

**The Role of News Media in Supporting Democracy
in Kurdistan Region**

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Abstract

This thesis has chosen the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as a case study to examine the media's function in newly democratised countries. In any new transitional democracy, the media will be influenced by the new political system and they will frequently be criticised for being unable to act as a watchdog because of the close relationship with the political elites. However, there are also many other factors, such as cultural, political and economic pressures that affect the development of the media. This thesis makes an original contribution by furthering understanding of the role of the media in supporting an emerging democracy in the Kurdistan Region after 2003. It argues that there is also an assumption the news media will try to keep their independence from political dominance, and work actively to expose the political and government wrongdoings. Therefore, this thesis aims to examine the state of the news media in playing the role of watchdog and holding power to account. It also assesses the working environment for journalists in Kurdistan to see whether the general situation encourages media to the same degree as in established democratic societies.

To understand the current situation of the media and how the news media take a critical stance towards political corruptions, this thesis has conducted in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. The results show that the media have demonstrated good practice in exposing corruption and malfeasance in the government. It argued that the media are present in the political scene and have performed their task as a forum for the public, providing the public with the necessary information. However, as a newly democratised country, the general environment in the political system is not helpful, for example, the executive, legislative and judicial authorities do not have enough power to play a key role in the democratic system. Various pressures on the media still exist, and the country lacks effective democratic institutions supporting the media, which are essential to build a strong democratic system. This has certainly limited the media's ability to stand against political corruption and hold the government to account.

Dedication

To God, be the glory.

To those journalists who struggle to develop democracy in Kurdistan.

PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

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List of Acronyms and Abbreviations

CPJ: Committee to Protect Journalists

IGK: Islamic Group of Kurdistan

IMK: Islamic Movement of Kurdistan

IMS: International Media Support

IREX: International Research & Exchanges Board

IWPR: War and Peace Reporting

KCP: Kurdistan Communist Party

KDP: Kurdistan Democratic Party

KIU: Kurdistan Islamic Union

KJS: Kurdistan Journalists Syndicate

KNN: Kurdish News Network

KRG: Kurdistan Regional Government

NGO: Non-Governmental Organisations

NRT: Nalia Radio and Television

PUK: Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

UN: United Nations

USA: United States of America

Introduction

An essential condition for any new democratic country is the emergence of professional media that are able to report reliable information from a variety of viewpoints and play a watchdog role in society. A central focus of this thesis is the participation of the news media as a watchdog, which in turn enhances democracy. Thus, this thesis makes an original contribution by furthering understanding of the current media position within the process of democratisation after 2003 in Kurdistan.¹ The suggestion that the media play a role in the political processes within all societies is generally agreed upon by political scientists and communications researchers. Many scholars (Downes and Monten, 2010; De Mesquita & Downs, 2006; Walker & Orttung, 2014; Barakat, 2013) have examined the impact of political transitions on the media, and the latter's role in the process. The findings concluded that, despite the different circumstances and events leading to transitions, most of the media will have been influenced by the new political system and at the same time they will have helped shape emergent political systems. Salgado (2009, cited in McConnel & Becker, 2002) also stated that because the media have a potential impact on political decisions, their role in the early stages of democratisation can therefore be very influential. In this regard, the role that the media could play in a place like Kurdistan following democratisation will be central in this study.

This thesis contributes to a broader understanding of democracy and the process of democratisation. It considers the argument that asserts that, in general, the process of

¹ Kurdistan is not a country, it is part of Iraq. As a region in Iraq, Kurdistan shared the same experience as in the process of democratisation of Iraq.

democratisation has brought many changes in Iraq and Kurdistan but as a newly democratised country it bears a lot of problems. In some ways, the changes are part of the process of democratisation and in others not. For example, a positive aspect of an emerging democracy in Kurdistan, several elections have been held with strong competition among dozens of political parties. In addition, many civil society organisations and professional associations have been established, estimated at between 8,000 and 12,000 within the first few years following 2003, as well as the democratic development of the media. All these changes are considered positive in the process of democratisation. However, this research also agrees that the process of democratisation will face some flaws such as the lack of law enforcement, the weaknesses in the democratic governmental institutions and the insufficient enabling environment provided by the media.

This thesis examines the changes that occurred in the media considering the liberal media theory, and assesses the extent to which the news media contributed to the democratic change in Kurdistan in recent times, since 2003. Therefore, it explores whether the media is inspired by the western liberal model. It is clear from the democratic perspective that a free media is considered to be a prerequisite of democratic consolidation, by providing the public with information and maintaining an informal check on the government. Therefore, this research first examines the role of the media and evaluates whether they have acted as ‘defenders of democracy’, and second, examines the working environment for journalists in Kurdistan to see whether it has enabled or hindered the democratic media. By addressing these issues effectively, this thesis enables a greater understanding of the role of news media in an unfolding democracy. For example, it questions, how far are the media free and independent from political interference? What kind of information do the news media present in Kurdistan?

Do they play a watchdog role or something else? What progress has been made in the media towards being the voice for the public? What progress has been made in journalists learning to take responsibility and consider the consequences of their work. Are the news media acting responsibly when trying to improve government accountability?

This study aims to prompt an in-depth analysis of the development and challenges for the media in the period of political transition in Iraqi Kurdistan. Generally, in any democratic transition the media will undergo development but there will also be failures and challenges. Democracy requires principally that the media provides sufficient information for the public, in order to perform a ‘watchdog’ function. Hallin and Mancini (2004) examined the relationships between media system and political system variables. Based on the empirical patterns and in order to describe how political and economic systems influence the media system, they identified three fundamental and ideal models of the media, which are: the Mediterranean or Polarized Pluralist Model; the North/Central Europe or Corporatist Model and the North Atlantic or Liberal Model.² Jakubowicz (2007) uses the Hallin-Mancini (2004) framework to place the newly democratised countries’ media systems and he argues that post-communist countries appear to be located around the Mediterranean Model because they share similarities with this model. As there is an increase of media outlets, the news media struggles to keep its strong connections between the media and politics while demonstrating political independence (Jakubowicz & Sükösd, 2008; Jakubowicz, 2007).

In this regard, tracking media developments within Kurdistan is a particular interest to this research. There is a tendency to point to the quality of media in Kurdistan,

² Details of the three models are presented in the literature review in Chapter One

for example, the large increase in the number of the Kurdish media outlets, and the benefits of this increase to democracy. Within an area of 83,000 km² and a population of nearly five million, there were 959 media outlets registered in the Kurdistan Region in 2013. This included 36 satellite television stations, 73 local television stations, 138 radio stations and 712 newspapers and magazines (Kurdistan Syndicate of Journalists, 2013). Other developments that have appeared in the media include the diversity of media ownership and the provision of a space for a wide expression of opinions. By law, the people are allowed to criticise the government and discuss political and economic issues explicitly via the media. These developments of the media should not be disregarded, and should be considered as a positive sign in the new era following the fall of Saddam Hussein, when there were only few daily newspapers and television channels.

One of the greatest steps that moved the media from the typical political dominance to the private media was the establishment of the private/ independent media in 2000. This new model made the media independent from the political parties' subsidies and improved the capacity of the media to practise their role as it is in a democratic society. The media began to criticise the government and expose the misconduct of politics in Kurdistan. They created civic awareness among Kurdish people, reported on aspects of reality and they give the 'truth' which was hidden from them for a long time. The appearance of the first private daily newspaper *Hawlati* was a turning point in the history of the news media in Kurdistan.

The aim of this thesis therefore is to develop intersecting theoretical concepts to examine the complex relationship between the media and politics in Kurdistan. In this matter, it considers the limits and the nature of the media in Kurdistan. This thesis analyses news media ownership and the relationship between media and politics.

Currently, media ownership is divided into four groups in Kurdistan: Group 1, the media directly associated with the ruling political parties; Group 2, the media indirectly associated with the ruling political parties, also known as ‘shadow media’, these media outlets are sponsored by wealthy and powerful individuals in the ruling political parties, the KDP and PUK;³ Group 3, the media group directly associated with opposition parties; Group 4, the private/independent, these media outlets are run by independent companies (see Chapter Four for more information). Using this division of media clearly points out that the structure of the media in Kurdistan has seen a lot of changes. The media represents a diverse ownership. However, except for the private/independent media, all the other types of media are aligned to political parties. A strong connection between media ownership and their political allegiances is clearly seen; most media outlets rely on direct funding from one particular party.

In regard to the democratic role of the media, Coronel (2010) indicated that government/political interference in the media has a direct influence on media in term of professionalism and watchdog reporting. Therefore, this thesis aims to examine whether this is the case within Kurdistan, where most of the media are run by political parties, do the media have the capacity to perform their function as a watchdog?⁴ Also, as stated above, despite the intervention of politics in the media, in the case of Kurdistan there is an assumption that the media are active in exposing corruption and malfeasance of the government and politics. There is therefore, a question as to how the media can be effective in this situation, or what the enabling environment is for the media to perform

³ Shadow media is explained in detail in Chapter Four.

⁴ A simple description of the function of the free media is to provide information free from government interference (Coronel, 2010).

their essential functions? To explain this situation, there is a detailed analysis of the role of the media in newly democratised Kurdistan in post 2003 (see Chapter Seven).

This thesis presents an exploratory analysis of interference in the media and their role in Kurdistan by framing the issues of connection between media and politics. The Kurds want their voices to be heard via the media, because since the collapse of the Great Ottoman Empire, at the end of the First World War, Kurdistan officially divided into four territories among Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Since then, the Kurds have been involved in an armed struggle and demand for independence. The Kurdish national movements have used the media for political purpose. Since the beginning of the Kurdish media which started in 1898, the Kurdish media have been concerned with the Kurdish rights for independence (see Chapter Two). Therefore, throughout the modern history of Kurdistan, the importance of the media was clear among Kurdish society and the tight connection between the Kurdish media and political issues is clearly noticeable (Hassanpour, 1996; Sheyholislami, 2011; Rasul, 2012; McDowall, 2003). Even when the Kurdish people gained autonomy in 1991,⁵ the Kurdish political groups devoted a considerable amount of effort into developing the media, and in 1992 the two major political parties launched their official newspapers and television stations. All the political parties had a handful of the media outlets at that time. As a result, there was a significant increase in the number of media outlets controlled by the political parties.

More recently, in the era of democratisation the Kurdish political parties have no intention of loosening their connection with the media, after 2003, a number of news media networks were established by individual wealthy politicians in the political parties.

⁵ In 1991, the Iraqi Kurdistan gain autonomous, and became independent from Saddam Hussein's rule.

For example, *Rudaw* Company by Nechervan Barzani;⁶ Kurdistan 24 by Masrour Barzani;⁷ and *KurdSat News* by Hero Xan.⁸ Establishing these powerful news media outlets has influenced the media situation in two ways. On the one hand, although the establishment of these media outlets are considered by scholars as a new type of party political dominance of the news media in Kurdistan, they have served the development of the media, because the owners give 'shadow media' organisations a huge budget, beside the technological development, they have attempted to develop the media content as well. On the other hand, these media networks have had a negative impact on the Kurdistan private/independent media because the 'shadow media' are not initially required to be profitable. Also, establishing these channels, which are entirely financed by individual politicians in Kurdistan, made the control of the media by political parties even stronger.

Research Problem

Examining the impact of the medias' role in the democratisation period since 2003 was selected for study because of the interest, challenge and the personal experience of the researcher on this topic. First of all, my interest in the process of the democratisation⁹ of Iraq and Kurdistan is that the process marks a turning point in the

⁶ Nechervan Barzani is Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region and a son in law of Masoud Barzani, the President of the Kurdistan Region.

⁷ Masrour Barzani, born in 1969, is the son of President Masoud Barzani.

⁸ Hero Xan is the wife of the former President of Iraq, Jalal Talabani.

⁹ It is clear that democratisation of Iraq was not the only goal in the intervention of the United States. The US had several complex reasons for intervention in Iraq in 2003, such as planning to reshape the Middle East and make it easier to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and Iraq, as the world's second largest reserve of oil can also not be overlooked (Harnden, 2003 Heinrich, 2015).

history of the region, which has attracted the attention of many experts and researchers. Selecting this event, as a period of study, is of interest because the democratisation of Iraq was unique in the Middle East since the country did not have any experience of democracy and was ruled by an extreme autocracy for nearly a quarter of a century. The most important point in the process of democratisation is that the whole process was arranged from outside of Iraq by the United States, which means that the country was not ready for the democratic changes. However, although Iraq and Kurdistan were not ready for the transition, many elements of democracy have appeared, and the practises of the media has noticeably improved. The media has witnessed a growth in the number and diversity of outlets (Rohde, 2005; Kim & Hama-Saeed, 2008; Moon, 2007; Ricchiardi, 2011; Al-Mljawi, 2009).

Another factor that motivated me to select this topic which examines the relationship between the media and politics in Kurdistan, is that I have many years of experience as a researcher in the field of media and politics. Also, I have worked as a journalist in Kurdistan for more than fifteen years and personally witnessed the dramatic political changes over a period of more than twenty years. For example, when I was younger, I witnessed the first Gulf War (the Iran-Iraq war) during 1980-1988. I saw the outcome of this war, which was very harsh, such as the attack on Halabja¹⁰ with chemical weapons on March 16, 1988, which resulted in around 5,000 civilian deaths and 10,000 injured. I was one of the residents of this city at that time and saw the humanitarian disaster it caused. I also witnessed the Kurds' resistance, fighting for independence during war time and the aggressive response of the Baath regime against the Kurds in

¹⁰ Halabja is a city in Iraqi Kurdistan, located in the Iran-Iraq border, about 150 miles to the north-east of central Iraq Baghdad.

Iraq. I saw how the extermination campaign of Iraqi forces under the so-called *Anfal* campaign killed 188,000 Kurdish civilians, and forced hundreds of thousands into exile. I also witnessed the second Gulf War in 1991, which brought new circumstances in Iraq and Kurdistan. After October 1991, northern Iraq (Kurdistan) was liberated from the Saddam Hussein regime and formed an autonomous regional government in 1992, and I personally had the opportunity to vote in the election in the Kurdistan Region in May 1992. I also saw a dramatic change in the media during 1991-2003, especially in terms of quantity, a large number of the media outlets were established in that period. During 1991-2003, unlike the areas Saddam Hussein controlled, the media in Kurdistan witnessed an increase in numbers, satellite dishes were free for all and Internet access spread widely (Relly et al, 2014). However, I also saw the civil war¹¹ between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and how the media was used as propaganda for their political parties. At that time, despite their autonomy from Baghdad, the media served political interests and the majority of media outlets were sharply divided between the KDP and the PUK. The media were active but with a very strong dominance of party political influence. These attempts have inspired me to pursue an in-depth study into the media situation during the dramatic political changes since 2003 in Kurdistan.

I should also mention that writing this thesis was challenging for three reasons. Firstly, the lack of academic and reliable sources for my research. There is a very limited number of in depth studies about the massive changes to the media and the challenging working environment for the media in Kurdistan in recent times since 2003. What does exist are the international surveys such as Freedom House Index and IREX's MSI and

¹¹ Please see Chapter Two for more details.

United Nations surveys reports about the media situation in Iraq since 2003. Since 2003, enormous efforts have been made by the United States and NGOs to help develop media performance in Kurdistan. According to David Rohde, the United States spent \$200 million in two years in Iraq which is the highest amount ever to have been spent to help develop and create an independent media, but very little went into developing academic research. Many short-term training programmes were conducted by the international NGOs such as The Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), International Media Support (IMS) and International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX), but they did not offer any scholarship for an in-depth analysis of the media in Iraq and Kurdistan. Of the very limited research that has been conducted into the role of media in Kurdistan as a newly democratised region in the Middle East, only a small amount of studies have centred on an extensive analysis of the news media contribution to enhancing democratisation, for example, playing the role of watchdog and holding power to account by exposing corruption in the transition period since 2003.

The second reason is that, in most of the international surveys, the media have been described very poorly in Iraq including Kurdistan as well¹². Most of the previous research does not differentiate between Iraq and Kurdistan in their conclusions. Also, specifying Kurdistan as an autonomous region is rarely seen in the international reports. Although Iraq and Kurdistan share some similarities, especially in terms of the political system, they are certainly different in many areas. The big differences between the two are: firstly, the Kurdish journalists have more experience, since 1991, almost 12 years before the rest of Iraq, they have experienced a better situation and freedom, although

¹² See the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Freedom House Index and IREX's MSI and United Nations surveys reports.

this freedom was limited it was certainly much better than in Saddam Hussein's controlling areas. After the withdrawal of the Iraqi Army from Kuwait in the second Gulf War in 1991, the Kurdish people in Iraq are enjoying independence from Baghdad. At that time, large numbers of newspapers and magazines emerged and the media were exercising their rights differently from the Saddam Hussein's time (see Chapter Two for more details); and secondly, Iraq and Kurdistan are not alike regarding security and the media working environment. Kurdistan is considered a relatively safe place compared to the rest of Iraq (Kim & Hama-Saeed, 2008). In terms of the media security situation, Kurdistan has a very small number of journalists who have been victims of war, while Iraq is considered a most dangerous and difficult place for journalists in the survey from the Committee to Protect Journalists (see CPJ reports in 2008, 2009, 2010-2016). For example, between March 2003 and January 2008, in Iraq 125 Journalists were killed while on duty, 82 media co-workers were murdered, and 43 were caught in crossfire or other acts of war. However, in that period, no similar cases were recorded in Kurdistan. The history of violation against journalists is much less in Kurdistan, in the five-year period of 2008-2013, three journalists were murdered because of their reporting activities.¹³ This is the only negative outcome for journalists' security recorded in Kurdistan. Thus, because of these differences between Iraq and Kurdistan, specifying the media in the Kurdistan Region is imperative to avoid any generalisation.

The third challenge of this thesis is to examine the multi-dimensional links between the media, democracy and the government in Kurdistan. As a Kurdish researcher, I conducted this thesis to fill the existing gap of academic research on the

¹³ These three journalists were Soran Mama Hama, who was killed in 2008; Sardasht Osman, who was kidnapped and murdered in 2010; and Kawa Garmyane, who was also kidnapped and murdered in 2013. Please see Chapter Six for more details.

media in Kurdistan. In this thesis, I provided an empirical analysis focusing on the current situation of the news media in Kurdistan and the relationship between the media and politics in the period since 2003. In this research, I explain the complex connection between the media and politics and the performance of the media as a watchdog in Kurdistan. In a region like Kurdistan, where democracy is fragile and in a fluctuating state, the media are also defined differently. To date, there has been a significant disagreement among scholars in their writings about the role of the media in Kurdistan; every researcher has different conclusions about the situation of the media in the newly democratised Kurdistan since 2003. Some have defined the Kurdish media as having a high level of democratic representation, by placing emphasis on the freedom of the media in Kurdistan Region. However, others have ranked the media's role in contributing to and enhancing democratisation very poorly. For example, Abdulla (2014), Hama-Saeed (2010), and Hogan & Trumpbour (2013) have pessimistic views about all the changes in the media, such as the increase in the number of print, online, and broadcast news outlets in Kurdistan, and say that these do not necessarily indicate a real development of the media because most of the media outlets are run by the political parties. Also, they have ignored all the development in the quality of the content of the media that has occurred in the last few years. Therefore, this thesis needs to be conducted to understand the complicated situation of the media in Kurdistan. As mentioned earlier, due to limited access to resources in Kurdistan and also language barriers, there is a limited amount of academic research about the media in Kurdistan as a newly democratised region.

Research Questions

The main research questions of this thesis are:

1. How have the media developed in the transition process of Iraqi Kurdistan Region?
2. In which way has the legal and economic environment enabled or hindered the role of the news media in the democratisation process?
3. To what extent has the challenging political situation hindered the development of democratic media in the Kurdistan Region?
4. To what extent have the news media been active in playing a watchdog role and contributing to government accountability in the newly democratised Kurdistan Region?

Methodology

The current study concentrates on a critical review of the role of the news media in the process of democratisation. It has chosen the Kurdistan Region as a case study to examine the media's democratic functions in the newly democratised countries. As the most known of methods in qualitative usages in communication research, this thesis is based on in-depth interview and focus group discussions. The researcher's personal experience and insights are an important part of the inquiry and are critical to understanding the phenomenon. This study employs a semi-structured interview method because it is a more flexible interview tool and commonly associated with qualitative research. For both the interviews and the focus group discussions, open-ended questions