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Our man in Kurdistan [1]

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It's hard to find any local folk here in Erbil, the capital of Iraq's Autonomous Region of Kurdistan, who are on the edge of their seats about the outcome of the UK's general election. That's one measure of the declining role the UK plays on the world stage even in this part which was once part of the Empire and which was quite recently invaded by it. Cameron? Brown? Clegg? Not even some fairly senior local businessmen or long-term foreign residents can quite place the names.

Most people around here are either wheeling & dealing in a pretty wide open economy or desperately trying to eke out a living. There's a serious transition going on from decades of oppression and, for now, private business is running well ahead of the pack. This shows up most clearly on the streets where new private buildings and houses are sprouting up all over amidst a shabby infrastructure where roads are unlit, pavements broken and streets full of holes.

Especially notable is the number of men just sitting around, not apparently doing anything - old and young sipping tea; a bored, unthreatening, soldier or policeman or security guard slumped in a chair every hundred yards or so. Also notable is the number of men who are working in services - hotels, restaurants, shops and street vendors. They seem to outnumber customers by a factor of two or three.

Most notable is the absence of women. In any given crowd, it's unlikely more than 10% are female and most of those aren't spring chickens.

What do they all live on? Mostly, it's a kind of welfare-in-work system whereby people pretend (or not) to work in return for a living wage from government ministries, politically-attuned businesses and especially political parties. In the UK, this is called the benefits system. Here in Kurdistan, it's marginal unproductive employment and probably not too dissimilar from many government jobs created by Labour over the past 13 years. End result is the same - keeps the streets quiet.

Overall, though, it looks like movement is in the right direction but with a long way to go yet.

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