



Editor: Bruce Maddy-Weitzman Assistant Editor: Brandon Friedman

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The Kurds and the Iraqi Parliamentary Elections

Michael Eppel

The results of last month's Iraqi parliamentary elections indicate that Iraqi Kurds are more divided than at any time since the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime in 2003. The elections reflected the weakening of the Kurds due to deep rifts within the Iraqi Kurdish population, as well as setbacks endured following the independence referendum held on September 25, 2017, which carried implications for the status of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. The constitutional crisis and political deadlock surrounding KRG President Masoud Barzani's continued tenure and the uncertainty regarding future presidential elections have also led to the weakening of Kurdish morale since 2016. Kurdish divisions were exacerbated by the economic crisis and social unrest in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). The September 2017 referendum on Kurdish independence also intensified the rift between the two main Kurdish parties, the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK).

The governments of Iraq, Turkey, and Iran have all demanded the nullification of the referendum and have implemented harsh measures against the Kurdish region. The Kurds lost much of what they had gained since 2014: Kurdish autonomy was reduced, territories taken by Kurdish forces during the fight against the Islamic State have been lost to the government in Baghdad, and the KRI's independent foreign relations have been damaged. In October 2017, the Iraqi army and allied Shi'i militias displaced the KRI's *Peshmerga* forces and took

control of the city of Kirkuk in response to the referendum. The loss of Kirkuk and its oil fields dealt a blow to Kurdish autonomy. President Barzani placed the blame squarely on the PUK. The Barzanis, who lead the KDP, accused members of the Talabani family and the PUK-aligned Peshmerga forces of “treason” after these forces withdrew from Kirkuk when Iraqi government forces entered the city. In the aftermath of losing Kirkuk, members of the PUK and the Goran (“Change”) party declared the referendum a “colossal error” and blamed the leadership of the KDP, the dominant party in the Kurdistan Regional Government, for the consequences of the vote.¹ Critics of the referendum suggested that its timing was influenced by the desire of the Barzani-led KDP to consolidate its power within the KRG.

Following the failed referendum and the loss of Kirkuk, Barzani announced his resignation from the post of president, which he had held since 2005. Ostensibly, his resignation was intended to help resolve the internal political crisis and permit the KRG to hold parliamentary and presidential elections. The most recent political crisis has deep roots, yet a big part of the KRG's success since 2003 was partly a result of its ability to overcome this history and present a unified front to the world.

Following the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, the two major Kurdish national parties, the KDP and the PUK, remained united against other Iraqi forces and the forces of the United States, Iran, and Turkey. This coordination hinged on agreements made in 2002 between the leaders of the two parties, which enabled the unification of the geographic areas under each party’s control into a single autonomous region. Thanks to the united front presented by the two major parties, the Kurds achieved significant gains that enabled the development of the Kurdish autonomous region and the consolidation of its status, in effect, as a “state within a state.”

¹ Marc Perelman, [“Kurdish referendum a ‘colossal mistake,’ says son of the late President Talabani.”](#) *France 24*, October, 20, 2018.

However, the structure of the Kurdish political system did not address the changes taking place in Kurdish society. Rapid urbanization, the expansion of the middle-class, and the rising level of education occurred alongside a shift from a rural, agrarian, pastoral society, to an urban society, with an expanding middle-class with rising expectations for issues such as quality of life, efficient and transparent governance, and, ultimately, independence.

Furthermore, Kurdish politics are also influenced by other factors such as heritage, values, and tribal or clan affiliations. The leadership of the two major parties, established during decades of armed struggle against Iraqi regimes throughout the twentieth century, managed to advance Kurdish national interests through the building of the autonomous, almost independent, Kurdistan region in Iraq. However, in recent years, the two parties struggled to meet the demands and expectations of a new generation of young Kurds that has experienced rapid urbanization and modernization. It was within this socio-political context that the political rifts dividing Kurdish society emerged.

In 2009, former PUK activists established a new party called Goran, which, in addition to its national leadership aspirations, sought to eliminate the corruption and nepotism in the Kurdish government, establish complete unity of the Kurdish region, and advance the democratization and transparency of Kurdish governance. The political platform of Goran also called for the de-politicization and full unification of the Peshmerga forces and security services, which were loyal to one of the two major national parties and did not have a unified command structure. Goran was headed by Nawshirwan Mustafa, one of the founders of the PUK, who had served as deputy for the head of the PUK, Jalal Talabani. An intellectual and a fighter, Mustafa enjoyed the status of former senior commander in the Kurdish Peshmerga, and was considered a righteous and uncorrupt politician. Goran managed to garner wide support particularly among Kurdish youth who viewed the party as an alternative to the national political establishment and a potential vehicle for positive change in the Kurdish government. In the Kurdish parliamentary elections in 2010 and 2014, Goran received more support than the PUK and became the second largest party after the KDP.

While the KDP managed to preserve its unity with the emergence of a multi-party system, the PUK started to see internal divisions surface between various members and factions. These tensions eventually led to defections and even further divisions within the PUK. The absence of Jalal Talabani, who served as president of Iraq from 2009 to 2014, and suffered from a medical condition from 2012 until his death in October 2017, left the party with a leadership vacuum. This vacuum exacerbated the internal struggles between individuals and factions within the PUK.

The PUK developed a complex, tug-of-war relationship with Goran. On the one hand, some party members continued cooperating with the Kurdish Democratic Party. Many establishment figures from the two parties took this route in order to preserve their status in the face of a threat from a new political force. On the other hand, a cooperation agreement was signed between the PUK and Goran, under the auspices of the senior leaders Jalal Talabani and Nawshirvan Mustafa in May 2016. However, the continuing divisions within the PUK, along with hardline positions of some Goran activists, disrupted positive relations between the two parties.

Barham Salih, second in command of the PUK after Talabani and an experienced statesman who had served as Prime Minister of the KRG between 2009 and 2012, left the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan in 2017. In anticipation of the upcoming elections, Salih founded his own party, the Coalition for Democracy and Justice (CDJ), at the start of 2018.

Another party, the New Generation Movement, was also established in the lead up to the elections in the winter of 2018. The party, headed by the young entrepreneur-turned-politician Shaswar Abdulwahid, mostly addressed younger voters, using slogans similar to those employed by Goran and the CDJ.

With inter-party relations in crisis, a divided Kurdish population approached the ballot box on May 12, 2018. The Kurdish Democratic Party managed to maintain its power, securing 25 seats in the Iraqi parliament. The Patriotic Union of

Kurdistan secured 18 seats, losing three, which was nevertheless an accomplishment for a fractured party whose leaders were blamed for the fall of Kirkuk in October.

Goran, the main opposition party, endured a blow to its political standing by losing four and securing just five parliamentary seats. Goran's electoral setback was likely due to its failure to meet its voters' expectations for reform in the Kurdish Autonomous Region. Meager progress in the party's campaign to eliminate corruption and improve transparency in the Kurdish government, as well as its inability to unite a fractured Kurdish polity led to the voters' disappointment. Adding to the group's political troubles, the death of the party's charismatic leader Nawshirvan Mustafa in May 2017 also left a leadership vacuum within Goran. Currently, there is no figure with similar political experience or credibility among the party's remaining leadership who would be able to fill this role. Furthermore, despite the agreement between the parties, the PUK still perceived Goran as its greatest threat and therefore focused its campaign against it.

CDJ leader Barham Salih also experienced his share of disappointment. Salih hoped he could capitalize on his image as a relatively young, honest politician to fill the power vacuum left by the deaths of Talabani and Mustafa, and attract youth fed up with the corruption of the two major parties and disillusioned by the failures of Goran. However, ultimately, Salih's party secured just two seats.

The new party founded by the young businessman Shaswar Abdulwahid, who entered politics as an anti-establishment populist, won four seats.

The two Islamic parties lost about half of their influence. The Kurdish Islamic Group, or Komal (KIG), led by Ali Bapir, secured two seats as opposed to the three secured in the previous elections. The Kurdish Islamic Union (KIU), under the leadership of Salahedin Bahaedin, secured two and lost two seats.

The election results were met with protests by Goran supporters. The party's spokespeople accused the Kurdish counter-terrorism forces, under the command

of Lahur Talabani of the PUK, of opening fire on Goran headquarters in Sulaymaniyah.

Numerous political parties leveled accusations against each other in the aftermath of the elections. Members of Goran, and other parties, accused the PUK of manipulating the electronic ballot in Sulaymaniyah, altering the outcome in its favor. These parties announced that they would cooperate in issuing demands for new elections in Sulaymaniyah. It appears that the shaky alliance between Goran and the PUK, based on the agreement of May 2017, has since dissolved. Goran's rigid and hawkish position vis-a-vis the KDP and even the PUK has hardened.² Many Goran party activists called for the party to establish its own armed militia.³

The Kurds now face a set of complex challenges following the May elections. First, they must partake in negotiations for the establishment of a new government in Iraq. Second, the KRG parliamentary elections, currently scheduled for September 30, must be held. Thirdly, the Kurdish leadership must restore the damage done to Kurdish autonomy following the referendum. Finally, they must deal with the social and economic problems of the Kurdish people. If the KRG is to be successful in laying the foundation for future independence within the current framework of the Iraqi state, it must find a way to address the region's underlying social and economic challenges. Then, when the international conditions are ripe for it, it will then have the potential to become an independent Kurdish state.

From the Kurdish point of view, it is crucial to have Kurdish participation in the selection of the Shi'i politician who will become the next Prime Minister of Iraq. It is essential for the Kurds to reach an understanding with the politicians in Baghdad in order to protect Kurdish interests, such as the allocation of oil revenues, the KRG's share of the Iraqi budget, and the preservation of Kurdish autonomy. Should the Kurds be excluded from the next Iraqi government, it will

² Mohammed Rwanduzy, "[Gorran and PUK: From possible merger to new enmity.](#)" *Rudaw*, May 24 2018.

³ "[Gorran considers creating an armed self-defence force.](#)" *Rudaw*, May 17, 2018.

limit their influence in Baghdad and further erode Kurdish autonomy. As of now, it is clear that Shi'i parties remain the dominant force in Iraq. However, in order to maintain the veneer of unity and stability of the Iraqi state and enable its successful development in the future, the new Iraqi government will require the cooperation of the Sunnis and the Kurds forces.

During the current negotiations for the formation of a new Iraqi government, the Kurdish parties are working separately. Delegations of the KDP and the PUK met separately with incumbent Prime Minister Haider al-'Abadi, as well as other candidates and influential politicians in Baghdad. Yet, at the same time, the two parties have held coordination talks and their alliance could be revived. On the other hand, Goran, which is taking a militant line against both the KDP and the Patriotic Union, has refused to cooperate with the two parties in negotiations with Baghdad.⁴

Personal and political disputes, different worldviews, and diverging interests are likely to continue plaguing Kurdish politics. However, even in these circumstances, there is a room for compromise and coordination between the dominant Kurdish actors regarding their essential national interests. The Kurds' ability to maintain a political system with mutually agreed upon rules of the game, while coming to a shared understanding of their vital national interests, will ultimately determine the future status and continued development of the Kurdistan region.

[Michael Eppel](#) is a Professor Emeritus in the Department of Middle Eastern History at the [University of Haifa](#).

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⁴ "[KDP, PUK meet in Baghdad espousing Kurdish unity after Iraqi election](#)," *Rudaw*, May 23, 2018; See also: David Romano, "[Anti-KRG sentiment at the heart of Gorran MP's expulsion](#)," *Rudaw*, 30 May 30, 2018.

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