

The 21st Century and the Temporal Power

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The hopes of the Assyrians (a.k.a. Nestorians, Chaldeans and Jacobites), Iraq's indigenous people, for freedom and security were dashed in the years following the 2003 US invasion of Iraq. One of the main reasons was the interference on many fronts by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Assyrians' internal affairs. Another reason is because many Assyrians are comfortable with living under the realm of their bishops and patriarchs at the expense of attending to national matters. The Assyrian religious leaders reckon that they are not elected by the people and they are armed with the power of the Bible. They know that the Assyrian public impact and reaction towards offenses or lapses they make is minimal, if not almost negligible, contrary to mistakes made by politicians or civic leaders. This has motivated the religious leaders to continue their interferences in matters beyond their normal church duties. The meddling in political matters began to shape after the creation of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in 1992. However, that interference transformed to a definite pattern since the 2003 US invasion as sectarian leaders gained exceptional recognition and power.

Historically, religious leaders around the world had great power within their societies. The compelling role of the pope, for example, and his temporal powers since the 8th Century are well documented. In regions where Christians lived under Islamic rule, patriarchs have historically enjoyed both spiritual and temporal leadership and exercised considerable civil authority over their communities. The rise of nationalism curbed the authorities of religious leaders in most free countries, unfortunately, religious leaders in the Middle East continued to dominate daily life.

The Assyrian national thinkers are baffled with the domination of the Old Testament narratives on Assyrians – it is overwhelming. In a letter by Benjamin Franklin in July 1757, after he narrowly escaped a shipwreck off the British coast: “The bell ringing for church, we went thither immediately, and with hearts full of gratitude, returned sincere thanks to God for the mercies we had received. Were I a Roman Catholic, perhaps I should on this occasion vow to build a chapel to some saint; but as I am not, if I were to vow at all, it should be to build a light-house.” Assyrians must awake from their slumber, and consider Franklin's golden perspective.

The calamity caused by the various Assyrian religious leaders since the 2003 US invasion of Iraq created an environment of dispassion, a sense of disinterest and imperviousness across society. The longing for freedom subsided as nationalists withdrew in despair while the religious leaders increased their dominance. The destruction of Iraqi civil society and institutions due to the role of the sectarian and tribal factions led to a setback to the Assyrian national movement. The friendly and cordial relationship between the Church and the Kurdish leadership compelled the Assyrian masses to show subliminal reaction against the antagonistic role of the Kurdish leaders towards the true Assyrian national and secular movement.

It is said that faith means making a virtue out of not thinking. The sectarian leaders need to advance rapprochement with fellow Christian leaders, exercise humbleness and be transparent, which is the vehicle to ensure the empowerment and prosperity of the weak Christian indigenous minority in Iraq. The Assyrians cannot progress when their church leaders are intertwined with their egotistic nature or when they undermine the Assyrian politicians and/or activists. The Assyrians cannot advance when leaders of the Assyrian civic institutions or policy makers distance themselves from anyone who criticizes the church leaders. Bill Maher said, “those who preach faith or elevate it are intellectual slave

holders keeping mankind in a bondage to fantasy and nonsense.” Most religions were introduced by goodhearted individuals who sought to change societies for the better. Regretfully, history lists many examples of religious leaders who were either not qualified to lead their congregations or they abused their position and caused more damage than good. Maher said, “religion allows human beings who do not have all the answers to think that they do.” This is dangerous to any society, specifically that of the Assyrians, since they do not have a country that could act as a guardian in times of distress.

Recently, news of the Sept 12, 2022 inauguration of the new Assyrian Church of the East patriarchate in Arbil spread on social media. Certain Assyrians from around the world, including leaders of diaspora political groups, began preparations to travel to Arbil in order to participate in the inauguration. Sources to this author have indicated that these groups have plans to meet with Patriarch Mar Awa III. The patriarch had met with the Iraqi Assyrian political groups a couple of times, more recently on Sept 4, 2022. His Holiness met also with Assyrian politicians and civic groups during his visit to Australia. These meetings are welcomed, but what is the objective.

It is interesting to know that a few years ago in Stanislaus County, California the re-introduction of the temporal power of the patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East was brought up by certain members of the church. We must understand that the duty of the clergy is to serve the spiritual needs of the people. Interfering in political matters must not be an option. The world has changed and in this 21st century we cannot behave as communities still slumbering in the 16th Century. Why do some Assyrian politicians act like ushers to patriarchs in the attempt to revive the temporal power, thus re-plant the millet system? Assyrians cannot follow in the footsteps of the Shi’a of Iraq, Iran or Lebanon who chose to allow their Imams or Ayatollas to be their temporal leaders. A look at the pathetic situation in those three countries should give Assyrians a good reason to avoid making such a grave mistake. Why do Assyrians want to get back to the dhimmi status again by subjecting themselves to be the dhimmi subordinates of the Kurdish tribal leaders after 600 years of being subjects to the Ottomans?

There are those who claim that Assyrians need to reintroduce the old temporal power since the political groups have failed to advance the national movement and are not agreeing on a unified national agenda and demands. There are three issues here to ponder: First, to demand that two groups, one grass-root and the other a paper-like, assemble in a room and grant them both equal power in making decisions is silly. Paper-like groups that are not supported by Assyrians cannot make their own decisions as decisions are dictated upon them by those who created them. Second, having certain Assyrian individuals in the KRG cabinet is not because those individuals won in elections through Assyrian votes, rather by the Barzani empowerment. The Barzanis use these individuals as a wild card to give the impression that the Kurds treat the Assyrians fairly and democratically, when they do not. Third, and most importantly, are the various Assyrian churches under one leadership or do they have a unified agenda? The answer is no. Each patriarch represents, and speaks on behalf of, his own congregation only. So what is the difference between the Assyrian political groups and the Assyrian churches.

The Kurdish leaders do not want to see a strong, independent Assyrian national movement; however, they welcome supporting various second class millet Christian congregations and their respective patriarchs. It is also possible that Patriarch Mar Awa would encourage taking advantage of certain descendants of Assyrian tribal leaders in order to advance the agenda that is on the table.

I would like to end by saying, sometimes, it is okay for Assyrians to learn from their foes. Do we see the Kurds voting for their Islamic groups? Very few, yet the majority of Kurds vote for the Kurdish political parties. What happened to the century old Assyrian national movement, the one million Assyrian martyrs or the dreams of nationalists such as Fraidon Atouraya?