

## **Perestroika in Kurdistan's Universities is long overdue**

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Since the liberation of much of Southern Kurdistan from Saddam's regime, there has been an exponential increase in the numbers and capacities of institutes of higher education (IHE) in the Region. It is deeply satisfying that both Kurdistan Regional Governments (KRGs) in Suleimani and Hawler have put HE high on the list of their priorities. Modern Campuses are being constructed coined with investments in the infrastructure and information technologies. The University leaders are increasingly better trained and in touch with their international counterparts in Europe, USA and elsewhere. Furthermore, Kurdish academics in Diaspora are enthusiastically eager to support change and modernisation of Kurdistan's IHE. Prospects for change were further boosted by the recent declaration of intention by the ruling parties to merge the two KRGs.

However, a major rate limiting factor in the process of modernisation is the IHE's lack of independence from the central Government. This is not only a major obstacle for academic success but also has created a breeding ground for corruption, "Wasta", political chaos and total stagnation.

In the early 1990s, the KRG's inherited a non-functioning state from Saddam's regime. Tragically, the KRGs sustained and largely protected this Middle Eastern style of governing. The system is corrupt, out of date and highly centralised. It is built in the shape of a rigid pyramid with little room for promoting or rewarding academic success. There is little incentive for individual innovation, creativity, expression of talent or leadership qualities. Power is monopolised by the Government, more specifically by the office of Prime Minister. The budget and the decision making process is increasingly diluted downwards via several complex and bureaucratic layers. The Ministers of Higher Education (or their deputies) have nominal powers and act as managers, as opposed to leaders. Presidents of IHE monopolise the remaining portion of governing power, leaving the Deans, Heads of Departments or individual academics with extremely diminished roles. A good example that demonstrates the non-functioning bureaucratic system is the issue of student scholarships which should be solely determined within the University mechanisms. Instead, the University plays a mere advisory role and, ultimately, the process is executed by the office of Prime Minister. Students are often refused scholarships by the Prime Minister's advisors, despite competitive selection and strong recommendations from University Presidents.

Thus, despite the magnitude of academic responsibility bestowed upon the academic leaders, their authorities have been undermined by a prohibitive bureaucracy and an out-of-date system of accountability.

In modern international Universities, individual academics retain full control over their research budgets. Heads of Departments and Deans retain their autonomy and have sufficient control over local strategic issues, including planning, new appointments, investment in new research areas, changing curriculum and many more. University Presidents focus on University wide strategies, including governing, meeting targets, planning, defining policies, administrating, auditing etc. The conduct of the Presidents and all other executive offices are governed via a constitution and monitored by a semi-elected body. The latter may have within its membership lay members, experts, elected staff, students and possibly Government representatives. There are plenty of successful democratic models to benefit from.

Now is the time for the KRG's and the Regional Parliament to expertly review the process of governing Kurdistan's IHE and introduce democratic checks and balances and ensure IHE's independence as well as accountability. Accountability to the public, the University staff and KRG are all essential. In return, IHE's should be granted full professional and administrative independence.

The road for academic success is a long one but starts from the right first step. A democratic and functional framework for a modern academic IHE can only be built upon a solid foundation. The onus is on the Kurdistan Regional Parliament to review and define the system of HE, the KRGs to implement the constitution and the academic leaders to continuously lobby for independence. The process of change costs next to nothing but its rewards are invaluable and the earlier this occurs the sooner Kurdistan can face the future with confidence.