

OPINION

Kurdistani Newroz vs. Iranian Nowruz: Conflicting Narratives and Agencies in Kurdistan*¹

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Abstract

The opinion piece under the title: *Kurdistani Newroz vs. Iranian Nowruz: Conflicting Narratives and Agencies in Kurdistan*, examines the distinctiveness of Kurdish Newroz compared to Persian Nowruz, emphasising its symbolic significance beyond seasonal celebrations. Kurdish Newroz embodies resistance, unity and gender equality through public celebrations and women's active participation. It challenges negative stereotypes imposed by Persian nationalism and advocates Kurdish and Azerbaijani-Turkish solidarity in the democratic definition of identities. The narrative reclamation during Newroz reflects a pluricentric approach to nation-building, rooted in inclusivity and linguistic agency, that counters homogenising centralist nationalisms. This vision envisions a future in which diverse voices are recognised and a shared sovereignty for all is promoted.

Keywords: Gender equality, Kurdish identity, Kurdish Newroz, Persian nationalism, Pluricentric nation-building

Greetings to friends joining us through various channels. My insistence on naming this seminar "Kurdistani Newroz and Iranian Nowruz" is not without reason, because my focus is on the Kurdish Narrative of Newroz. I aim to share some of these reasons with you and our friends here today, highlighting the significance of exploring the Kurdish perspective on Newroz. This focus is crucial, as it unveils a narrative rich in history, resilience, and cultural identity that distinguishes Kurdish Newroz from its Persian counterpart.

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¹ * The following text refers to Behrooz Shojai's speech on 31 March 2024 at Platform X with Rahman Javanmardi under the title "Kurdish Newroz vs. Iranian Nowruz; Narrative and Functional Conflicts in Kurdistan".

Newroz, a celebration marking the advent of spring, is observed with great fervor across various parts of the Middle East and Central Asia, particularly among Kurdish and Perso-Iranian communities. However, the Kurds have showcased the Kurdish interpretation and celebration of Newroz that stands out distinctly from the Perso-Iranian Nowruz. This divergence is not merely a matter of different customs but is rooted in deep cultural, social, and even political significances that merit a closer exploration.

For the Kurdish people, Newroz transcends its origins as a mere marker of the vernal equinox, embodying a potent symbol of resistance, freedom, and national identity. Unlike the more introverted family gatherings seen in Persian Nowruz celebrations, Kurdish Newroz is characterized by its vibrant public demonstrations, communal feasts, and large gatherings. It's a folk feast that brings entire communities together in open spaces, around bonfires, and in town squares, emphasizing collective joy and social cohesion. The contrast between Kurdish Newroz and Perso-Iranian Nowruz underscores a broader dichotomy between communal solidarity and individual family celebrations. Kurdish Newroz, with its emphasis on public gatherings, folk traditions, and the expression of collective identity, serves as a vibrant testament to the Kurdish spirit of resistance and community bond. It turns the arrival of spring into a publicly shared spectacle, a rallying point for Kurdish aspirations and social cohesion.

Unlike the fixed and relatively short-spanned Newroz celebrations in other regions, the Kurdish Newroz extends both in time and geography. Celebrations commence from the beginning of Esfand (the last month in the Persian calendar) and continue until its end, embodying a temporal extension that signifies the importance of Newroz as a period of renewal and preparation for the new year, rather than a single day of celebration.

A striking feature of the Kurdish Newroz is the prominent role and wide participation of Kurdish women, which starkly contrasts with the more restrained participation observed in other Muslim communities, including those of Iran. This not only highlights the high social status of women within Kurdish society but also indicates a cultural paradigm that values gender inclusivity and equality. Women's freedom and safety to express joy publicly, especially in the mass dances, signify a societal structure where gender constraints are minimized, and the empowerment of women is celebrated.

The Kurdish Newroz celebration embodies a profound sense of inclusivity and collective identity, vividly brought to life through its traditional ring dances. Participants, spanning all ages and genders, join hands in a seamless circle, donned in vibrant Kurdish attire, symbolizing a society united. These dances transcend mere physical expression, encapsulating deep-seated values of unity, collectivity, and resistance. They stand as powerful acts of defiance and solidarity, blurring entrenched social distinctions. Through these rhythmic movements, the Kurdish community articulates a broader vision of inclusiveness and harmony, showcasing a communal resistance that is both celebratory and defiant.

The setting of the Kurdish Newroz celebrations in mountainous terrains, accompanied by the vivid colors of traditional dresses against the backdrop of nature, underscores a profound connection with the natural world. This celebration amidst nature is not just a preference for scenic beauty but a cultural reaffirmation of the Kurds' historical and spiritual bond with their land. It symbolizes resilience, freedom, and a life in harmony with the natural environment.

An intriguing aspect of the Kurdish Newroz is the symbolic wearing of men's dress by women, a nod to the female Kurdish fighters who also don such attire. This choice of clothing transcends mere fashion or tradition; it embodies a statement of strength, equality, and the ongoing struggle for rights and recognition within Kurdish society. It is a powerful expression of the Kurdish Newroz as not just a festive occasion but a symbol of cultural identity and resistance.

The Kurdish interpretation of Newroz, as showcased in Eastern Kurdistan presents a rich tapestry of cultural norms, societal values, and symbolic expressions that distinguish it significantly from the Perso-Iranian celebrations. This divergence is emblematic of the Kurds' unique cultural identity, deeply rooted in communal bonds, gender equality, connection with nature, and an unyielding spirit of resistance. The Eastern Kurds' celebration of Newroz thus stands as a vibrant testament to their rich cultural heritage and their enduring quest for identity and sovereignty.

In this year's celebration of Newroz, the Kurdish people did more than just herald the arrival of spring; they presented a vivid narrative of resilience, unity, and cultural distinction. This celebration was a departure from narratives imposed by dominant Persian state-nationalism, offering a nuanced glimpse into the true essence of Kurdish identity—a stark contrast to the labels such as "brigands, head-cutters, terrorists, anti-revolutionaries, foreign agents, and so

forth," spread among non-Kurdish communities within Iran's political geography under this racist discourse.

Central to this year's Newroz was the active rejection of these derogatory labels and the re-claiming of narrative, cultural, and linguistic agency. For years, the Kurdish community has been depicted under a cloud of negativity by dominant Persian narratives, casting Kurds as disruptive elements or reactionary forces. However, the joyous and peaceful Kurdish Newroz presented a compelling counter-narrative that not only challenged these portrayals but also highlighted the rich cultural fabric and social values of the Kurds.

One of the most notable aspects of this narrative reclamation was the emancipatory role of Kurdish women in Newroz. Contrary to the biased perceptions of prevailing nationalism regarding the social status of Kurdish women, Kurdish Newroz emphasized their vibrant and significant participation, underscoring a society that champions inclusivity and gender equality. This participation directly contested the state-imposed image of Kurdish women, shattering the cultural narratives within the Persian state-nationalism framework. The Kurdish community, through Newroz celebrations with such extensive participation and visible leadership of women, refuted the "misogynistic reactionary" labels and instead portrayed itself as a beacon of progressive values. This year's Newroz spirit was a manifestation of the spirit of Jîna Amini, presenting a narrative of resilience and defiance, a narrative distinctly Kurdish, not what has been imposed upon them.

Furthermore, Kurdish Newroz served as a testament to inclusivity and collective solidarity within the Kurdish community, starkly contrasting with the exclusionary tendencies of Persian nationalism. The inclusivity witnessed during Kurdish Newroz underscores a social structure that embraces diversity while simultaneously fostering a sense of belonging and unity among its members. This inclusivity not only stands in opposition to the sectional and exclusionary Iranian nationalism but also represents the diverse yet unified identity of the Kurds, embodying a democratic and inclusive essence.

Another central aspect of this year's Newroz was the emphasis on linguistic agency by the Kurdish people. Kurds, by centering the celebrations around the Kurdish language – through songs, music, and other cultural expressions – reclaimed their linguistic agency in a state of coloniality. The revival of linguistic agency in Kurdistan goes beyond merely celebrating Newroz in Kurdish; it's also an act of resistance against homogenization and cultural erasure.

Unlike the top-to-bottom nation-building approaches observed in neighboring countries, Kurdish nation-building is pluricentric, inclusive, democratic, and essentially bottom-to-top. The Kurdish nation is defined by its people and its diversity, not by a doctrinal notion imposed from above. This bottom-to-top movement of Kurdish nation-building, with its democratic ethos, is not a threat to neighboring nations. Instead, it challenges the monolithic, homogenizing centralist (as opposed to pluricentric) dominant nationalisms. On the contrary, the Kurdish national movement, entrenched with the engagement and solidarity of Kurdistani citizens, aims to be liberating and inspiring for neighboring nations. It is based not on land and conquest but on the legitimacy of the sovereignty of its people over their land.

This year's Newroz demonstrated that the Kurdish approach to nation-building, contrary to dominant state nationalisms, does not regard the land through a medieval lens of ownership. Instead, it proposes an approach based on popular sovereignty—sovereignty over oneself and, ultimately, over one's land. Those who persist in demeaning and othering Kurds on social networks, or who have yet to free themselves from internalized false narratives of the Persian state nationalism miss the essence of this movement. Similarly, this message extends to our Azerbaijani Turkish neighbors. Those labeling Kurds as migrants, guests, or other derogatory terms are either adherents of a Ayatollah's mindset or that of Erdogan's. The rights we demand for Kurds are no more than those we advocate for Azerbaijani Turks. We hope that Azerbaijani Turks will also challenge imposed narratives and define their identity from their own political and cultural understanding. In supporting the manifestation of Turkish identity in their national sovereignty definition, we not only support but stand alongside them.

This Kurdish narrative and nation-building process, pluricentric and grounded in the principles of democracy and inclusivity, represents a profound departure from the constraining narratives of the past. It is a testament to the resilience, unity, and progressive vision of the Kurdish people—a vision that challenges, inspires, and aspires for a future where every voice is heard, every identity is acknowledged, and sovereignty is shared by all.

Behrooz Shojai, a Researcher and Lecturer at the University of Kobani, has devoted his academic work to the field of Kurdish studies. Having completed advanced studies in this field at Uppsala University in Sweden, Shojai is currently a PhD student. His scholarly endeavours mainly revolve around Kurdish language and literature, drawing on his extensive academic experience gained at various institutions such as Dohuk University, Mardin University and the Faculty of Language and Literature at Kobani University.