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BRILL

Changing Political Identities of the Iranian Kurdish Left in Europe

From Deindividualization to Individualism

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Abstract

This article examines the tendency towards political individualism and its impact among first-generation political immigrants with a leftist political background from Iran/Eastern Kurdistan (Rojhelat) living in Western Europe, from the perspective of individuals' political identity in terms of relations with political organizations and their ideological stance. Following a qualitative approach, data was collected through semi-structured in-depth and focus group interviews with members and ex-members of political parties. The findings show that, as a result of leaving Iran's political climate as well as Kurdish political organizations, and with the influence of a new political culture, many interviewees have adopted individualized politics based on their own opinions and self-interest. The immigrants have found a multi-dimensional political view that simultaneously pays attention to the ethno-national, class, and gender issues of Kurdish society.

Keywords

deindividualization – Iranian Kurdistan – Kurdish parties – Kurdish immigrants – political identity – political density

1 Introduction

The experience of being forced to leave one's country and attempting to construct a new life in a foreign host country is likely to bring about profound changes in the persons concerned. When people exchange a society with strict social control and a collectivist ethos for one with a more individualist political culture, and when they are no longer subject to political parties that dominate every aspect of their lives, the part played by individuality in their political identity changes. The effect of this change on the political attitudes of immigrants is remarkable. Recent studies have paid attention to various psychological and socio-cultural changes in immigrants, but this aspect remains rather neglected.¹ The change from collective to highly individualistic political identity has been especially salient in the case of many political refugees from Eastern Kurdistan in Western Europe. For that reason, a closer look at them may throw light on the process of individualization and the nature of the subsequent intellectual change in the individuals themselves.

This article examines the role of individuality in political identity reconstruction among first-generation Kurdish political refugees with a leftist political background who arrived from Iran/Eastern Kurdistan (Rojhelat) between 1980 and 2020 and who are now living in Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and France. Using a qualitative approach, I attempt to answer the following questions: How do Kurdish immigrants reflect on their political experiences in relation to the change in their individual agency after migration? What is the impact of these changes on their political identity in the host country? Before migration many of these people were subject to what has been called deindividualization, a situation where people see themselves as members of a category rather than as individuals,² and where group members experience limitations in their agency, personal identity, and distinct awareness, becoming "submerged in the group's cognitive reality."³

Political deindividualization can be observed in closed political systems, in centralized parties, and in clandestine militant movements. Most if not all refugees from Rojhelat have experienced these conditions. Political individualism, on the other hand, emerges in situations where individuals have a higher degree of agency and enjoy freedom to take political decisions according to their own opinions and self-interest, as has been most refugees' experience

1 Green and Staerklé, "Migration and Multiculturalism"; Mao and Shen, "Cultural Identity Change"; Perozzo et al., "Social Identity Change"; Ballentyne et al., "Lost in Transition."

2 He et al., "Political Identity Dissimilarity."

3 Fisher et al., "Conflict Analysis and Resolution," 498.

after arrival in Europe. Iran's religious regime has been characterized by the repression of political individualism (although some forms of non-pluralistic and non-humanistic individualism continue to exist under the guise of collectivism: in joining the regime's various institutions, individuals have been able to pursue their own interests by violating the rights of others as we see in numerous cases of corruption and sexual misconduct).⁴

Many Kurdish and Iranian activists experienced that agency and power of decision-making was taken away from them and consigned to various political authorities, including the state apparatus as well as opposition movements whose leaders acted as the sole decision-makers. In more open societies like Europe, on the other hand, the situation is different, with a higher degree of development of political individualization, humanistic individualism, and less organizational control. This leads to a change in the immigrants' political identity and the strengthening of political individualism among them.

Political activity within the Kurdish diaspora mainly began in the 1980s, although Kurdish migration to Europe has a longer history. There are numerous studies of Kurdish immigrants in Europe, mostly related to the Kurds of Turkey/Northern Kurdistan (Bakur) or Kurds in general.⁵ However, although previous studies have considered changes in the political identity of the Kurdish people, an investigation of the agency-related political experiences of Kurdish individuals from Rojhelat, who were previously active in centralized proscribed parties and then migrated to a more open socio-political society will better reveal the changes in political identity, the process of these changes, and their impact. This forms the principal argument of this paper. After explaining the concept of political identity and its changes, I will present the research design and discuss the main findings of my analysis. I conclude by discussing the wider implications of my research and possibilities for further research.

2 Change in Political Identity

Political identity is concerned with people's political viewpoint. It is mostly a social identity, as it relates to membership of a group, party, or movement;

4 Taheri Kia, "Reverse Individualism." See also Calenda and Meijer, "Political Individualization"; Bréchon, "Individualization and Individualism."

5 Başer, *Diasporas and Homeland Conflicts*; Alinia et al., "The Kurdish Diaspora"; Khayati and Dahlstedt, "Diaspora Formation among Kurds"; Bezwan and Keles, "Displacement, Diaspora and Statelessness"; Eliassi, "Making a Kurdistan Identity"; Eliassi, "Statelessness in a World"; Eliassi, "Kurdish Diaspora."

these group-based identities are central to politics since they generate political cohesion.⁶ Yet it can also be an individual-based identity or have an individual ideological component, especially when the group is not “capable of supplying some satisfactory aspects of an individual’s social identity.”⁷ Along with conventional politics based on social group identification, personalized politics, “in which individually expressive personal action frames displace collective action frames in many protest causes,” developed as a consequence of globalization from the mid-1970s. Later neoliberalism with its mantra of personal freedom became a notable trend.⁸ These political discourses in host societies also affected the political identity of immigrants. Although personalized politics has a long history in the form of charismatic leaders, today “social fragmentation has produced individuation as the modal social condition.”⁹ Therefore, although partisanship is “the most common political identity,”¹⁰ individuals can take collective action either based on group/organization or personal politics and have political identity based on self-interest.

Political identity is always constructed, contested, open to change, and often ambivalent.¹¹ It can be changed from a partisanship-based identity to one based on self-interest, or to an identity based on a social or societal structure such as ethnicity, religion, etc. Political identity is contingent on personal situations, including migration, and remains changeable throughout life, although the strength of previous attitudes acquired from childhood affects the change and stability of political identity in adulthood.¹² Migration not only brought changes in the socio-political situation of Kurdish refugees and their citizenship but also affected their political attitudes and visions, especially in terms of their individual role in politics.

3 The Political Context: Immigration, the Only Choice

Neither under the Shah nor under the subsequent Islamic regime did the people of Iran experience democracy and political freedom, except for a brief period at the time of the 1979 revolution. Soon after, not only political freedom

6 Campbell, *Persons, Identity, and Political Theory*, 168.

7 Tajfel, *Human Groups*.

8 Bennett, “Personalization of Politics.”

9 Ibid.

10 Huddy, “From Group Identity,” 746.

11 Kristensen, “Citizens’ Political Identity.”

12 Rekker et al., “Dynamics of Political Identity”; Waldinger and Duquette-Rury, “Emigrant Politics.”

but all kinds of social freedom were even more severely restricted than before. The situation was especially difficult in Rojhelat, which had also become a refuge for other Iranian dissidents. Various Kurdish and Iranian leftist opposition groups existed in close interaction with local people and activists. People who joined these organizations did so on the basis of individual choice and political conviction, but many of the organizations kept their members under close surveillance and coerced them to conformity and hostility towards all rival organizations.

Apart from the first few months after the 1979 revolution, when there was an open space for civil activities, including the creation of popular councils and associations, there was no space for the growth of humanistic individuality.¹³ Civil society was severely weakened. Socio-political conditions made people, especially in the political arena, less able to make decisions for themselves as individuals. As family and tribal relations and loyalties gradually weakened and individuals became relatively independent, both governmental and opposition organizations with collectivist views achieved a sense of political deindividuation. The government asked people to devote themselves to Islam and the regime. It declared opposition organizations illegal and attacked them severely.¹⁴ In contrast, the parties that led the Kurdish movement needed people to completely commit themselves to serving them in order to gain their desired rights. Under such conditions, without freedom of legal activity and in a state of war waged by the Iranian regime against Kurdish parties, they could not act like political parties in democratic countries that do not hinder individual freedom, although theoretically they upheld social freedom.

The Kurdish political movement in Rojhelat has a left-wing legacy, going back to the establishment of the Republic of Kurdistan in 1946.¹⁵ The Kurdistan Democratic Party of Iran (KDPI), the Revolutionary Association of Toilers of Iranian Kurdistan (Komele), and the Kurdish branches of Iranian parties such as the Tudeh (Mass) Party and the Organization of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas (OIPFG) and various smaller Kurdish political groups are almost without exception leftist parties with highly centralized structures under a leader or leadership group that pursues some interpretation of socialism or Marxism-Leninism. It has only been since the days of the 1979 revolution that a number of Islamist groups emerged, most prominent among them Maktab Quran, the

13 Eskenderî, *Bîrewerî û Yaddaşt*; Hassaniyan, *Kurdish Politics in Iran*.

14 Cabi, "The Armed Struggle."

15 Vali, *Kurds and the State*; Vali, *The Forgotten Years*.

Muslim Brotherhood, and the Organization of the National-Islamic Struggle of Iranian Kurdistan (Xebat).¹⁶ However, the left-wing Kurdish movement has remained mainstream.

The political migration of Kurdish activists from both the Kurdish and Iranian opposition parties began with the military assault of the Islamic regime on Kurdistan, which initiated the civil war between the regime's forces and the dominant Kurdish movement and ultimately resulted in the expulsion of Kurdish forces outside Iran's borders.¹⁷ Indeed, the experience of exile has become a part of the history of the Kurdish movement.¹⁸ Over more than a decade of war, many of these activists were forced to leave Kurdistan, mainly settling in Europe. With the exception of Xebat, unarmed religious groups did not participate in the civil war. In addition, the dispute and conflict between Kurdish forces themselves because of their different ideologies and politics not only hindered their working together against the regime, which led to their weakness, but also accelerated forced migration.

Political refugees from Rojhelat to Europe have therefore mostly been from leftist political organizations. This includes new generations of Kurdish youth, given the ongoing nature of the conflict with the regime. In Europe they started a new life, generally with decreased relations with their parties.

4 Methodology and Conceptual-Analytical Tools

In this research project, political identity change was studied from the perspective of individualized versus organizational identity, focusing on the degree of dependency of Kurdish political refugees on their political organizations. Thirty-four semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with female and male Kurdish immigrants aged 30–80, who were members or former members of Iranian and Kurdish leftist parties (12 in Sweden; 9 in Germany; 8 in the Netherlands; 5 in France). Most of these belonged to the KDPI or offshoots of Komele, including the Kurdistan Organization of the Communist Party of Iran (CPI, founded by Komele and some other small Iranian leftist groups); smaller numbers belonged to the Kurdistan Free Life Party (PJAK, the PKK's Iranian branch), Tudeh and its splits such as the Labour Party of Iran (Toufan), the Organization of Iranian People's Fedai Guerrillas (OIPFG), and the Union of Iranian Communists. All interviewees migrated between 1980 and 2020 and

16 Mofidi, "Religion and Politics."

17 Cabi, "The Armed Struggle."

18 Khayati and Dahlstedt, "Diaspora Formation among Kurds."

arrived as adults; although this was not a criterion for their selection as respondents, most of the interviewees were critical of their previous or current parties.

After finding the first interviewees through multiple approaches such as asking friends or using social media, the snowball method was used to find more. To prevent any bias towards people with the same ideas and thoughts, after finding three to four people through the snowball method I tried to start another snowball chain. I followed the constructivist interview method adopted from a grounded theory approach.¹⁹ The interviewees were asked about their political affiliation and its impact on their life and socio-political relations as individuals in Rojhelat and then in Europe. In addition to the personal interviews, I organized a focus group interview with six men and women in Germany, lasting for three hours. They discussed their socio-political opinions, which revealed significant changes in their thoughts and attitudes when compared with their past and their peers living in Kurdistan.

I relied on identity change theory (ICT) and other relevant approaches to analyse the findings. As major life changes are usually accompanied by identity change, expatriation and migration lead to a profound personal transformation and revision of the immigrants' sense of who they are, particularly around their identification with political cultures. This identity change is related to major disruptions of the expatriates' social circles. If the bonds to the home country are loosened, especially among political refugees who have no formal ties to it, instability is created in immigrants' identities, as well as a transitional identity which can facilitate the identity change process.²⁰ The political identity change of Kurdish immigrants has been analysed by considering a combination of three approaches: the cognitive approach, especially self-categorization theory (SCT), the realistic interest approach, and social constructivism.²¹

5 The Deindividualization Process

My hypothesis is that migration from the closed, undemocratic and conflict-ridden society of Iran, and especially the environment of centralized and dogmatic parties shielding their deindividualized members from alternative worldviews, to the more open and democratic societies of Europe, leads to change in the degree of individuals' agency, political identity, and awareness (see Figure 1). The move towards political individualism enables the migrants

19 Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*.

20 Mao and Shen, "Cultural Identity Change."; Clark et al., "Transitional Identity."

21 Huddy, "From Group Identity," 739–758.

not only to integrate into the host society but also to achieve a multi-dimensional view and develop relations beyond parties, for example, based on Kurdish or Kurdistan identity.²²

An examination of the interviewees' life histories shows that most of them entered politics and joined leftist parties under conditions where open political debate and free choice were impossible. They were influenced by clandestinely circulating propaganda or the example of other people in their surroundings. Disaffection with the regime's oppression and violence was a major reason for joining opposition movements. Political ideology appears not to have played a significant role: most of those who joined parties at the time of the revolution and in the 1980s, and even more of those who joined later, gave other reasons for joining a particular movement.

A former Komele cadre observed: "I'd say that 80 per cent of the people who joined Komele as peshmerge were not leftist at all. But of course after their joining we educated them and then they learned." Others claimed to have been influenced by their perception of ethno-national, class, and gender inequalities. Many stated that they were very young and inexperienced, following their emotions, when they made the choice to join. Their decisions were due to limited knowledge, fantastical thinking, political simplicity, and dogma, as they had no political education or ability to analyse conditions at the time. Some of them were as young as 13 to 16 years old when they joined the parties:

I was only a 16-year-old girl [when joining the Tudeh party]. At such an age a person has no real intellect. I had no deep understanding of politics.

I was a 14, 15-year-old boy when I joined Komele. [...] With the beginning of the war in Kurdistan and after the Pawe incident²³, I was 15 at the time, and I don't really know how it was, but having a gun made me feel like I was something; a teenager is emotional, I had no political consciousness and I didn't know what I was, and if I was shot and killed at that time, it was not clear why was I killed, if I killed someone I didn't know why.

22 Eliassi, "Making a Kurdistan Identity." The "Kurdish" identity is mainly ethno-linguistic, while the "Kurdistan?" identity is more national and emphasizes the geo-political aspect of the Kurds' homeland as a basis for the formation of their own state, suggesting that the national identities of Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey do not represent the Kurds.

23 The Pawe incident refers to the conflict between Kurdish parties and Islamic regime-affiliated forces in Pawe/Paveh city, which led to the so-called 3-month war following Khomeini's fatwa in August 1979.

At the time, I was [a] young [girl] and in high school, I had no information, I didn't know what Komele actually was. I didn't read its constitution and program to know what [political] trend it is. [...], I did not know who Lenin was and what communism is, I never knew such things.

I was [a] very young [girl], through my mother I saw my uncle and it led me to be pulled towards the Youth Union of KDPI.

Their reasons for joining a party were based more on emotion than accurate knowledge, without fully knowing their party and understanding how it differed from other organizations. In this regard, a member of KDPI said: "My cousin was martyred, another cousin was a pêşmerge, there were other relatives, these influenced me to join KDPI, not politically, but emotionally and sympathetically. [...] More out of feeling than following its program." They were mostly influenced by family members, political relatives, and friends. A Komele member also said: "What made me join Komele was the influence of my father, who I saw was politically active and who was arrested by the Islamic Republic and was always in prison."

The Kurdish opposition parties were critical of society's conservative values and restrictions of individual freedoms, which were further aggravated under the Islamic regime. They supported people who wished to break away from social restrictions, especially women who faced traditional gender inequality and religiously legitimated practices such as child marriage and forced marriage. For example, the Kurdish-Swedish parliamentarian Amîne Kakebawe (Amineh Kakabaveh) is a former pêşmerge, who joined Komele as a 13-year-old teenager. In an interview with the BBC, she spoke of the social pressure on her to get married young, from which she escaped by joining Komele. Looking back, she said "Komele saved me."²⁴

In addition, issues of class played a role in some young people's joining Komele, as a female ex-member said: "We joined Komele because the issue of workers, labourers, and poor people was raised there." This organization also, more than others, provided the ground for women's activity. Indeed, a large proportion of the politically active Kurdish women come from the Komele Party.²⁵ Another Komele member said: "At that time, Komele was the only place where women could assert their identity, think like women, be independent, and defend their rights, I think." According to the interviewees' reflections, while

24 See: BBC Persian, December 2021. Online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AsojME4HLo8> (last accessed December 2022).

25 Karimi, *Genre et militantisme*.

women had agency, there were only few who joined their parties out of gender awareness. These exceptional cases often belonged to the later generations of Komele, who experienced the Islamic regime's policy against women, for example in the family courts. One of them stated: "I was not exploited just because I was a Kurd, but as a woman I had no rights in the system of the Islamic Republic. This was undoubtedly a factor in my choosing Komele for political activity because it was a leftist organization that supported women." These women thus sought refuge in progressive parties, which however demanded their complete submission to the parties' struggle and in which other forms of gender inequality continued to exist due to the leadership's masculine mindset.

Due to the party discipline and secretiveness imposed by the proscribed Kurdish and Iranian opposition parties, their members experienced shrinking social words, without much individual freedom. They had to hide their membership and live in clandestinity or join the party's headquarters and camps outside Iran. Living in conditions of insecurity and armed conflict, they became totally immersed in serving the party. They had to permanently pay attention to security issues and martial protocols and had to connive in the party leadership's total control over individual members. These conditions, then, along with the above-mentioned characteristics of young people, provided fertile ground for deindividualizing their members, although some organizations at least in theory favoured individual rights. This was clearly brought out in some of the interviewees' recollections:

By the Komele's decision at that time [1981], when I was 17 years old, commander S. [*one of the Komele leaders*], along with some other people influenced by rumours, forced me to marry a pêşmerge. I said: "I don't know what love is, I am not ready for marriage." However, they implemented their decision and I got married. Although Komele's slogan was equality of men and women, it was a young organization that came out of such a society. [...] A few years later, when I met S., he regretted that decision very much.

There was a culture where we were willing to make sacrifices for each other. We had such dedication and principles that we dedicated our lives to what we were pursuing. Since the formation of the CPI was the decision of the Komele leadership, others remained silent even if they disagreed.²⁶

26 An internal referendum was held on the formation of the CPI, but most of the members

I remember, in 1983 A.M. [one of the Komele leaders] wired a message that a referendum would be held in Komele, so that everyone would vote for the formation of the CPI. He said: "If you don't vote for it now, in the future workers will ask us why we didn't."

In the winter of 1991 the organization decided we had to leave Kurdistan for Europe. It forced us to leave, and because I did not want to, in fact I still regret coming.

The deindividualization in the 1980s in Kurdistan was such that, according to some interviewees, members were afraid to leave their parties because of the consequences, including falling under the party's suspicion of being a traitor and being ostracized by their members. One of the interviewees said: "Because at the age of 14–15 you leave all things you have and join the organization, afterwards when you leave your organization's headquarters nobody is ready to talk with you. It is seen in all Kurdish organizations: you become an enemy, nobody is ready to have relations and talk with you."

A notable level of deindividualization can be seen in the words of the same interviewee:

Based on my experience, in all political organizations, including the KDPI and Komele, [...], you had many more duties than rights. [...] As leftist movements, they rebuilt us, that is, our private and social relations—gradually you became a part or organ of the organization. It affected all our relations, including family relations, and our views. For example, in 1979 Komele took my friend and me to work in a brick-making workshop to help the people there and organize them. It means the change and end of your private life, you have surrendered to them, finish. They put you how and where they want, you've accepted everything. It is seen in all organizations, and gradually you yourself are nothing and your personality disappears, you lose your social relationships. When you join an organization nothing belongs to you, all things are for the organization and you are known as part of it. [...] Gradually you are created, you become another person, you just listen to them, there is no other radio, TV, other people. Your whole life is closed within the organization's framework. [...] We forgot ourselves.

followed the leadership's advice, although a few were unaware of it. Later, some opponents abandoned it. About two decades later, some of the leaders who pushed people to vote for the CPI left it themselves to rebuild an independent Komele.

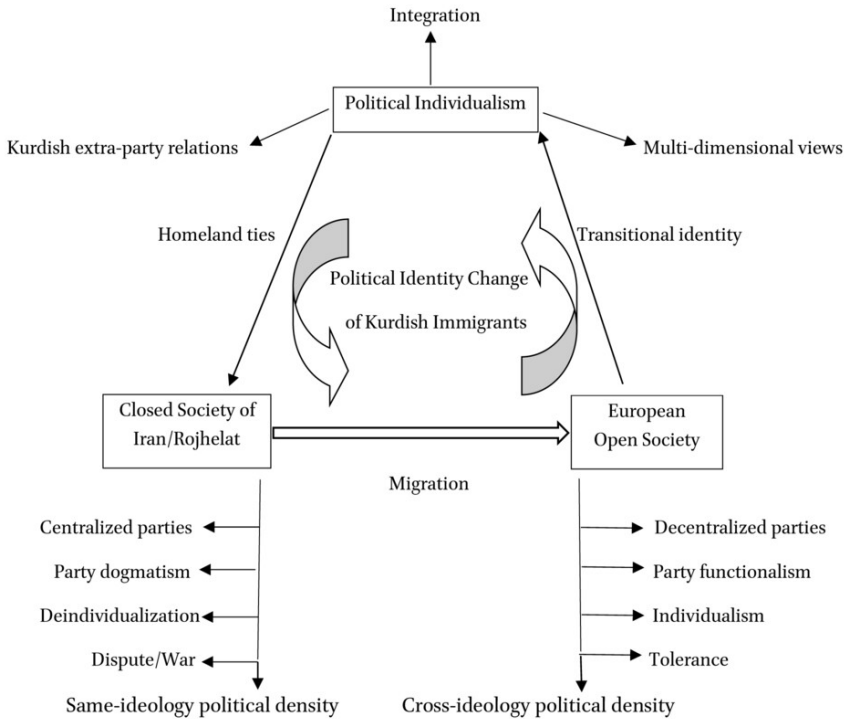


FIGURE 1 Change in individual political identity of Kurdish immigrants

Thus not only people under the control of the totalitarian regime but also some people who joined political opposition organizations became devoted to the organization and its goals, and gave up a significant part of their individual agency. Although individual thought did not completely stagnate, individual agency and self-interest were significantly curtailed by the difficult circumstances in which people lived. Finally, the pressure and political violence of the Iranian regime led to the forced migration of a large number of opposition members, either through their organizations or individually. Even those who left their parties did not return home in most cases, because in the case of surrender or arrest they might be sentenced to death or imprisonment, or might be forced to become government spies. Those who made it to Europe had to start a new life, in which many tried to reassert their individuality, resisting partisanship in the host countries.

6 Political Individualism vs. Rigid Partisanship

Regardless of my party background, as an individual I can also think very differently. Although independence for Kurdistan is not the slogan of my party, as an individual, I believe in it and I work for it. [...] It is important to think for oneself.

Despite the effects of earlier attitudes throughout life, the transformative experience of migration influences political identity, as an identity more open to change than for instance ethnic or religious identity.²⁷ Emigration often affects group loyalty and makes it more diluted. During immigration and early years in the host society, as mentioned earlier, a “transitional identity” is shaped, which is also true for Kurdish refugees as transnational immigrants.²⁸ Moreover, among the interviewees who adhered to their party line during the early years of immigration, such a transitional identity is politically seen as the first stage of a change from organization-based identity towards individualized identity. This is a state of political liminality, indicating a change in the role of their individuality, which is based on the swing between political individualism and rigid partisanship.²⁹ With migration, many Kurdish political migrants moved out of party control. However, they needed party support or the use of a membership background to obtain residency. According to one interviewee, some parties created committees, such as the Refugee Council by CPI/Komele, which helped them obtain residency but also spread political propaganda. In some cases, even non-political immigrants tried to get party support and participate in political demonstrations against the Iranian regime’s human rights abuses in order to strengthen their case as regime dissidents at the immigration office and in this way obtain residency. This helped keep a dominant collective sense of self among the immigrant members and their adherence to organizations. So, they were still organized by their parties while also focusing on their individual lives.

Such needs are important for immigrants, especially at a stage where they reorient themselves from an organization-based identity towards a more individualized identity. As internal states, needs and motives lead to the achievement of certain goals.³⁰ In line with self-interest, these needs may push people

27 Rekker et al., “Dynamics of Political Identity”; Waldinger and Duquette-Rury, “Emigrant Politics”; Kristensen, “Citizens’ Political Identity.”

28 Alinia et al., “The Kurdish Diaspora”; Eliassi, “Kurdish Diaspora.”

29 O’Reilly, “Living Liminality.”

30 Caprara and Vecchione, “Personality Approaches.”

towards or away from an ideology,³¹ depending on whether they are sought collectively or individually. A person's needs can thus become a source of their political identity, if they choose their political affiliation as a means of ensuring those needs are met. When there is less need for organizations in the host society, dependence on them decreases. This usually happens when immigrants attain permanent residency and a stable life, when they are no longer afraid of losing support because of any criticism they may feel towards the organization.

The first years were spent in obtaining residency. We got residence earlier, because we were known as Komele. I was active for CPI/Komele, while I had to work, study, and take care of my child. Later I felt that there was no reason to remain in such a party, because not only were our activities and work not valued, while we ignored our personal issues, but also its methods and policies were not acceptable to me. [...] So, some female comrades and I left the party.

Gradually, the previous organizational political identity of migrants—influenced by the situation in their place of origin—changed; this was also related to the acquisition of residency in host countries. Frustrated at not being able to influence the organizations and move them in a more democratic direction, some members left. Some Kurdish immigrants' strong collective sense of association with organizations decreased in favour of an individual sense of self. The change in people's basic values and beliefs affected their political behaviour.³² The higher level of democratic values of liberty, equality, and justice in host countries, especially political pluralism and tolerance, allowed less unrestricted and more diverse socio-political interactions.

Many political refugees thus passed through a transitional stage towards a more stable situation mostly based on political individualism, in an effort to compensate for the deindividualization they had previously experienced, as I will show below. Subsequently, if they participated in politics, for example by maintaining membership of a party or joining one, this tended to be based more on their own conscious decision as individuals. As has been observed in several sociological studies, a reduction in group loyalty in the new environment may lead to personalized politics. Indeed, the collective activity of immigrants may take the form of "individualized collective action" instead of

31 Ibid., 34; Huddy, "From Group Identity," 740–741.

32 Inglehart and Welzel, *Modernization, Cultural Change, and Democracy*.

being collectivity-based.³³ Their mobilization is more diverse and individuals may “code their personal politics through personal lifestyle values.”³⁴

7 Overcoming the Centralized-Leftist Party Structure and Dogmatism

According to the former members who were interviewed, the Iranian leftist parties all had an undemocratic centralized structure. It was practically impossible for their Kurdish members to pursue their Kurdish national rights through these parties, such as the Tudeh party.³⁵ Moreover, there was discrimination against Kurdish members within the parties, which led to internal disagreements between Kurds and others. Due to the influence of these parties through their Kurdish branches as well as the ideological position of Kurdish parties and their sometimes close relations with Iranian parties in opposition to the Iranian regime, the undemocratic party culture of Iranian centralized parties also affected the Kurdish ones. An interviewee who arrived in Germany in the late 1980s, having become sceptical of socialism during his migration through the Soviet Union, left the Tudeh party in 1990 and started civic nationalist activities. The man, who was in his mid-sixties at the time of the interview, described the above situation as follows:

Later, we realized that there was no intellectual and political freedom, no basic freedom of association and expression in the party. The members of all parties--the KDPI, the Tudeh party, the Fadaiyan organization (OIPFG), and Komele--were enclosed within that frame and defended the policy, politics, and ideology of the party they were a member of.

Once they had embarked upon what they considered a more “normal life” in Europe and were moreover facing a new range of migration-related problems, many of the refugees came to adopt a more critical attitude towards the imposed political conformity of their parties. Internal conflicts and scissions and inconsistencies between the parties’ official views and actual practices on issues of ethno-national identity and gender equality caused many members to take a certain distance from their organizations. In the recollections of some interviewees, many Kurdish members of the Iranian centralized leftist

33 Micheletti, *Political Virtue and Shopping*.

34 Bennett, “Personalization of Politics.”

35 Bexşi, *Lêkdabiran*.

parties gradually realized that those parties' policies actually favoured the dominant ethno-nationalism and that their socialism was de facto a tool to silence the Kurdish issue. This political awareness was further achieved in Europe, where the ground was set for liberation from the previous party culture. They thus broke silence and changed their ways. This was the case, for example, of some of the Kurdish members of the Tudeh party, who in retrospect regretted that they had "nurtured the ideal of a pure socialist society in their mind and had become dervishes of that [socialist] path."³⁶ When they took account of the Tudeh Party's actual politics, which favoured the dominant Persian ethno-nationalism, they abandoned it in 1990.³⁷

Gradually, the members of Kurdish parties also began loosening their ties with these organizations, although for reasons other than ethno-national difference and discrimination. Unlike in Kurdistan, in European societies individuals were not completely dependent on parties, so they did not feel the need to think like them. They refused to tolerate certain behaviours in their parties that were contrary to the previously mentioned emancipative values. For example, mentioning her rapid integration into Swedish society since she was young, one interviewee said: "I was curious to know what this society was like, then I fell into conflict with the CPI/Komele, and afterwards I left the party." In this regard, the gender problem became more prominent. Although the larger participation by women was a distinguishing feature of the Kurdish movement,³⁸ women had a double reason to leave Kurdish parties or reduce party ties. While the parties were expected to consider gender equality based on their principles, and were even seen as a refuge for women to escape from family and social problems in Rojhelat, all were in practice dominated by men. According to the interviews, the level of attention given to gender issues was still insufficient once women had experienced different gender relations in the host societies and acquired more gender awareness. Most of the interviewed women were not satisfied with gender relations in Kurdish parties and often saw little or no change in the thought of male members. Some of them, while maintaining shared beliefs, left the parties because they felt that the framework was too narrow for them as women. In this regard, as the following statement shows, the impact of interpersonal social contact with host societies has been significant:

I was 20 years old when I left Iran. I changed a lot here and I saw many other things that I didn't see in Kurdistan. I learned about what in the

36 Bexşî, *Lêkdabiran*, 56.

37 See the statement of their separation from the party in: *Ibid.*, 81–91.

38 Cabi, "The Armed Struggle."

Netherlands is called “individualism” and saw that Dutch women can openly express their opinions and thoughts, and not only when they follow a party line. Party membership prevents you from speaking as you really want. So I left the party because I was critical of it. In my opinion, it was very traditional, there were many women militants, but there was no woman in the leadership of the party, all activities were in the name of men. The party was no longer attractive to me because some of my beliefs and thoughts changed here that didn’t fit with partisanship. I still love the KDP, supporting socialism and autonomy for Kurdistan, but I felt that if I limited myself to the party framework, I would not be able to pursue what I love. I left it so I could talk about my beliefs as a free human being.

Interviewees reported gender inequality in parties, even in Komele, where women’s rights were expected to receive more attention, as Fatemeh Karimi’s research confirms.³⁹ The persistence of traditional gender relations limited women’s activity to subservient or military roles.

Whereas for some women, joining Komele was a way to escape from forced marriage, as mentioned above, it was not unusual for parties to impose intra-organizational marriage. A former Komele member, who had joined when she was in high school, turned away from the party’s Marxist ideology and became a feminist activist after she arrived in France in the early 2010s. The woman, who was in her late fifties at the time of the interview, said: “The oppression that women experienced in Komele was nowhere to be seen. They participated in so many activities and tried not only to be women, but also to be men. [...] Thought in Komele was masculine thought.” Therefore, these women’s female agency was diminished. The awareness of such gender relations made them move away from their parties.

On the other hand, some Kurdish immigrants now have a more functional view of parties. From a social constructivist perspective, political density is important here, which is the degree to which individuals from the same or different political groups and ideologies know each other and to which they have political interactions during social contact.⁴⁰ This has two sub-dimensions: same-ideology/party and cross-ideology/party density. As an effect of cross-party political density, when comparing the outlawed, revolutionary, non-electoral centralized Kurdish parties with European parties, many interviewees

39 Karimi, *Genre et militantisme*.

40 Mao and Shen, “Cultural Identity Change”; Kabashima and White, *Political System and Change*.

criticized the former for their fixed structure and leadership, and their unprofessional management. Some thought that Kurdish parties have lost their original function, as one interviewee, who left her party after a few years in Europe, noted: “The organization functionally was not like before, the politics of Komele were no longer acceptable to me.” Others have found a functional and group-interest view on political organizations. A former member of the KDPI said: “I believe that no society can progress without real political parties, but these Kurdish parties are not real parties that have commissions and internal elections for their leadership etc. Ever since I left the party, I always feel I have lost something important. Despite this, I can never devote as much time to doing work in an organization as before.”

Another interviewee, who joined the KDPI at the age of 17, arrived in Sweden in his early thirties, in the early 1990s. He studied up to graduate level and got a job in a government institution. In his mid-sixties at the time of the interview, he commented on breaking party ties:

I was convinced that I could not actually work with the methods that political parties follow, especially the KDPI. I know there are many difficulties on the path of struggle and party work, but I realized that it is useless, it [the members' party work] is just a market in which [the parties] reproduce themselves. They go round in circles instead of opening the door to analysis and a clear strategy. My experience of this unchangeable party made me give up on party work. People can do politics in other ways. I've never stopped, but I haven't taken part in this kind of party work.

In contrast to the tendency to follow political dogmatism in Kurdistan, leaving their party has become easier for immigrants. A member of the CPI says: “Regarding political issues and my thoughts about them, since I've moved here, I see the world differently, not as a dogmatic person who just parrots the party line or says nothing.”

And a KDPI member expressed it in these words:

I have been a member of the KDPI for several years but I am not married to it. If I see another party that works better, while my own party does not perform well, then I may go to the other party, like the system that exists in the Netherlands. Based on their policies, I follow whichever is better. That is, my coming to Europe has meant that I'm no longer a hundred per cent devotee of a party, defending it regardless of whether it's good or not, just because I'm already a pêşmerge. No, I call good what is good about it and bad what is bad.

8 Rehabilitating beyond Organizational Boundaries

Moving to Europe and getting away from the organizational conditions in Kurdistan paved the way for people with different levels of education, who were no longer entirely dependent on and influenced by their parties as they had once been while living in camps, to rethink and revise their past. One interviewee, who dropped out of high school to join Komele, emigrated after leaving the party, arriving in the Netherlands in his mid-twenties. Turning away from Marxist ideology, he focused on his own life, studied for a postgraduate degree and became a civil servant. In his late fifties at the time of the interview, he remarked about his socio-economic independence: "Europe gave me a basis to live again, since I hadn't had any normal life from the Iranian revolution until 1989. When you have no normal life, your relationships are not normal either. Those relationships I had in Komele were not human relationships like those of the other nine billion people."

While some political immigrants left their parties completely, whether in Kurdistan or afterwards in Europe, others have maintained the relationships with their party while also working and finding a role in wider society. For example, another interviewee, who had joined Komele at the age of 15 and acquired basic literacy within Komele, arrived in Germany in the late 1990s without any documents. This woman, who was in her mid-fifties at the time of the interview, said about her independence: "I am still a member of Komele, however being in Europe has affected me and I have learned through experience. You are independent, you depend on yourself, you learn many things here." By integrating into the host society, entering personal life, and occupying themselves with their families and social responsibilities, some immigrants gradually decreased or gave up their party-related activities. Thus, apart from the parties' high officials who directly engage with political activity as their job, other members deal with their own personal lives in a European society.

The new lifestyle of Kurdish immigrants in Europe has led some of them to a kind of political individualism with a self-interested realistic view, in the sense that self-interest may motivate their political attitude towards the parties, especially when party decisions or policies directly or indirectly affect the objective or subjective interests of individuals.⁴¹ Alongside other changes in their lives, they try to reconstitute their political selves beyond the boundaries of their organizations. This allows for social contacts with a higher level

41 Huddy, "From Group Identity," 740–741.

of cross-ideology political density, in which they not only become acquainted with people from different cultures but also with different ideologies and political parties and thus develop their individual political orientations. They no longer subscribe to the same political ideas as their parties. As a former member of Komele stated: "Here I have always participated in events related to Kurdistan issues [...] I have always been supportive and I have done what I could, but individually, I didn't follow any [political] trends." And another interviewee: "I openly say that I understand the word democracy here, in this country. Here I can express my opinion, not like at that time in Komele." For them, working with a Kurdish party is not easy, since they are no longer willing to hold only the party's view. As they grow older and more experienced, according to the interviews, logic and realism rule their lives more. Unlike their lives in Kurdistan, which were more deindividualized by political organizations, their present lives and their own feelings are important bases for their political decisions. In the words of one interviewee: "I needed to rebuild myself and make up for my shortcomings."

This self-interested realistic view is well manifested in the following statement:

Here, I told myself that what I had done so far has been to serve the nation, the homeland, and the working class through my political organization. Now I serve myself: I raise my children well, unlike my own childhood [...]. I decided to study and work, and at the same time, if I can, I will do what I can for the people and my homeland.

Moreover, when they are not socially and economically tied to the parties, they dare to think differently politically. Familiarity with individualism and mutual respect may lead to a basic change in Kurdish individuals' attitudes, as in this interviewee:

In my opinion, the culture and tradition of European countries, especially Scandinavia, is very effective in respecting individuals. They see the refugees as individuals and do not judge them by their beliefs. I think this country teaches that. The first thing that occupied my mind when we first came was how respectfully they deal with people in these countries. This affected me very much, and it made me wake up.

Such a change in life leads to other changes. In host societies that provide the context for acquiring sufficient knowledge to adjust their perceptions, some migrants reevaluate their circumstances and gradually move away from their

previous thoughts and criticize them.⁴² While those radical leftists who have kept their relations with their organizations have changed their views less than those who left, they often recognize or describe themselves not as Marxists and communists any more but as leftists, socialists, and justice seekers, believing in a kind of social democracy. In answering a question following on from a discussion of her previous leftist ideology, an interviewee said:

No, no, I have changed a lot. I'm not a communist any more and I don't want a communist party. That communism emanated from the Soviets; it came to us and was injected into us, and we absorbed it. By now calling myself a leftist, I mean something like social democracy. I want a democratic condition, a welfare state, prosperity, and security, so that people can live a comfortable and normal life in peace.

Along with their socio-political experience and a major change in their personality characteristics, Kurdish immigrants have been affected by global changes, including a shift to neoliberalism and personalized politics, more since they have come to Europe than when they were in Kurdistan. In countries such as Germany and Sweden, many leftist parties have shifted their stance on domestic programmes, considering privatization of public services, trade agreements rather than labour protections, etc.⁴³ This has affected the political identity of Kurdish immigrants who mainly had a leftist background, resulting in a shift of their political-ideological views in the same direction as those European leftist parties.

9 Discussion: Towards a Multi-dimensional Political View

Many Kurdish political immigrants have tried to strengthen their individuality and agency, which had been severely restricted in their political organizations. Contrary to my expectation before the research, most of the interviewees confirmed that they had been deindividualized party members whose individuality did not play an important part in their political identity when they were politically active in Rojhelat. They were dedicated to the social groups or political organizations they belonged to. In that closed society, with its intense and violent political persecution, with dogmatic and centralized parties hold-

42 Mao and Shen, "Cultural Identity Change."

43 Bennett, "Personalization of Politics."

ing rigid ideological positions, and subject to deindividualization, people only knew the followers of their own party well and only had intellectual interaction with others who shared the same ideology. Living in Europe and getting away from the previous political climate led to a slow change in their political identity towards “self-relevant meanings,” while considering their individual role and personal life in their political decisions and activities.⁴⁴ Gaining more awareness of their individual rights and working against the more deindividualized status created by political organizations, they moved towards a balance between individual and organizational identities. The existence of a more open society, individualism, and the decentralized parties with different political functions in Europe strengthened cross-ideology political density in their social contact. Immigrants thus met more people with different political ideologies. In the plural, more democratic atmosphere of the host societies, they moved away from ideological restrictions and adopted a more democratic and tolerant mindset. In the words of a former member of both the KDPI and Tudeh, “We learned many things in Europe: respect for freedom, for individuality, for each other’s private life, for women.”

The political experiences and the process of political identity reconstruction of Kurdish immigrants include a significant gender dimension. In this regard, apart from the growing attention to women’s rights, increasing tolerance towards LGBT people and supporting their rights and freedom is a good case in point. For example, a female interviewee who said that in her mind there were only men and women in Kurdistan, added about LGBT people: “Now, I see this as a normal and natural thing.” A male interviewee, mentioning his lack of familiarity with LGBT people in Iran and Kurdistan, said: “But [now] I have friends who belong to this group.” In the focus group, too, along with ethno-national, class, and women’s problems, the participants insisted on including the problems of people belonging to what they called a “third gender” (*cinsî/regezî sêyem*) category and ecological issues. They spoke freely and respectfully about the rights of this group in society, a topic that is generally taboo in Kurdish society. For example, they mentioned their relatives living in Kurdistan who are irritated by talk about LGBT individuals and say: “No, no, never talk about them.” It shows the difference between the participants and their peers in Kurdish society.

Many of these interviewed immigrants consider themselves as belonging to different categories at the same time and pay particular attention to the specific problems of those categories to which they belong: women, minorities, work-

44 Burke, “Identity Change.”

ers, and so on. They believe that it is unacceptable to wait until the national issue is solved before speaking about their particular problems, for example as a woman. As one interviewee insisted: "I don't prioritize the Kurdish or national problem over the problem of gender inequality, nor the class problem. For me all of these are important problems together and each one can have a special place for me, and I strive to address it."

Some members of parties want to transfer such an intersectional view to their parties in Kurdistan. For example, according to the interlocutors, the LGBT issue has not yet been raised by their parties in Kurdistan, neither publicly nor privately, because the parties have not moved sufficiently far from the restrictive social norms in mainstream society. However, this group's rights have become a matter of concern for some party members who have been influenced by their social contacts in Europe where, unlike in their society of origin, these groups can openly meet and be seen:

Today, I consider many problems in Kurdish society. I have to change as an individual, yet there are many individuals here who have not changed their way of thinking. [...] I even discuss LGBT people in our party. Now, LGBT people are also part of my concern, although it's taboo in our society. [...] There are people in my party who say it is not a concern of our society now. We have to work on all the issues. I have to support LGBT people because it is a reality in society.

Therefore, the growth in awareness of socio-political problems and a consideration of societal diversity, especially influenced by socio-political interactions, education, and experience, has paved the way for raising an intersectional socio-political view among Kurdish immigrants. For example, discussion of the class issue was hegemonic in Komele and prevailed over other issues, while the various other identity dimensions of workers and labourers, such as their culture, language, and feelings, were not considered; this has changed in the European context. For most individuals, whether party members or ex-members, the Kurdish national question is also important. Yet if the Kurdish question is hegemonic in the KDPI, class and gender relations are also important for individuals.

By breaking away from party control early in migration and shaping a transitional identity, Kurdish migrants have passed the more deindividualized state, while still dominantly maintaining a collective sense of self and adherence to group norms, which are the logical precursors to political cohesion.⁴⁵ Apart

45 Huddy, "From Group Identity," 739–740.

from the impact of a different political context, especially regarding the political regime, as they gain more diverse experience and knowledge they no longer devote themselves completely to one group, organization, or idea. In other words, they have moved away from idealistic and highly collectivist thinking, which pays less attention to individual interest. Political interactions within a social network with a higher level of cross-ideology political density contribute to fostering pluralism and tolerance. In this constructivist state, social contact between Kurds from different political groups, and between European and Kurdish people, has affected their perceptions.

10 Conclusion

This article aimed to show the process of political identity change from a more deindividualized state to individualism among leftist Kurdish immigrants in Western Europe. In this regard, relying on ICT and relevant cognitive, realistic, and constructivist approaches, in-depth and focus group interviews with ex-/members of Kurdish leftist parties were analysed. The findings show that while they experienced less individual agency in Kurdistan, they tended to be more individualistic and less partisan in host societies. By overcoming the centralized party structure and related dogma, they tried to rehabilitate their lives beyond organizational boundaries with greater individual political agency. Therefore, moving out of authoritarian structures, securing their sense of individuality, and shifting from organizational deindividualization to political individualism gradually led to the growth of extra-party political consciousness and a multidimensional socio-political view among Kurdish immigrants. They simultaneously paid attention to important socio-political problems including ethno-national, ecological, class, and gender issues, which they felt was not (sufficiently) the case in their parties. Such a view can affect Kurdish politics both in Europe and Kurdistan. It can create a space for Kurdish relations beyond party and ideological boundaries, convergent and thus more influential not only in the Kurdistan movements and the politics of Kurdish parties, but also in policy-making in the origin and host countries. Further research may explore if the development of individuality and political individualism can pave the way for outside-party relations between individuals, collective action, and changing views on collective political identities.

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Kurte

Ev gotar, bi nêrîna nasnameyên siyasî yê takekesan a li gor têkiliyên wan ên bi rêxistinên siyasî û sekna wan a îdeolojîk re, meyla ber bi takekesîtiya siyasî û bandora wê ya li ser nîşa-yekem a koçberên siyasî yê xwedî paşxaneyêke siyasî ya çep ya ji Îran/Rojhilatê Kurdistanê yê li Rojavayê Ewropayê analiz dike. Bi şopandina nêzîk-bûneke çawahînê [*qualitative*], bi rêya hevpeyvînên niv-binyadkirî yê kûr û komên baldariyê [*focus group*] yê ligel endam û endamên kevn ên partiyên siyasî dane hatine berhevîrin. Encam nîşan didin ku ji ber terkkirina hewayê siyasî ya Îranê û rêxistinên siyasî yê kurd, herwiha ligel bandora çandêke siyasî ya nû, gelek beşdarên siyaseta takekeskirî ya li gor nêrîn û menfaatên xwe qebûl kirine. Koçberan nêrineke pir-alîyî dîtine ku di heman demê de baldariya pirsgerêkên etno-neteweyî, çînî, û zayendî yê civaka kurd dike.

Kilmnus

Na meqale meylê ferdperestîya siyasîye û tesîrê ci yê koçberanê Îran/Kurdistanê Rojhelatî yê siyasîyan ser o vindena. Nê koçberê neslê verênî dorûverê çepgirîyanê Îran/Kurdistanê Rojhelatî ra yenê û ewro Ewropaya rojawanî de weşîya xo ramenê. Meqale perspektîfê ê kesan ver bi nasnameyê înan ê siyasî, pagirêdayîşê înan bi rêxistinên siyasîyan û îdeolojîya înan analiz kena. Ma metodêko kalîtatîf xebitna, endamanê partîyanê siyasîyan ê aktîf û kanan reyde komportajê nêmwankerde û xorînî ameyî kerdene û dayeyî wina ameyî arêdayene. Netîceyê roportajan ma rê musnenê ke eke merdim hem dorûverê Îranî yo siyasî hem zî rêxistinên kurdan ê siyasîyan biterikno, ser o kî binê tesîrê kulturêkê siyasîyê neweyî de bimana, zaf kesî benê wayîrê siyasîyêkê ferdperestî. No siyasîyê kî fikr û faydeyê wayîrê xo ser o awan beno. Nê koçberan zereyê komelê kurdan de yew siyasîyê zafdîmensîyonal dî ke bale anceno hem meseleya etnîka neteweyîye hem zî yê sinif û cinsîyetî ser.

پوخته

له روانگه‌ی ناسینه‌ی رامیاری تا که کانه‌وه واته پنه‌ندی له گه‌ل رینکخراوه سیاسیه‌کان و هه‌لویستی ئایدۆلۆجیکیان، ئەم وتاره مه‌یل به‌ره‌و تانکوازی سیاسی و کاریگه‌ریه‌که‌ی له تیو وه‌چه‌ی یه‌که‌می کۆچبه‌رانی خاوه‌ن پاشخانی سیاسی چه‌پ خه‌لکی رۆژه‌لاقی کوردستان که له رۆژئاوای ئەوروپا ده‌ژین، تاوتوی ده‌کات. به‌که‌لکوه‌رگرتن له ریازی توێژینه‌وه‌ی چۆنایه‌تی، زانیاریه‌کان له ریگی دیمانه‌ی قوولی نیچه-پیکهاته‌ی و فوکس گروپ له‌گه‌ل ئەندامان و کۆنه‌ئندامانی حیزبه‌ سیاسییه‌کان کۆکرانه‌وه. ئاکامی توێژینه‌وه‌که‌ پیشان ده‌دات که به‌ دوورکه‌وتنه‌وه‌ له‌ که‌شی سیاسی ئێران و هه‌روه‌ها رینکخراوه‌ سیاسییه‌ کوردیه‌کان، و له ژێر کاریگه‌ری چاندیکی سیاسی نویدا، زۆریک له دیمانه‌له‌که‌ لکراوه‌کان سیاسه‌تیکی تانکوازانیه‌یان به‌ی بیروپرا و به‌رژه‌وه‌ندی خۆیان گرتۆته‌به‌ر. کۆچبه‌ران گه‌بشتونه‌ته‌ روانگه‌به‌کی سیاسی فره‌-ره‌هه‌ند که‌ هاوکات سه‌رنجی پرسه‌ نه‌ته‌وه‌ی، چینه‌ی‌تی و جینه‌دیه‌یه‌کانی کۆمه‌لگای کوردی ده‌دات.