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Nationalism and Feminism : The Case of Kurdistan

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Framework of the Study

This study, a work in progress, is in its preliminary stages. Using a political economy framework I define " nation " and " nationalism " as follows : " A nation consists of a people, sharing a common language (or dialects of a common language), inhabiting a fixed territory, with common customs and traditions, which may have become sufficiently conscious to take on the aspect of law, and who recognize common interests and a common need for a single sovereign. " ¹ We must add to these features of the nation the existence of capitalist relations and a middle class as well as national consciousness or nationalism. According to this definition, Canada does not consist of a single nation ; there are two major nations, French speaking Quebecers and Anglophones. When European colonizers settled in this part of the world, the Native peoples had not yet evolved as nations. European domination resulted in the disruption of their food-gathering and/or agrarian economies and dismantled their territories. In terms of social organization, most of the Native peoples lived as tribes or, in a few cases, as agrarian and urban peoples (the Incas and the Mayas).

Thus nations did not exist throughout history. Nations began to emerge with the rise of capitalism first in Western Europe in the 18th century, and much later in Eastern Europe and other countries. Nations are, therefore, *political* and *social* formations, which can be distinguished from kin, tribe, group, society, community or country.

Pre-capitalist society was characterized by the existence of an agrarian " natural economy, " in which the peasant family produced food and other necessities for their own consumption. This was a subsistence economy, which produced only a small surplus appropriated by the feudal lord. The

tools of agrarian production were underdeveloped. Most of the people had to work on the land. Thus, social and geographical mobility was limited. People usually grew up, lived, and died in their birthplace. This situation favoured local dialects, local culture, and loyalty to one's community and region. In the absence of a sizeable surplus production, trade was seriously limited. Politically, the majority of the people, i.e. the peasants, were tied to the land and the landlord. The small landlord was subordinate to the more powerful feudal lord and all of them were subject to the power of the monarch who sought legitimacy in God and the Church.

The rise of the bourgeoisie or the middle class gradually changed this relationship. The new class did not produce for its own consumption only. It was in the beginning a mercantile class. It bought and sold. It promoted commodity production. It developed a national market, in which people from all parts of the country could sell their labour power and become workers; social, economic and geographical mobility was for the first time possible on a large scale. The authoritarian feudal state was an obstacle to the development of the middle class, which needed law and order in order to engage in trade. This new class called for "popular sovereignty." It opposed the exercise of power by the monarch; it called for the exercise of power by the middle class through the parliament. Through a series of reforms and revolutions, monarchs lost their power and were replaced either by constitutional monarchies or republican regimes. The rule of the middle class led to the transformation of vernaculars into national languages, standardization of weights and measures, improved education facilities and the universal application of laws.

Thus capitalism unites a people by creating a national market, national borders, a national language and culture. Another tendency of capitalism is to create a surplus production of commodities which is beyond the ability of the nation to consume. These commodities had to be exported, and raw materials had to be acquired from other countries. Means of transportation, beginning with navigation, were improved and mechanization of production was introduced on a large scale. All of this required the promotion of secular knowledge, i.e. modern sciences, and literacy. Secularism challenges the religious world view.

The Case of Kurdistan

The Kurds are one of the ancient peoples of the Middle East. In terms of social organization, they were mostly agrarian and tribal, although urban life similar to that of Medieval Europe has been a feature of Kurdish society. Under the flourishing feudal economy of the 15th and 16th centuries, powerful mini-states or principalities emerged in Kurdistan. However, a united or centralizing state did not emerge out of this mosaic of principalities. This was largely due to the emergence of two powerful feudal empires; the Iranian state to the east, and the Ottoman state to the West, which divided Kurdistan in the 17th century. The two empires pursued a centralization policy aimed at the overthrow of the mini-states, and their replacement by governors from Istanbul and Isfahan. The principalities put forward strong resistance. As a result, Kurdistan turned into the site of a ceaseless war between the two empires. Each side used one or more principalities against the other side. The war resulted in the devastation of the agrarian economy, the destruction of villages, towns, farms, and numerous massacres and forced migrations. While these destructions prevented the social and economic development of the Kurds, it led to the rise of a political awareness among the Kurdish literati, i.e. the clergy and the members of the landed aristocracy. A sense of Kurdish identity began to emerge in the realm of literature and language and the writing of the first history of the Kurds four hundred years ago (1597). Kurdish intelligentsia of the 16th and 17th centuries clearly distinguished the Kurds from their Moslem neighbours, the Turks, Arabs and Persians. In the 17th century, one Kurdish poet, Ahmad-e Khani identified the Turks, Persians and Arabs as oppressors, and called for the establishment of a Kurdish state under the rule of a Kurdish king. This was of course far from being a middle class, European type of nationalism.

Modern ideas of a nation and nationalism first appeared in the latter part of the 19th century in the poetry of the Kurdish poet Haji Qadiri Koyee.² He did not call for the liberation of the Kurds by uniting them under the rule of a king. In fact, the last remaining principalities had been overthrown in the 1860s. Haji Qadir who lived the last years of his life in cosmopolitan Istanbul looked at Japan and other modern nations as a model. Although he was a mulla, he called on the Kurds to discard

superstitious religious beliefs, to learn modern sciences, to publish newspapers, and to take up arms and liberate themselves by forming their own state. However, feudal relations of production were still dominant especially in the countryside. The first newspaper was published in 1898, and the first political party was established during the bourgeois democratic revolution of 1908 in Turkey known as the Young Turk Revolution. All of these initiatives were taken by the members of the uprooted landed aristocracy, i.e. the feudal class.

With the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in the First World War, the western part of Kurdistan was redivided between the new states of Iraq, Syria and Turkey. The Treaty of Serves, signed in 1920 between the victors of the war and the Ottoman state, called for the formation of a Kurdistan state on the present territory of Turkey. However, the rise of Kemal Ataturk to power and the formation of the Soviet Union resulted in the replacement of this treaty by another treaty (Lausanne Treaty) which did not mention the Kurds.

In 1923, the Ottoman empire was formally replaced by a Republican regime which was an extremist Turkish nationalist state. The Kurds resisted assimilation into the Turkish state by revolting in 1925 and frequently in the 1930s. All of these revolts were brutally suppressed resulting in the killing and deportation of hundreds of thousands of Kurds.

In Iraq, under the British Mandate and the League of Nations, the Kurds struggled for an autonomous state, but they were allowed only minor concessions in the form of limited freedom to use the Kurdish language in primary education and the media. The Kurds revolted in the early 1920s and later in the 1940s but they were suppressed by Britain and Iraq.

In Iran, too, the Kurds suffered under the extremist nationalist and centralist regime of the Pahlavi monarchy. Soon, after the end of the second World War, however, the Kurds, encouraged by the Soviet Union, formed their autonomous state in areas that were under Soviet occupation. The Kurdish Republic lasted for 11 months and was suppressed by the Iranian government six months after the Soviet troops left Iran. This was the Kurds' most important experiment in modern state building.

Kurdistan in the latter part of the 20th century has been the site of unceasing nationalist revolts in Iraq, Iran and Turkey. There are now numerous political parties, ranging from Marxist to nationalist, Islamic, and social democratic organizations. In Iraq, in the so-called Safe Haven formed by the allies of the Gulf War a "Regional Government of Kurdistan" has been formed since 1992. In Turkey, the Kurdistan Workers Party better known as PKK, has been fighting the Turkish state since 1984. The Kurds of Iran have fought the Islamic state since 1979. However, the Kurds seem to be far from achieving their goal of self-determination in the form of autonomy or independence. The Western powers do not want a dismantling of the international borders in the region. The stability and security of Turkey, a NATO member and an important ally of the West, is more important than the national rights of the Kurds.

The Kurdish Women's Movement

The literature on Kurdish women is extremely limited.³ The scant literature by Westerners depicts the Kurdish women as enjoying more freedom than Turkish, Persian, and Arab women. Much of this claim is based on the observation that women do not veil and they freely associate with men. It is also based on the observation that a number of Kurdish women came to power as rulers in some territories of Kurdistan during this century.⁴ One well-known case in the present century was Adela Khanum of Halabja. At the time of the British occupation of Southern Kurdistan in 1918, she was already a widow, but "she had remained the uncrowned queen of the region, and it was with her that [British] generals and political officers had to deal"⁵. Because she saved the lives of several British officers, the British administration conferred on her the male title "Khan Bahador."

Another example is Fatima Khanum who, after the death of her husband, administered his group of eight villages near Rawandiz, Iraq. She transacted every kind of business with the Iraqi Government and was chosen regularly by the villages to vote on their behalf at parliamentary elections, at a time when the law stated quite clearly that only males were entitled to take part either as primary or secondary electors.

A number of similar cases can be cited for urban women. Edmonds mentions Rabi'a, a lower class woman who had become the head of the bakers at Sulaimani in the early 1920s. Rabi'a negotiated with the municipality regarding price-fixing for bread and maintained admirable discipline among her colleagues in the craft who were second only to the butchers.

In spite of this, Kurdish women are as oppressed as the women of neighbouring nations. The patriarchal system is equally powerful in Kurdistan. Despite the intensity of the nationalist struggle, women were excluded from participation. In 1919, the first women's society was formed with the adoption of a constitution. This was, however, a society formed by the male and female members of the Kurdish aristocracy of Istanbul. It did not indicate the existence of a feminist "movement." In the many revolts of the 1920s and 1930s in Turkey, there is no indication of women's participation. In the autonomist movement of Sheikh Mahmud in the early 1920s in Iraq, a woman, Hapsa Khan (1881-1953), was a prominent personality related to the leader Shaikh Mahmud but, again, this was an exception. She was made responsible for the proper handling of the jailing of several British administrators who were imprisoned under Shaikh Mahmud's orders⁶. Later in 1930, Hafsa Khan continued to contribute to the nationalist cause when she sent a petition to the League of Nations protesting the violation of Kurdish national rights in Iraq (League of Nations, Geneva 1931, p. 220). She also aided the Kurdish Republic established in Iran in 1946. Hafsa also devoted much of her life and property to providing education for women ("Hapsa Khani Naqib," March 1961).

During the Kurdish Republic of 1946, a Women's Party (*Hizbi Jinan*) was formed by the ruling Kurdish Democratic Party in Mahabad, the capital of the republic. It was led by Mina Khanim, the wife of the president of the republic. The party appointed ten women to head party activity in the ten neighbourhoods of the city. One of the activities was a literacy program for women who were mostly illiterate. Another was collecting material aid for the administration of the republic. Members of the party participated in cultural and political meetings, and some of them gave talks on different occasions. A number of women wrote articles for

the newspaper *Kurdistan*. During a celebration of the foundation of the Republic, sixteen speeches were made, two of which were by women (*Kurdistan*, No.10, February 4, 1946).

The President of the republic, Qazi Mohammad, was personally interested in promoting education among women. Two girls' schools were operating, and several of the teachers were women. However, women did not become members of the Kurdish Democratic Party, and although a few were employed in the administrative system, no one achieved a prominent administrative or political status. Women's participation in the political life of the country was limited to appearances in ceremonies, demonstrations, raising funds and other materials needed for the Kurdish resistance army. Organizationally, the women's union was dependent on the Kurdish Democratic Party. The active women belonged mostly to the nobility. Each of ten quarters of the city of Mahabad, capital of the Republic, had a woman director who was responsible for organizing the women of their neighbourhood (see *Kurdistan*, No. 77, August 15, 1946, p. 4, for a list of names). Although the organization was being expanded (according to an announcement in *Kurdistan*, No. 85, June 12, 1946, p. 1, the Union needed an accountant, treasurer, secretary, and cashier), no increased involvement in politics is recorded in the official press. However, it is important to note that almost half of the female teachers and contributors to the newspaper were Armenian and Jewish, although the Armenians and the Jews were a small minority.

The Autonomist Moment of Iranian Kurdistan, 1979-1985

The Kurds of Iran participated actively in the anti-monarchy revolution of 1978-79. The Kurds demanded autonomy within a democratic and federated state, even though the Islamic regime, as centralist as the old regime, declared war on the autonomist movement. The government attacked Kurdistan in April 1980 and a brutal war started which lasted for several years.

The revolution and the autonomist movement politicized the entire Kurdish society. Women's involvement in both political and military action is unprecedented in recent history. Until the first government

offensive of August 1979, women's activism was mostly non-violent : demonstrations, sit-ins, marches, and organizing of working women and housewives. Secondary school students, the major force in all these actions, were joined by teachers, government employees, and others. During these months several women's organizations were formed in Saqqez, Sanandaj, and other Kurdish towns. The Militant Women's Society of Saqqez had achieved considerable influence and prestige not only among the dozen or so political organizations of the city but also throughout Kurdistan. The Women's Council of Sanandaj had a leftist orientation and was a very active political force. Both of these organizations were dissolved as a result of government offensives against the autonomist movement.

A new women's organization called "The Revolutionary Organization of Kurdistan Women" was established in Sanandaj in 1980. Training programs, discussion groups, and support groups were established. Following the takeover of the towns, the government arrested and executed many women and men, names were announced in the state-controlled press and several check points were established.

Conclusions

In Kurdistan, there is no evidence of the existence of a feminist movement as exists in the West. National oppression has overshadowed gender oppression. Since the 1920s, Kurds have been subjected to a very harsh policy of linguistic and ethnocide especially in Turkey, Iran and Syria (since 1962). These conditions were not favourable to the development of feminist consciousness. Women, when allowed to engage in political struggle, fought under the same banner held by men, nationalism.

In order to demonstrate their interest in the fate of all members of the nation, Kurdish political parties began to talk about equality between the two genders. However, until the formation of Komala and PKK, no political party allowed equal access to political and military activism. PKK and Komala both advocate Marxism as their ideology. Other nationalist parties such as the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of

Kurdistan have formed their women's organizations. However, these organizations are merely cosmetic, and the two parties have argued in recent years that there is no room for gender equality in Kurdish society because the Islamic and traditional culture consider the people to be all equal. They argue that any improvement in the lives of women should be postponed until the achievement of self-determination.

Thus, although the nationalist movement depends on rallying the support of men and women, it discourages any manifestation of womanhood or political demands for gender equality. In the 1980s, the Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran, which is quite conservative, engaged in extensive propaganda against its rival Komala for allowing women to join the political and military ranks of the organization. However, it is clear from the evidence that the scope and depth of the struggle against gender inequality depend on the political and ideological orientation of the nationalist movement.

Notes

1. Roger Scruton, *A Dictionary of Political Thought* (London, Macmillan Press, 1982), p. 313.
2. See Amir Hassanpour, "The pen and the sword : Literacy, education and the revolution in Kurdistan," in Peter Freebody and Anthony R. Welch (eds.), *Knowledge, Culture and Power : International Perspectives on Literacy as Policy and Practice* (London : Falmer Press, 1993), pp. 35-54.
3. See Henny Harold Hansen, *Daughters of Allah : Among Moslem Women in Kurdistan*, trans. Reginald Spink (London : Allen and Unwin, 1960) ; and *The Kurdish Woman's Life : Field Research in a Moslem Society, Iraq*, (Kobenhavn : Nationalmuseet, 1961) ; and Shahrzad Mojab, "Women in politics and war : The case of Kurdistan," Working Paper #145, Women in International Development, (Michigan State University, 1987).
4. For more discussion on this point see, Martin van Bruinessen, "Matriarchy in Kurdistan ? Women rulers in Kurdish history," *International Journal of Kurdish Studies*, Vol. 6, nos 1&2, 1993, pp. 25-39.
5. C. J. Edmonds, "The place of the Kurds in the Middle Eastern Scene," *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society*, Vol. 45, no. 2, April 1958, pp. 141-153.
6. See Fredrik Barth, *Principles of Social Organization in Southern Kurdistan* (Oslo : Universitets Etnografiske Museum, 1953), pp. 120-21.

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