

Kurdistan: a new face in the Middle East¹

Usman A. Tar

Dr. Usman Tar was interviewed by Namo Abdulla of the *Hawler Tribune* on 4 May, 2009. Dr Tar critically analyzes the approaches by which Kurdistan region can be developed and modernized. He believes that Kurdistan is developing smoothly and can be a new face of development in the Middle East. Dr. Tar is author of *Politics of Neoliberal Democracy in Africa* and Managing Editor of the *Information, Society & Justice*, London Metropolitan University.

Hawler Tribune: What is your impression of Kurdistan and its struggles to achieve independence and development?

Usman Tar: We must see Kurdistan in comparison with other similar societies. I will give three examples. First, we have regions which are far less fortunate than Kurdistan. Consider Kashmir which is shared by three nuclear powers – China, India and Pakistan. Two of these middle-range powers (India and Pakistan) have been engaged in years of skirmishes over the control of this region. For many years, Kashmiris have been struggling for independence, but their aspiration is far from being achieved. Second we have societies which have managed to gain their independence with mixed results. Good examples include Somaliland and Puntland who declared independence from Somalia, a weak state that collapsed in 1991. Unfortunately both Somaliland and Puntland are yet to secure international recognition. Somaliland submitted its application for international recognition to the UN since the early 1990s, but the body is yet to recognize it. Another example is Kosovo which recently declared independence, but is yet to achieve recognition from many actors in the international community. Many powerful states and organizations in the international community are not in a mood to grant recognition to seceding states because doing so will set dangerous precedent for others. It is perhaps because of the Kosovo precedent that Russia recently recognized the South Ossetia and Abkhazia which declared independence from Georgia – following recent civil war in late 2008. Finally, we have regions which are very fortunate to gain independence after years of struggle. A good example is Eritrea which is fully recognized by the international community. Today, Eritrea is a self-governing and self-dependent state with its standing army, a vast coastland, and thriving economy. Kurdistan can be located between these three extremes. It is fortunate in many respects. The achievement of Kurdish self-determination and development is a function of the

¹ Source: *Hawler Tribune*, available at: <http://hrtribune.net/View.aspx?id=117> [Accessed: 05-05-09]

determination of all fragments of the Kurdish society – politicians, industrialists, teachers, youths, men, women etc – as well as how politics unfolds at the centre (Baghdad)!

Hawler Tribune: Kurdistan region has been trying to modernize and rebuild its system on a Western secular model, which is a liberal democracy, especially in terms of the economy and free market. To what extent do you believe this is going to be feasible and productive?

Usman Tar: Based on my observation and reading of current politics of the region, I will confidently claim that Kurdistan is well poised to achieve liberal development. It demonstrates the trappings of a modernizing society. There are two contexts of achieving this. First is the domestic environment. Kurdistan is endowed with natural and human resources. The Kurdish political and working classes are determined and willing to build modern institutions based on global practice. Kurdistan is also endowed with a young energetic population – Kurdish youths are some of the most defensive and patriotic people I have ever seen. Kurdistan is relatively secure compared to other parts of Iraq. Indeed it is described as “the other Iraq”. Key sectors of the economy are gradually being developed. Second is the external environment. Since the demise of Saddam Hussein, the region has attracted both the goodwill and interest of the international community. Foreign investment is gradually flowing into the region in spite of the current global economic slowdown. Kurdistan is attracting investors from all parts of the world – Europe, Asia, and North America – particularly in the energy sector.

In this respect, I will only advise that in adopting liberal development, and building a modern Kurdistan, the following should have to be institutionalized. First is the construction of forward-looking identity, one that fosters a common sense of purpose among culturally diffuse groups in the region (Kurdish, non-Kurdish, Muslims [Sunnis, Shi’ites], Christians, Yazdies etc). Second is a civilised and democratic means of arriving at a consensus on the legitimate exercise of power and authority. There is need to create sufficient spaces for popular engagement – elections, referenda, opinion polls, policy debates and so on. The inputs of the people should be taken in good faith, and in the spirit of democratic decision-making. Third is the need to ensure constructive inclusion of members of society in the policy and democratic processes. “Marginalisation” has been a disease imposed on the Kurdish people, and should be avoided at all levels of society. Men, women, youths, and peoples of all ethnicities and religions should be engaged in building the region. Fourth is the need to ensure effective presence government and its machineries (bureaucracy, security agencies, parliament, governorates etc) throughout the region. A responsible government opens its door to society, and prioritize peoples’ interest in social provisioning. Fifth is equitable distribution of resources which involves balancing of public demands for goods and services with the government’s capacity and responsibility in all sectors of the economy – welfare, defence, security etc. Finally modernisation involves integration which involves the creation of a tolerant, coherent, and constructive culture amongst the diverse interests of the members of society.

Hawler Tribune: Many people including both local and foreign people denounce KRG for having a high level of corruption and lack of transparency in the crucial matters, such as, of budget. How can this issue of corruption be dealt with?

Usman Tar: I want to take serious exception to these allegations. First, corruption and transparency are relative terms. There is no society that is 100% corrupt or 100% transparent. By extension, every society has some degree of both. Second, it is premature to claim that everybody in a particular society or government is corrupt. There may be “bad eggs” in a bird nest, but we should not ignore the good eggs that will eventually hatch. The challenge is to carefully remove the “bad eggs”, and allow the good ones to hatch. Personally, I have no evidence that there is

“high level of corruption and lack of transparency in the KRG” – as claimed in the question. If there is any irregularity in Kurdistan, then I will suggest the adoption of robust culture of transparency and a “zero-tolerance” against corruption as adopted by developed western democracies. These societies stand out in the international league of transparent nations because of the relatively selfless and transparent caliber of their leaders and scrutinizing nature of their citizenry.

For Kurdistan, zero-tolerance could be built at two levels. First is a “transparent state” governed by “selfless leaders”. Leaders should be people of integrity and honor – those who are ready to forgo their selfish interest for the benefit of society. The machineries of governance, under a selfless leadership (ministers, parliamentarians, bureaucrats, security agents etc) should be based on good practices such as those practiced by Europe, USA, Canada, Australia and some Asian countries. Leaders should be held accountable for every dinar of income and expenditure in the region. Those in position of authority should govern as custodians of public resources, and providers of public good. Policies and programs should be people-centered. The principles of fiscal discipline, accountability and proper auditing such as those advocated by Transparency International should be the hallmark of good governance.

Second is a “transparent society” populated by patriotic, informed and alert citizens who are not only incorruptible, but also fearless in demanding accountability from their leaders. People at all levels of society – civil society, families, communities, youths, elders etc – must consciously imbibe the culture of transparency and serve as watch-dogs of a corruption-free society. People should be “clean enough” to demand a transparent leadership. They should not be forced to give bribe, or tempted to accept them. Bribery is cancer that kills self-esteem and productivity.

Hawler Tribune: If Kurdistan emulates a Western secular model, to what extent would it be survive amongst and tolerated by its neighbors, which are highly religious and fundamental?

If Kurdistan emulates the western secular model it stands high chances of following on the footsteps of developmental states in the Middle East especially Jordan, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. A modernized Kurdistan is likely to be stronger, stable, secure, united and democratic. With these virtues it is natural and likely that Kurdistan will have both friends and foes. Kurdistan’s friends will be like-minded, forward-looking and modernized entities in the international community. Many European and North American countries have been sympathetic to the Kurdish people and their causes. They will continue to support the region, particularly against its enemies. On the other hand, Kurdistan’s enemies will mainly be its neighbors. The region is indeed surrounded by hostile neighbors – Iran, Syria, and Turkey. Most of these nations are governed by theocratic orders, even though some claim to be secular. Going by their policies, particularly towards their Kurdish citizens, these countries have no sympathy for Kurdistan or the Kurdish people. Turkey calls its Kurdish citizens the “Mountain Turks”. It is a treasonable offence to claim Kurdish identity in Turkey. Iran and Syria too have similar repressive approach against their minorities. In companionship with its friends, a modernized Kurdistan will be in a better place to face enemies.

Hawler Tribune: There are several approaches to development - Modernization, Socialist and so forth. Which approach can be the most feasible one to the modernization of Kurdistan?

Usman Tar: I will briefly examine the two main approaches to development and then make an informed prescriptive statement. First, Modernization approach advocates the adoption of liberal democracy, secularism, rationalism, constitutionalism, and transparency as the means of achieving western style development. Liberal democracy is a kind of democracy built around

“people” as the source of popular rule and sovereignty. The defining features of liberal democracy are regular elections in which people have the absolute right to elect or depose their leaders, popular participation in policy-making and implementation, guarantee of all forms of human rights (social, economic, political and cultural). Secularism involves the extrication of religious sentiments in public affairs. Secularists abhor the preference of any particular religion in the public sphere. This does not mean that religion is discouraged. People should be free to practice their religion but only in the private realm. The aim is to promote tolerance, multiculturalism, mutual coexistence and, above all, the primacy of national identity above sectarian identity. Rationalism involves the adoption of rational scientific model of thinking in governing public affairs. Public institutions and policies should be influenced not by sectarian or selfish motives, but by objective rational motives. Constitutionalism involves the governance of society on the basis of rule of law, fundamental human rights, check and balances on those who hold power, and transparency in public policy. Finally, transparency involves the prudent governance of public resources.

Secondly, the Socialist approach advocates the adoption of totalitarian socialist order where the state controls the means of production: factories, markets, farms and so on. Here, development is predicated on the principle of “from everybody according to his/her capacity, and to everybody according to his/her needs”. The state makes everyone work on the basis of their ability, and reward everyone on the basis of their need. There is no room for individualism, entrepreneurship, or profit-making. Marxism advocates a strong state, governed by the proletariat who represent the interest of the society as a whole. The strong totalitarian state will be responsible for formulating collectivist development agenda in which all members of society have equal stake. It also advocates socialist democracy where every member of society participates directly in the governance of public goods. Finally, it advocates collective ownership of resources which means that, in principle, every member of society has equal share based on need.

We need to understand that each approach is supported by corresponding ideological paradigm (Modernization=capitalism, and Marxism=socialism/communism). Some societies practice the modernization approach (e.g. European countries, USA and Canada), while others practice the Socialist approach (e.g. China, North Korea and Cuba). We should also understand that following the end of the Cold War in 1989 both international capitalism and neoliberal modernization have now become the favored models of development. Conversely, the socialist model of development is currently in a state of comatose. Nevertheless, each theory has some benefits and limitations, particularly if applied to fledgling society like Kurdistan. But it seems Kurdistan has adopted the Western secular development model. This is not surprising because many societies including those who adopted the socialist model (including former Soviet Republics) have now adopted the capitalist model. In this respect, I will suggest that the region should strive to build the key structures of western style development model as outlined in my response to Question 2.

Hawler Tribune: After you saw Kurdistan, how did you see it politically, economically, socially and culturally?

Usman Tar: My impression of Kurdistan was that of a region suppressed by millennia of domination, marginalization, repression, oppression and decay from the inglorious hands of emperors, dictators and tyrants. I saw it as an unfortunate region, not by its own doing but by the conspiracies and aggressive policies of others. Today, my impression has changed to the following: a region that is fast developing in spite of its bitter history. Politically, Kurdistan is relatively united entity, with a common sense of direction, notwithstanding some degree of

disagreements amongst its people. The international community is aware and sympathetic of the Kurdish people and will always support the region to achieve development. Economically, I see Kurdistan as a "construction site". One sees new buildings and economic activities mushrooming throughout the region. With the way things are going, Kurdistan could soon be a new face of development in the Middle East. Socially and culturally, the Kurdish people are very friendly, yet defensive of their culture. They receive foreigners with an ambient sense of respect, but expect others to respect them too. They relish "culture talk" and are outspoken, outgoing, and modest. I see this social and cultural make-up as a function of their deep-rooted history and fearless nature. Kurdistan is one of the oldest human civilizations. According to the Kurdish calendar, this year is 2709 – it is 700 years older than the Gregorian calendar and over a thousand years older than Muslim calendar! This is an indication of an old culture, with its unique norms and values. If in the past, history has not been on the side of the Kurdish, today history is certainly with the Kurdish people. There is every reason to celebrate and be hopeful.