
OPPONENT OF IRAQ KURD LEADER SOLE CANDIDATE IN PRESIDENTIAL VOTE

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An ex-minister in Iraq's first post-invasion government will be the sole candidate for the presidency of the country's autonomous Kurdish region in a November election, an official said on Tuesday.

Mohammad Tofiq Rahim, 64, a staunch opponent of current Kurdish leader Massud Barzani who has repeatedly said he will not stand again for the post, was the only person to put forward his candidacy, the autonomous region's electoral chief said.

"By the deadline for candidates on Tuesday, we had received all the documents necessary for Mohammad Tofiq Rahim to be a candidate for the presidency of Kurdistan. He is the only person to have declared himself a candidate," electoral commission head Yari Hadji Omar told AFP by telephone from the regional capital Arbil.

The Kurdish region, which last week voted overwhelmingly in favour of independence in a referendum rejected both by Baghdad and by Iraq's neighbours Turkey and Iran, will hold presidential and legislative elections on November 1.

The electoral commission has approved 21 lists of candidates for the legislative vote.

Despite repeatedly saying he would not stand for re-election, Barzani has also been seen as reluctant to cede power.

Rahim, a former member of the Kurdish peshmerga security forces, is a member of Goran, a party strongly opposed to Barzani.

The most recent presidential vote in the autonomous Kurdish region was in 2009.

Originally, a presidential term of office was four years, but in 2013 parliament extended it by two years.

A general election was held in September 2013, but Kurdish parliamentary activity has been frozen since November 2015, enabling Barzani to remain in power.

Rahim has opposed Barzani's mandate being extended.

"The commission must now examine the documents and accept his candidacy," Hadji Omar said of Rahim.

In September 2003, Rahim became industry minister in the first Iraqi cabinet that followed the US-led invasion of Iraq and overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

The September 25 referendum on Kurdish independence, a Barzani initiative, returned a resounding 92.73 percent "yes" result.

- Regional tensions -

But it also provoked a resounding "no" from Baghdad, Tehran and Ankara and sent regional tensions soaring.

Barzani's successor will have a heavy and urgent workload in the wake of the referendum result.

On Monday, Iraq and Iran -- previously sworn enemies that fought a devastating eight-year war in the 1980s -- staged joint military manoeuvres just across the border from Iraqi Kurdistan in Iran.

Iraq, Iran and Turkey all have sizeable Kurdish minorities and have taken measures to isolate Iraqi Kurdistan, including suspending international flights to and from its two main airports.

Iran has also slapped an indefinite ban on the transport of oil and energy products to and from Iraq's Kurdish region.

Officially comprising Arbil, Dohuk and Sulaimaniyah provinces, Iraqi Kurdistan also claims other territory including oil-rich Kirkuk province -- a dispute that is a major source of contention with Baghdad.

Tuesday's electoral commission announcement that only Rahim had registered to stand in the presidential election came shortly before the announcement of the death in Germany aged 83 of charismatic Kurdish leader Jalal Talabani, a former president of Iraq.

On Sunday, the Kurdish region replaced the referendum council with a body dubbed the Political Directorate of Kurdistan, seen by Barzani opponents as a way of him retaining control.

The new body includes members of the two main traditional parties, Barzani's Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

But it has been criticised including by Talabani's widow Hero Ibrahim Ahmed, a PUK leader.

She has called it "a gross error" and compared it to Saddam's Revolution Command Council, the real decision-making body under the dictator while the government had no role.

Kaynak/Source: