
IRAQ'S FORMER PRESIDENT JALAL TALABANI DIED

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Jalal Talabani, former president of Iraq and Kurdish politician, has died in Germany aged 84.

He was Iraq's president from 2005 to 2014 and a key figure in the Kurdish region of Iraq, where voters last week overwhelmingly backed independence in a controversial referendum.

"Our leader died in Germany," an official with Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) said on Tuesday.

A family member said Talabani's health had taken a turn for the worse and he been transported to Germany, along with his wife and two children, before the referendum.

Zana Said, an Iraqi Kurdish politician, paid tribute to Talabani as "the only president whose death saddens Arabs, Kurds and all other ethnicities".

Q&A: Iraqi President Jalal Talabani

Iraq's head of state plays a largely ceremonial role and is elected by members of parliament.

Talabani was one of the longest-serving figures in contemporary Iraqi Kurdish politics, but for much of the past 40 years, he opposed successive governments in Baghdad.

Among Kurds, he was widely referred to as mam (uncle) Jalal.

Talabani's death, following a decades-old struggle for Kurdish statehood, came after Iraq's Kurds voted 92.7 percent to split from Iraq in the September 25 referendum.

The vote, rejected by the Iraqi central government as illegal, has put a deep strain on ties between the Kurds and central Iraqi authorities, who have cut off international flights to the region and threatened further action.

Political career

Talabani was an avuncular politician and a skilled negotiator, who spent years building bridges between the country's divided factions, despite his efforts for Kurdish independence.

Born in 1933 in the mountain village of Kalkan, he studied law at Baghdad University.

In 1956, while still a student he went into hiding to evade arrest for his political role as founder and secretary-general of the Kurdistan Student Union.

After graduating from law school in 1959, he was called to serve in the Iraqi army where he commanded a tank unit.

When the Kurds sought independence and rose against the Iraqi government in 1961, Talabani led battles at home in Iraq, as well as diplomatic missions to Europe and elsewhere in the Middle East to drum up support for his people.

Joining the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) of Mullah Mustafa Barzani, father of Masoud Barzani, current president of the Kurdistan Regional Government, Talabani took to the hills in a first uprising against the Iraqi government in 1961.

However, abandoned by their Iranian, US and Israeli allies, Mustafa Barzani's forces were routed by Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein's army, and the Kurdish revolt collapsed in 1975.

Talabani split from the KDP to form the PUK in an attempt to redefine the Kurdish political movement.

The PUK suffered badly when Saddam's generals used chemical weapons against the Kurds in 1988.

Talabani fled northern Iraq to seek asylum in Iran, from where he continued to lead an armed resistance against Saddam.

Talabani's political career took a fresh turn after the 1991 Gulf War and the subsequent Kurdish uprising against the Iraqi government.

The establishment of a "no-fly" zone and a safe haven for Kurds above the 36th parallel by Britain, France and the US, after Iraq's defeat in Kuwait, marked the beginning of a short-lived honeymoon with the KDP.

Elections were held in the Iraqi Kurdish regions, and a PUK-KDP joint administration was established in 1992.

However, the underlying tension between the two parties spilled over into armed confrontation, dubbed the fratricide war, in 1994.

Peace agreement

Shortly after violence broke out, the KDP under Masoud Barzani called on Saddam's forces to help in routing the PUK. Talabani again fled to Iran.

However, their four-year conflict ended in 1998 with Talabani and Barzani signing a peace agreement in Washington, DC, after concerted efforts by the US and, to a lesser extent, Britain to defuse tensions between them.

The peace accord was further strengthened on October 4, 2002, when the regional parliament reconvened in a session attended by MPs of both the PUK and KDP.

Talabani became president in April 2005 after the first post-Saddam election in Iraq and continued in the post until 2014.

In August 2008, Talabani underwent successful heart surgery in the US, then in 2012, he was flown to Germany after suffering a stroke, casting doubt over his ability to ever return to Iraq.

He did go back in July 2014, with Iraq in crisis after the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL, also known as ISIS) group had taken control of big expanses of the country.

Kaynak/Source: