

## Using External Threat for Internal Gain

By: Dr. Salah Aziz



Recently, inflammatory language against Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki was used by leaders of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Parliament. The recent escalation can be interpreted as an attempt by the Kurdish leading political parties to use external threat to marginalize newly-emerged Kurdish opposition or as an effort to limit al-Maliki's political ambition to strengthen the role of the central government of Iraq. In both cases, there is a risk in delaying the development of democracy and shaking the stability in Kurdistan. Kurds have to practice their rights carefully and fairly in the democratic and federated Iraq.

Using an external threat to gain political power internally is a well-tested technique in the Middle East and elsewhere. Former dictator Saddam Hussein was able to eliminate a large number of leading figures of the Ba'ath Party in 1979 by accusing them of being pro-Syria. He used the same technique again in 1980 by attacking Iran under the pretext that Iran's Islamic Revolution was a threat to Iraq's Pan Arabism Secular Regime. Syria under both presidents Hafez and Bashar Assad used Israel's occupation and threats to keep their population afraid and maintain control of their country. Away from the Middle East, both North Korea and Cuba have used anti-Americanism to keep tight control over their countries for more than half a century. These dictators have ruined their countries economically and politically, all for the sake of holding power.

Is it possible that the Kurdish leading political parties are using the same technique: creating fear among the public against al-Maliki to maintain control of Kurdistan? As criticism against the Kurdish Government arises and Kurdistan witnesses an emergence of new political groups hoping to compete in the coming elections, many are answering yes. The new groups claim that the KRG falls short in serving those who elected them; they rule Kurdistan based on political affiliations; they accumulated wealth and acted ineffectively in defending the national agenda. Therefore, as some opposition argued, the Kurdish leading parties are shifting public interests from the real problems in Kurdistan to al-Maliki in order to keep controlling Kurdistan.

The Kurdish Government expressed displeasure with al-Maliki on several issues. They are against the establishment of the tribal councils inside Kurdistan and in the nearby disputed areas and accuse him of intentionally delaying any resolution to the Kirkuk issue according to the Article 140. Some labeled al-Maliki an authoritarian and anti-democratic leader. As result, KRG sees no hope in al-Maliki's government, therefore, they warn of a possible Arab-Kurd war. Kurdish leaders are also trying to make a new political coalition

in Baghdad to replace al-Maliki's government. Further, they requested from the U.S. government to pressure Baghdad to reconcile on the above mentioned issues.

Kurdish fear from the Iraq's central government is not groundless. Throughout the modern history of Iraq, central governments have acted friendly with the Kurdish national movements when Baghdad was weak. However, when Baghdad gained power and their position became strengthened, they used their military weapons and strength against the people of Kurdistan. Al-Maliki is from the Dawa Party: an Arabist and Islamist. Therefore, there is the possibility that he will not give in to demands of Kurdish secular groups. However, Kurds must know that since 2003, Kurdish leading parties and Shi'a Islamic groups have been partners in governing Iraq. Using Kurdish party-controlled media to emphasize the threat of al-Maliki could generate fear and make people vote for the same political parties already in power in Kurdistan. Al-Maliki's recent popularity in Iraq should not alarm the Kurds since he earned it due to combating lawless militias, restoring stability, providing services and managing the provincial elections successfully. As long as the political power in Baghdad is ruling according to the Constitution, there is no need for fear in Kurdistan, only caution.

Kurdistan should learn from history that the international community respects and supports nations who defend their interests and values within the rule of law. After the recent Kurdish requests from the U.S. Government to pressure the al-Maliki Government, U.S. State Department spokesman Robert Wood said to the Associate Press on February 14<sup>th</sup>, "Iraqi citizens have to rely on the country's democratic system to work out their differences, not the United States." This is a clear message to the KRG to act within the framework of the Constitution, not through the use of threats and manipulation.

During the development of a democracy, political parties often use different techniques to maintain or gain power. The people of Kurdistan should elect those who will serve them and defend their national interests.