ramshackle Iraqi army in the war against the DAESH. The US and Iran shared a supreme strategic objective in Iraq: commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Iraqi state. This proved decisive in the event of the seizure of Kirkuk by the Iranian backed Hashdi Shabi and units of Iraqi army, while the US stood aside watching the process without any attempt to stop it.

Mr Barzani made a grave strategic error. He thought that in the post-DAESH Iraq conditions making the US-Iranian cooperation will no longer hold, and that the US will be inclined to support him and his project against an Iranian backed Shia regime in Baghdad. He gravely underestimated the US commitment to Iraqi sovereignty. The US commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of was paramount in view of what has been going on in the neighbouring Syria since 2011. The failure of the Arab Spring and the rise of Jihadi Islam in the Arab middle East once again emphasised the paramount status of centralised sovereign states for security and order.

Is it possible to say that the Kurdistan Regional Government could carry out a good diplomacy after the referendum in order to explain the results to the world and be accepted by it? Do you think this was ever possible?

At present the situation is more difficult in terms of political and diplomatic processes and practices for the KRG. The referendum resulted in the political isolation of the KRG, just as this isolation resulted in the defeat of the political leadership of the KRG and the project of referendum altogether. As it was said political miscalculation and strategic errors undermined the position of the KRG, its power, prestige and influence have been seriously damaged by this massive strategic miscalculation and erroneous political-strategic mismanagement. It is highly unlikely that the KRG can regain the lost political power and influence any time soon. In fact, in all likelihood in normal political and diplomatic conditions it is going to take some time for it to stabilize and take up a "proactive" political position in Iraq and in the region. But the present situation can change in the conditions of national crisis in Iraq or a regional crisis in the Middle East.

As I have already said the geopolitical weight and the strategic importance of Bashur/ the Kurdish region in Iraq in general and the KRG in particular can change quite rapidly in critical conditions; they can assume a geopolitical weight and strategic importance far above their actual political weight and importance in the situation of national crisis and the collapse of central political authority in Iraq.

Given the historical and political specificity of the Iraqi state such a crisis leading to the disintegration of state power and the political order in Iraq is not ever unlikely. Iraq is a “postcolonial state” and the structure political domination is unstable. It is often based on a fragile political alliance among contending socio-political forces, deeply fractured by religious and ethnic communal relations and primordial tribal/clan loyalties. This unstable structure is often unified by strong political figure which uses violence rather than law to obtain political submission rather than consensus.

In Iraq, like most post colonial states, citizenship is a “share identity” imposed on the population, it is used by the state to meet its “security” objectives and enforce its domination over the diverse ethnic, religious and tribal population in the territory to boost the political order. It is devoid of its democratic content and stripped off the general civic and democratic rights and liberties theoretically associated with the concept of citizenship. The persistence such a political structure and the related forms political institutions and processes in Iraqi politics show very clearly that politics is not based on a broad popular political consensus and that the political process is not institutionalised.

Iraq has been a postcolonial state for nearly a century now, but it has failed completely to produced a uniform Iraqi national identity. The rapid collapse of the Iraqi military against the DAESH, the warm reception that it received in the Sunni community in Iraq, and more recently the emergence of the Hashdi Shaabi, an entirely Shia military force, recruited and organised on the basis of Shi’i religious identity, is a stark reminder of the absence of a uniform Iraqi national identity. They all testify to the truth of my argument that the postcolonial state has failed to create a uniform Iraqi national identity and that communal and primordial relations and loyalties are still dominant in the political field. These conditions breed instability and crisis on national and regional scales.

What would you like to say about the evaluations that the Kurdistan Regional Government has not calculated or ignored the political moves of the central government of Iraq as well as Turkey and Iran, while making a referendum decision? Is it possible that this was a political short-sightedness ?

I think I have already answered this question largely, or at least answered it partly, so here I will only explain the KRG’s response to its neighbours, its serious misconception of the status of Turkey and Iran and their immediate and long term interests in Iraqi politics which led to its miscalculation of their reactions to the referendum.

Iran and Turkey were the two neighbouring countries which played important roles in the debacle that followed the ill-fated referendum project. In relation to Turkey, Mr Barzani seemed to focus on a number of political and economic issues. In the economic field the emphasis was

on the booming trade relations including the export of oil via Turkey, which it was widely believed to serve the interest of both parties rather comfortably. Mr Barzani seems to have estimated the importance of the economic and financial relations in the strategic consideration of the Turkish government.

Politically, Mr Barzani and his advisors assumed that it was in a strategic alliance with the AKP government. At the centre of this strategic alliance was their common opposition to the PKK and its expanding influence in the region. Barzani gave a free hand to the Turkish army to carry out operations against the PKK in Bashur. It also allowed it to station fighting forces in the Kurdish territory much to the dislike of the Iraqi government. In addition to this Mr Barzani also used his influence in the Kurdish community in Turkey to help the AKP in various elections, both general and local. He effectively helped the election campaign of the AKP by mobilising his supporters in the Kurdish community in Turkey to vote for its candidates. In recent years Mr Erdogan used Barzani's overt support to counteract the increasing influence of the HDP and consolidate his legitimacy as the Turkish leader with a strong constituency of support in the Kurdish community.

This strategic cooperation was damaged and weakened by the developments in Rojava, namely, by the appearance and success of the PYD and PYG in Rojava and the inability of pro-Barzani forces to stave off its expansion. Turkish government was hoping to use the pro-Barzani political parties and organisations to create an effective proxy force in Rojava. But Barzani's attempt to realise this objective failed, despite various political and economic restrictions which were imposed on the PYD and PYG in the border area as well as in Bashur by the KRG. The strong military cooperation between the PYG and the USA in Syria was the main reason for the marginalisation of the pro-Barzani forces in Rojava.

In side Turkey too, the shift of strategic focus in AKP's politics after the June 2015 elections and the subsequent AKP-MHP alliance delimited the field of operation for pro-Barzani forces. This is exemplified by the failure of attempts to revive the KDP- Turkey, despite the fact that the HDP was being forced out of the political field and the constitutional political process. The latest opinion polls suggest that the HDP has been able to sustain its constituency of support in the Kurdish community despite the adverse measures taken against it, its leadership, members and supporters. This shows clearly that Barzani and his supporters in the Kurdish community in Rojava and in Bashur could not fulfil the AKP's expectation to act as effective forces and their strategic value in political calculations of the Turkish government declined considerably. In this respect the recent developments in Rojava were more significant as Mr Barzani seems to underestimated their strategic significance for the Turkish government. These developments, inability to change the current US strategy and its likely outcome for Turkey in Syria and the spectre of an autonomous Rojava under the PYD government played an important role in Turkish government's opposition to Mr Barzani referendum.

The dangers of popular quest for independence in Bashur, even if it was being voiced by a trusted ally such as Masoud Barzani, far outweighed the political and economic benefits of the KRG for Turkey, at least in the present volatile conditions in the Middle East. Mr Barzani and

his band of learned advisors also seriously misunderstood and miscalculated Iran's position and the Shi'i regime's aims and intentions. The strategy to counterbalance Iran and the US in the post DAESH era in Iraq backfired completely. As I explained earlier in this interview, Mr Barzani and his advisors overlooked the US commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Iraq, nor did they understand the complexities of the Iran-US relations in the post-DAESH Iraq.

After the referendum and the handing over the control of Kirkuk to the Iraqi central government, comments were made that the Kurdistan Regional Government did not make any economic, diplomatic and military preparations for the independence. Do you agree?

Yes I agree, I have already pointed this out in various interviews and broadcasts before and after the referendum. This lack of preparedness was both a cause and consequence of Barzani's serious strategic miscalculation, his fatal error of judgement.

Referendum for independence is by definition an exercise in political sovereignty, it is the declaration of intention for sovereign rule over your population in your own territory, it is the declaration of your sovereign will to make and implement laws independently in your own territory, it is the declaration of your intention to make and implement independent economic and foreign policy.

These capacities require definite conditions of possibility, definite conditions of realisation, but above all they require military-security, economic-financial, political-institutional conditions. These conditions must be provided to support and sustain the declaration of intent to the establishment of sovereign rule, even if this declaration is only a tactical move and is not legally binding. Mr Barzani and his advisors were too naive to assume that a tactical move would not require such conditions to sustain and support it, particularly when it is proven to be misunderstanding, misconception or even deliberate misrepresentation by the opposition, internal or external. Of these conditions the military-security and political-institutional proved decisive after the referendum. The events on October 16, the fall of Kirkuk and the resulting debacle clearly proved this point. It showed very clearly Mr Barzani presided over a government which lacked a uniform military-security force on the ground and uniform military-security command capable of making uniform decisions and exercising his authority directly throughout its territory.

The KDP and the PUK, the two pillars of the KRG, each had their own Peshmarga force and their own security apparatus with their own leadership and command structure. This disunity and the resulting political factionalism runs deeper in the KRG. It was endemic to its power structure which was based on an alliance between the KDP and PUK. This alliance was a result of political expediency and sheer political pragmatism grounded in short term interests of the two political parties. The alliance was based on the recognition of zones of power and influence by the two parties, the KDP zone, the so-called Yellow zone centred on Erbil, the PUK zone, the so-called Green zone, centred on Sulaimaniya. This expedient power sharing was sustained by a secret agreement to divide the oil revenue between the two parties. This arrangement, especially the mutual recognition of zones of influence, which has been in force effectively since 2003-4 was antithetical to any concept of unity. It was, in effect, an arrangement for power sharing and division of revenue, rather than a united political administration.

So when in the aftermath of the debacle leading to the loss of 52% of territory and 60% oil revenue Mr Barzani went on TV and cried out he has been betrayed his words rang hollow. This because everyone knew those who were said to have betrayed him and delivered Kirkuk to the Hashdi Shaabi under the Iranian command, did not crawl out of the ground all of sudden, No, far from it. They were heads of the security apparatus and political command of the PUK: everyone knows that Pavel Talebani, Aras and Lahor Shaikh Jangi were prominent members of the Talebani clan and as such part of the disunited power bloc otherwise known as KRG.

There is no doubt that they betrayed their own nation by handing over Kirkuk and the rest of the so-called disputed territory to an Iranian organised and led Iraqi Shia militia. But this historic betrayal should be seen politically, that is, in the context of the dynamics of the political process in the KRG grounded in the structure of power sharing between the KDP and the PUK. The balance of power sustained by the creation of zones of influence and revenue sharing had been disturbed by the emergence and rapid popularity of the Gorran Movement in 2011. The electoral success of the Gorran two years later displacing the PUK as the second largest party in the parliament resulted in the increasing dominance of the KDP in the structure of power sharing in the KRG. The PUK appeared to accept to be relegated to a secondary position in so far as the KDP played a leading role in combating and containing Gorran's influence in the political process.

The PUK thus supported Mr Barzani's anti-Gorran policies and practices to the end. In fact struggle against Gorran and attempts to exclude it from the formal political process protecting the established conditions of power sharing in the KRG became an important issue in the new and modified structure of alliance. But Mr Barzani continued with his authoritarian policies and exclusionary practices after the effective marginalisation of Gorran and began targeting specific centres of power and influence inside the PUK. His aim was to break up the PUK and force internal splits. He wanted to marginalise the opposition to his rule within the PUK and dominate the faction which was willing to accept his supremacy and help him to hegemonies his domination, namely the faction composed of the core of the Talebani clan. The betrayal of October 16 was in way a backlash by the opposition growing inside the PUK to Mr Barzani's authoritarian and policies aiming to concentrate power under his own command. In effect the seeds of betrayal germinated in the structure of power in the KRG. It was in this sense an endemic feature of a power structure created and presided over by Masoud Barzani for 14 years. He only has himself to blame for what he brought upon himself and his nation.

Especially after the surrender of Kirkuk, criticism against Kurdish political parties has increased. As the Leader and his insistence for the referendum Masoud Barzani was exposed to these criticisms the most and eventually resigned. What kind of period awaits for the Kurdish politicians in the future? Should we expect for a new and strong leader or a strong political party instead after the death of Jalal Talabani and the resignation of Barzani?

A7. People are seriously unhappy with the political and economic conditions, they rightly blame it on the political leadership the government and political parties, their political corruption and

weakness. They are asking for change which can ensure democratic participation and transparency. This means an open political process and genuine pluralism and popular participation, democratic checks and balances in the crumbling political system. But Significant changes should not be expected as all political leaders and parties are deeply scared of the people, this fear of the common people will force them to compromise over rule most likely at the expense of civic and democratic rights and liberties. The emergence of a new strong leader capable of mobilising the people, making them rally around him and his political programme, a truly national figure in highly unlikely at present. What is needed is not a just strong leader, a strong man to drive people forward, but a strong leader with wisdom and vision. Kurds need a wise leader, a visionary capable of thinking beyond today, a leader who could see today and plan for tomorrow. Such a leader has been missing in Kurdish politics, In my opinion has been the gravest weakness of Kurdish politics, the greatest lack with catastrophic consequences for Kurdish society. Kurdish politics has been full of heroism an sacrifice but short of reason and vision. You only have to read Kurdish history to see the bitter truth of this statement. Kurdish history is a sad history, a history of brave expectations and lost hopes, of sacrifices and betrayals, of defeat and despair.