

INTELLIGENCE BRIEFING

# Kurdistan Has Emergded from Its Latest Elections More Divided Than Ever





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## Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	4
Seats in the Kurdistan Region Parliament, 2018-2024.	4
Minority Seats in the Kurdistan Region Parliament, 2018-24.	5
History of KRG Elections	7
The PUK’s Turmoil and Its Impact on the KRG’s Stability	10
Kurdish Division, Federal Intervention, and Electoral Restructuring	12
Turnout, Money, and the New Election	17
Conclusion	20
Recommendations for the Iraqi Federal Government.	20
Recommendations for International Partners	20
Recommendations for Kurdish Parties	21
Author’s Biography	21
Endnotes	22

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(COVER) Supporters of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP/PDK) hold flags during a party rally in Dahuk, Iraq in October 2024, ahead of the Kurdistan Regional Parliament elections. (Ismael Adnan / SOPA Images / LightRocket via Getty Images)

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## Executive Summary

The inconclusive results of the October 2024 parliamentary elections in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq are likely to precipitate a new era of political division. Because neither of the region's two largest political parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – won a parliamentary majority, the already tense relationship between them could be inflamed. If both parties fail to move beyond petty personalized politics, this potentially will fragment the region's political power and will severely erode its autonomy. The KDP-PUK factionalism has already transformed the Kurdistan Region from a respected autonomous area that once shaped national politics and had been afforded equivalent status of a sovereign state on the global stage into a divided region that struggles to manage its own affairs.

Iraqi Kurdistan has been gripped by an economic crisis, which has deepened political strife and accelerated institutional decay, resulting in voting that was marred by pervasive distrust and politics. While the genesis of the KDP-PUK acrimony is historical, tensions hit a new high after a PUK lawsuit in the Iraqi Supreme Court ended with changes to election laws that made it more difficult for the KDP to retain its electoral advantage.

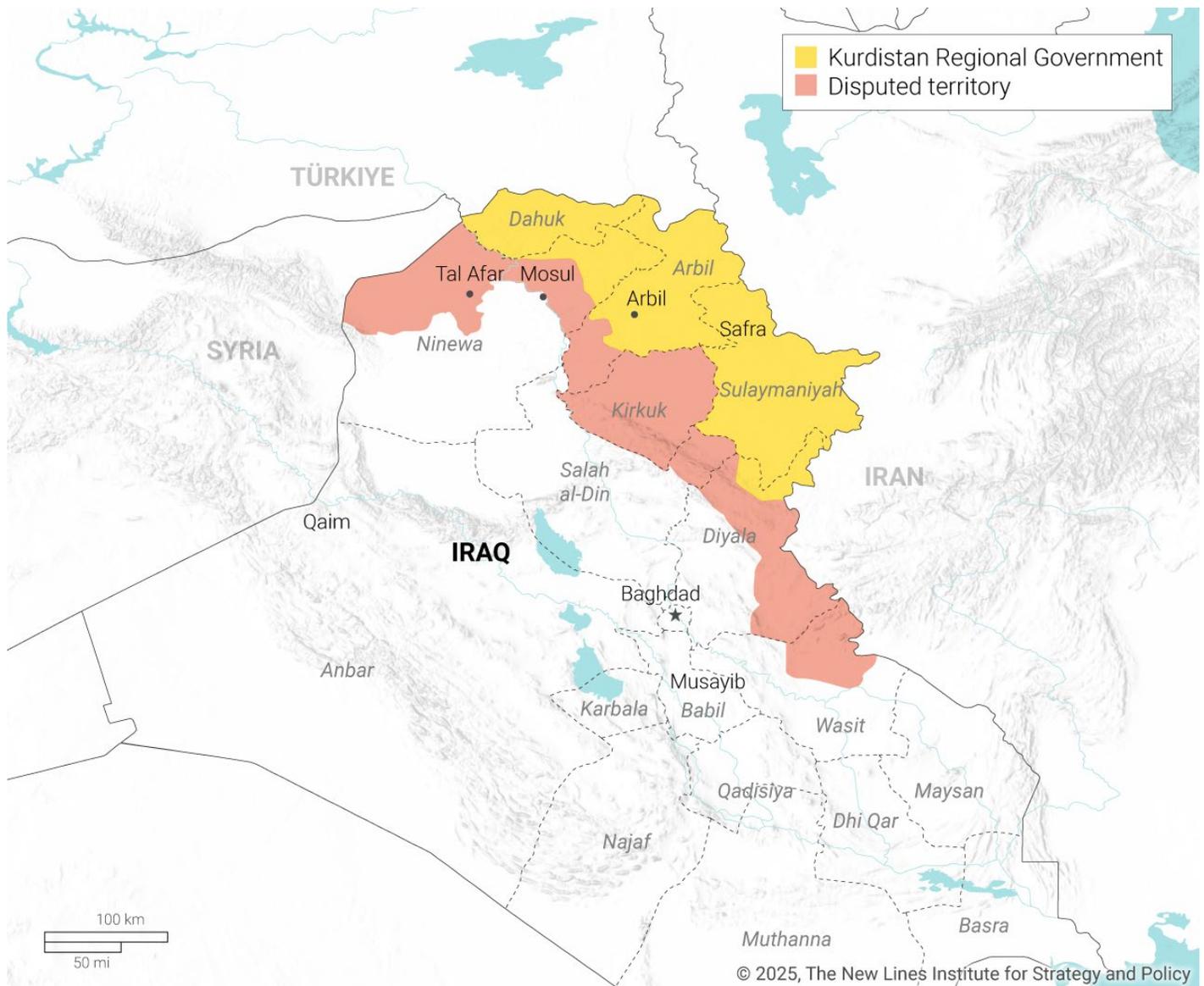
Although these revised laws made elections more competitive, they also increased divisiveness between the two parties. Initially, senior officials of the KDP and PUK each rejected the possibility of traditional power-sharing models of the past Cabinets. However, the inability to reach a compromise over shared governance between the two parties poses serious risks to the stability of the Kurdistan Region given its political trajectory since 1992. The KDP, which won a plurality of seats but is far short of a majority, resolutely refused to partner with the PUK to form a government, fearing it would again act as a disruptive opposition. Meanwhile, the PUK has attempted to form a majority coalition with small parties, excluding the

KDP. However, geopolitical shifts, including the election of U.S. President Donald Trump, the fall of Bashar Assad, and the declining influence of Iran in the Middle East have altered the postelection environment in the Kurdistan Region.

The PUK's attempt to adopt a winner-take-all mentality<sup>1</sup> faltered after regional shifts weakened its traditional alliances both within Iraq and regionally. The PUK's allies seek to retain their power within Iraq through disengagement than to risk losing status through engagement. This has prompted the PUK to seek a power-sharing agreement with the KDP, abandoning its maximalist demands of equal partnership as it aims to realign with regional geopolitics and remain politically relevant.

At the same time, the KDP views this as an opportunity to strike a deal with the PUK that capitalize on the previous gains and secure the party's support for some of the programs that were crucial to the image of Prime Minister Masrour Barzani, who is expected to lead the next Cabinet. Among them is the "My Account Initiative" a key project of Barzani's ninth Cabinet, aiming to digitize the payroll and payment system for KRG employees. The PUK, meanwhile, has obstructed the project in the areas it controls, including Sulaymaniyah and Halabja provinces. During the election campaigns, PUK leaders vowed to oppose the initiative and campaigned hard that promise.<sup>2</sup> Despite this, on Feb. 23, PUK leader Bafel Talabani praised the My Account Initiative, acknowledging its success and progress.<sup>3</sup>

As a result, Kurdish political parties are demanding proportional representation in government more or less based on electoral results. These shifts suggest that government formation may proceed more swiftly than expected, potentially ushering in a more cooperative and pragmatic approach in Kurdish politics, though significant challenges remain in achieving lasting political stability.



## Introduction

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq's latest parliamentary elections, held Oct. 20, 2024, after five delays, ended with no clear majority winner. In the highly polarized and contentious vote, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) won 39 of the 100 seats in the KRG's Parliament; its chief rival, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), won 23; and seven other parties won 15 or fewer.<sup>4</sup> These elections precipitated a new era of division in the region by exacerbating tensions between the two major parties and are likely to have serious implications for the region's autonomy.

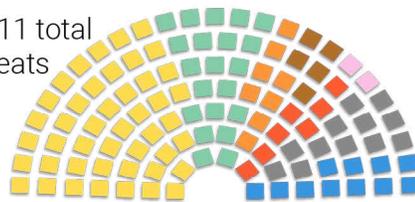
## Seats in the Kurdistan Region Parliament, 2018-2024.

The elections were some of the most divisive in the region's history,<sup>5</sup> coming in the wake of an Iraqi Supreme Court decision that resulted in sweeping changes to the KRG's makeup and electoral process.<sup>6</sup> Failure to reach a consensus over a law that reallocated minority quota seats in Parliament led the PUK to file a lawsuit asking for a reinterpretation of the Kurdistan Region's 1992 election law. The court's decision transformed the region's electoral map in a way that favored the PUK, dividing it into

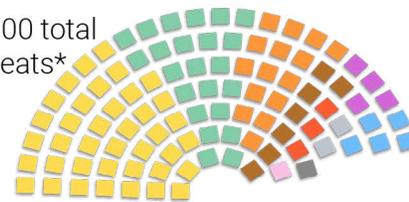


## Seats in Kurdistan Region Parliament

111 total seats



100 total seats\*



Party	2018	2024	Change
Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)	45	39	-6
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)	21	23	2
New Generation Movement	8	15	7
Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU)	5	7	2
Helwest Movement	0	4	4
Kurdistan Justice Group	7	3	-4
People's Front	0	2	2
Kurdistan Region Coalition	2	1	-1
Gorran Movement	12	1	-11
Minority reserved seats	11	5	-6
Total seats filled	111	100	-11

\* On Feb. 21, 2024, the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court issued a ruling on the 1992 Kurdistan parliamentary election law, declaring parts of it unconstitutional and cutting the number of parliamentary seats to 100, while abolishing 11 quota seats. However, in a follow-up decision in May 2024, the court restored five seats for minority groups within the 100-seat parliament.

Sources: Rudaw, Kurdistan24

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four electoral districts rather than keeping it a single entity, and reduced the number of parliamentary seats from 111 to 100. Five seats are allocated to minority groups, down from 11, and these are distributed across districts instead of being at-large positions. Thirty seats are reserved for female candidates.<sup>7</sup> These changes have made it unlikely that any party, especially the KDP, can capture the 51 parliamentary seats needed for a majority. The 11 minority seats had traditionally caucused with the KDP, but the new regional distribution has made it possible for the PUK to secure two seats in its stronghold of Sulaimaniyah.

### Minority Seats in the Kurdistan Region Parliament, 2018-24

In the 2024 parliamentary elections, 13 political parties fielded 1,191 candidates, including 84 independent candidates, representing a wide spectrum of ideologies.<sup>8</sup> The volume of candidates represents a significant jump from the 2018 elections, when 719 candidates ran from two coalitions and eight

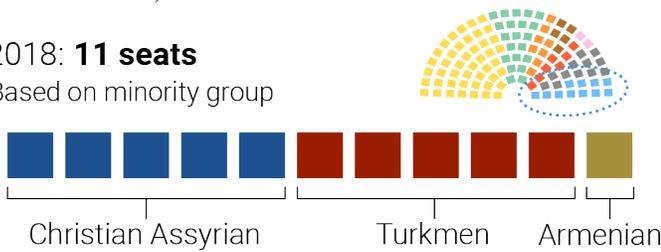
parties, and 64 candidates from 19 parties ran for the 11 minority seats.<sup>9</sup> In the crowded 2024 field, some parties eschewed substantive debate over critical issues in the region and instead used provocative tactics to court controversy, which led to a landscape dominated by personal rivalries and sensational claims that meant voters had to navigate a complex web of rhetoric.

The PUK adopted a populist election strategy under its leader, Bafel Talabani, whose unconventional tactics – including dramatic actions, like dropping and kicking microphones, and presenting himself in a deliberately modest way, such as wearing a simple T-shirt – signaled that he was just like ordinary people.<sup>10</sup> Talabani also aimed harsh attacks and ridicule against his rivals, with rhetoric and strategies unprecedented in Kurdish politics. His approach resonated with many, and he thus became the voice for the public's frustrations and grievances, particularly economic hardships. This was especially notable given that his own party shared responsibility for the Kurdistan Region's financial crisis.

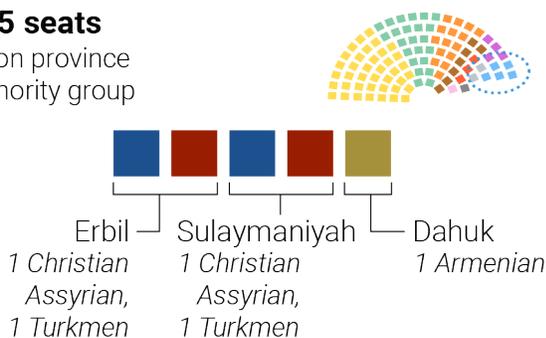


## Minority Seats in Kurdistan Region Parliament, 2018-2024

2018: **11 seats**  
Based on minority group



2024: **5 seats**  
Based on province and minority group



Sources: Rudaw, Kurdistan24 © 2025, New Lines Institute for Strategy and Policy

More than 2 million people voted in the election, a 72% turnout, up from 58% in 2018.<sup>11</sup> Talabani's rhetoric energized voters, resulting in 409,548 votes for his party, but it also galvanized support for his rivals, particularly the KDP, which secured 812,794 votes – nearly double that of the PUK. The New Generation Movement received 292,032 votes, a 50% increase from 2018; in stark contrast, the once-powerful opposition party, the Change Movement (Gorran), received only 11,693 votes.<sup>12</sup>

The PUK, which traditionally partnered with the KDP after elections to form a coalition government, continued its election rhetoric and strategic positioning until the fall of Assad regime, which suggested that it was not yet ready to engage in coalition negotiations. However, the regional geopolitical shifts that weakened the PUK's partners forced the party to review its strategy and give up the idea of allying with smaller parties to form a government without the KDP. Instead, the PUK and the KDP have held several rounds of talks on Cabinet formation. The PUK has shifted the grandiose narrative of winner-take-all toward hope of resuming its previous Cabinet posts with a clause in the agreement that power-sharing would be respected by the KDP. The Kurdistan Region's executive branch

would have one vice president instead of two, with Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani preferring to occupy that position. This represents another concession by the PUK as it drops its maximalist demand to take over the region's presidency.<sup>13</sup>

The PUK had also vowed to hinder "The My Account Initiative" a key project of Prime Minister Masrour Barzani aiming to digitize the payroll and payment system for KRG employees. However, the PUK obstructed the project in the areas it controls, including Sulaymaniyah and Halabja provinces. Instead, it was advocating for the Central Bank of Iraq's salary domiciliation program (Tawteen) of KRG employees. During the election campaigns, PUK leaders vowed to defeat "The My Account Initiative."<sup>14</sup>

In what appears to be a complete reversal regarding the initiative, on Feb. 23, PUK leader Bafel Talabani publicly praised The My Account Initiative, acknowledging its success and progress, suggesting that the PUK has accepted the project, betraying the trust of its electorate for political convenience in response to the regional strategic realignments.<sup>15</sup>

Before regional geopolitical shifts took hold, the PUK focused on the upcoming Iraqi national elections, scheduled for no later than November 2025, prioritizing future electoral success over immediate governance responsibilities.<sup>16</sup> The PUK aimed to leverage its allies in Baghdad to pressure the KDP into making concessions during government formation. However, the Iranian retreat, Trump's election, and uncertainty about its allies' performance in the national elections derailed this strategy. Now, the PUK is shifting its focus to secure what it can in the Kurdistan Region, treating the national elections as a separate issue and abandoning the idea of linking KRG and Baghdad posts in negotiations.<sup>17</sup>

If the KRG and federal positions had been treated as part of a comprehensive deal, the timeline for establishing functioning governments in both Erbil and Baghdad would have been further complicated, pushing back their completion. However, in light of recent developments, a new coalition government led by the KDP and PUK in Erbil could be formed before the summer.



## History of KRG Elections

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq held its first election on May 19, 1992. The KDP and the PUK formed a coalition government, leading to the KRG's establishment.<sup>18</sup> However, this unity was short-lived; the Kurdish civil war of the 1990s thwarted the possibility of subsequent elections, and the region was divided between the KDP's and the PUK's administrations until the 2005 elections.<sup>19</sup> The 1998 peace agreement, brokered by the United States, concluded the civil conflict and instituted a general political framework within which the two dominant parties could negotiate and collaborate, despite persistent underlying tensions. The overthrow of Saddam Hussein's regime fostered a closer relationship between the KDP and the PUK, and from 2005 to 2009, the region established a more autonomous government, which paved the way for better governance; substantial economic development – including trade, foreign investments, and energy; territorial expansion; and enhancing Kurdish diplomacy, despite the outstanding challenges over power sharing and resource allocation within the region and with the Iraqi federal government.<sup>20</sup>

Most Kurdish political factions, including the KDP and PUK, united under the Kurdistan Alliance's electoral list, which won 104 of 110 seats in the 2005 elections.<sup>21</sup> At the national level, the Kurdish representatives operated as a unified political bloc, becoming the most systematically organized and formidable political and military force in the newly constituted Iraq. They played a pivotal role in shaping national political dynamics, rendering political entities in Baghdad incapable of intervening in Kurdish matters.<sup>22</sup>

This unity allowed Kurdish leaders to gain key constitutional rights in the new Iraq, while also enabling the KRG to embark on strategic initiatives to enhance local governance, stimulate economic growth, develop energy, and revive Kurdish cultural heritage.<sup>23</sup> In addition, the region formed international partnerships, using foreign investment to develop its hydrocarbon sector and collaborate in alignment with its development.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, the region strongly emphasized cultural preservation because it recognized the importance of maintaining Kurdish identity and traditions in the face of persecution by Iraqi regimes.<sup>25</sup>

By 2009, rifts emerged between various Kurdish political factions, driven by an increasingly complex interplay of political and economic interests. This divergence was further intensified by numerous public grievances related to misgovernance and pervasive corruption, which had become deeply entrenched in the Kurdish political framework. Culminating conflicts over these issues led to a gradually manifest fragmentation of Kurdish unity, both within the autonomous Kurdistan Region and at the national level in Baghdad.<sup>26</sup>

As the Kurdish political landscape began to unravel, the once-solid alliance that had strengthened the Kurdistan Region gave way to a fragmented and contentious relationship. This disintegration not only heightened existing tensions but also ignited rivalries among different Kurdish groups and influential party leaders, each striving for greater power and influence. The political dynamics shifted from a united front advocating for Kurdish rights and autonomy to infighting and partisan discord, which has led to lasting negative political and economic implications for Kurds in Iraq.<sup>27</sup>

Nawshirwan Mustafa, who as deputy leader of the PUK had tried to implement internal reforms, ultimately severed ties with the party and founded the Gorran Movement,<sup>28</sup> whose reformative agenda struck a chord with the electorate. Gorran won 25 parliamentary seats in 2009, compared with 59 for the KDP-PUK alliance. Gorran predominantly acquired seats that had been held by the PUK, undermining the latter's standing in relation to the KDP and substantially shifting power dynamics. Gorran opted not to join the coalition government in 2009. Instead, it maintained a robust opposition presence within the parliament. Gorran's members of parliament<sup>29</sup> This new approach challenged the status quo, and it thus encouraged civic engagement fostering a political culture that demanded greater responsiveness from elected officials.

While Gorran garnered significant media attention and considerable discourse, its strategy ultimately faced constraints, given the legislative authority of the ruling parties due to their supermajority status. In January 2013, Gorran, along with the Kurdistan Islamic Group and the Kurdistan Islamic Union, was unable to



A Kurdish man registers to vote during parliamentary elections at a polling station in Duhok in the autonomous Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The vote was postponed numerous times due to disputes between the region's two largest parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan. (Ismael Adnan / SOPA Images / LightRocket via Getty Images)

prevent the KDP and the PUK from extending President Masoud Barzani's tenure by two years.<sup>30</sup> In this way, the opposition's inability to bring change has been its Achilles heel, which has led to growing disillusionment among supporters in a political climate dominated by the two established traditional ruling parties.

The PUK's popularity had steadily declined due to factional divisions, a leadership crisis, and the party's focus on Baghdad over Erbil, thus making it a weaker partner for the KDP in the Kurdistan Region. This imbalance of power led the KDP and PUK to contest the 2013 parliamentary elections on separate lists that better defined their respective political bases. In the elections, the KDP secured 38 seats, Gorran took 24, and the PUK took only 18.<sup>31</sup> The PUK's decline was

further compounded by an internal leadership crisis, which was exacerbated by the hospitalization of its then-leader, Jalal Talabani (father of the current PUK leader Bafel Talabani), in Germany, along with other internal challenges.<sup>32</sup>

In the previous electoral campaigns, Gorran had made bold populist promises, including equitable wealth redistribution, job creation, direct salary payments to households, and reforms that resonated deeply with public demands. However, as an opposition party without executive power, Gorran struggled to translate these promises into tangible results. While its impassioned critiques of the government and lively parliamentary debates were compelling, it lacked the political power to improve the lives of ordinary citizens.



Recognizing this challenge, Gorran reassessed its strategy to fulfill its prior promises and demonstrate its governance capabilities more effectively than the incumbent parties. Meanwhile, the KDP was also dissatisfied with the politically charged atmosphere of the parliamentary sessions, which contrasted with the more conventional proceedings of the past. This created a convergence of interests between Gorran, which sought executive power, and the KDP, which longed for political stability. Both parties were inclined to restore a period of greater political calm after the discord and opposition that marked the previous term. The ruling elite, uneasy about the political tensions, sought a more harmonious four-year period.

Accordingly, in April 2014, after lengthy negotiations, Gorran joined the KDP-led power-sharing government, which also included the PUK. Gorran was granted key government positions, such as finance, trade, peshmerga forces, religious affairs, and the speakership of parliament.<sup>33</sup> This strategic maneuver was also designed to neutralize Gorran's critiques of the KDP and the KRG concerning matters such as corruption and resource management. The PUK secured the deputy prime minister position and additional ministerial roles.<sup>34</sup> The KDP-Gorran partnership became increasingly defined by strategic maneuvering and underlying tensions. Gorran engaged in the political process, seeking to influence policy and secure financial benefits for itself and constituents, but it remained critical of the KDP's governance, and it used its position in the legislative assembly and on various media platforms to publicly scrutinize the administration that it had partly helped to establish. This dual approach was a calculated effort by Gorran to avoid being perceived as a mere subordinate to the KDP, especially in light of Gorran's history of vocal opposition. By maintaining this critical stance, Gorran aimed to preserve its public credibility and support by positioning itself as a potential alternative in case the coalition government encountered challenges or collapsed.

The dispute over the powers of the presidency became a focal point for the rivalry, especially because Gorran and three other political parties were demanding a clear definition of presidential authority as a precondition for extending Barzani's term, which had expired in August 2015. For the KDP, this was

a nonstarter. This impasse, coupled with growing economic difficulties, led to escalating public protests: alleged Gorran supporters set the KDP's offices on fire in October 2015 in Sulaymaniyah and several other towns under the influence of the PUK.<sup>35</sup> The KDP swiftly banned Gorran's leaders, including parliament Speaker Mohammed Yousif, from entering Erbil, citing security concerns but also aiming to weaken Gorran's legitimacy and isolate the opposition. The KDP further escalated the conflict by dismissing Gorran's ministers from the regional government and closing the opposition's media outlets.<sup>36</sup>

Eight Kurdish political parties, including the PUK, condemned the KDP's actions and warned that such measures threatened Kurdish political unity. However, the PUK did not withdraw support for the KDP-led government. Instead, it maintained a facade of supporting institutional integrity and shared governance while attempting to capitalize on the dispute for political gain.

The 2018 elections revealed significant internal fractures, shifting voter attitudes, and strategic realignments, which highlighted both the resilience and volatility of the political parties – illustrating how leadership crises, interparty competition, and public disillusionment had reshaped the electoral landscape. The weakened PUK had difficulties presenting a coherent platform, which eroded voter confidence. Its modest electoral gains reflected those internal struggles; it secured 21 seats, an increase of only three compared with 2013, signaling both its difficulty in regaining momentum and its failure to capitalize on the discontent of its competitors.<sup>37</sup>

Gorran struggled with internal fragmentation after Mustafa's death. The party's failure to deliver on prior reform promises, coupled with the rise of the New Generation Movement led by self-styled populist businessman Shaswar Abudlwahid, further eroded its support base. New Generation, with its anticorruption rhetoric, attracted disillusioned Gorran voters, resulting in a sharp decline in Gorran's seat count, from 24 to 12.<sup>38</sup>

Despite a worsening economic crisis, the KDP was able to leverage its organizational strength to consolidate power. It further weakened its already-vulnerable



opposition by co-opting figures from rival parties. This strategy, combined with effective organizational tactics, helped the KDP increase its seat count from 38 to 45, solidifying its control over the KRG.<sup>39</sup>

The elections also saw voter turnout, drop to a historic low of 58%.<sup>40</sup> This reflected growing disillusionment with the political system, as voters expressed frustration with poor governance and economic stagnation. Voters particularly stayed away from the polls in the strongholds of the PUK and Gorran, signaling their rejection of both the ruling and opposition parties.

## **The PUK's Turmoil and Its Impact on the KRG's Stability**

The PUK has experienced a tumultuous process of self-reinvention as it has aimed to regain its political and institutional strength, with the goal of restoring public trust and creating a more inclusive platform. Central to this effort has been its reform strategy, designed to address its internal shortcomings, including its organizational structures, political direction, and ideological foundation. In 2020, the PUK took a significant step by electing new leadership, but this transformation encountered substantial internal resistance, which severely undermined its success.<sup>41</sup>

One of the most controversial components of the PUK's reform was establishing a co-presidency intended to balance power between two key figures: its leader, Bafel Talabani; and his cousin, Lahur Sheikh Jangi.<sup>42</sup> The co-presidency was initially framed as a progressive and collaborative step, but it quickly degenerated into an intense rivalry. Bafel and Lahur vied for control over the party's finances, military assets, and strategic decision-making powers. This struggle for dominance culminated in a July 2021 "white coup," when Bafel ousted Lahur from the co-presidency, accusing him of a poisoning plot against him and other PUK leaders, a charge that further fueled intraparty conflict.<sup>43</sup>

The Talabani family, particularly Bafel and his brother, KRG Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani, took decisive steps to consolidate power within the PUK by sidelining Lahur's supporters and replacing them with loyalists. This purge extended across political,

security, and military sectors, demonstrating the Talabani family's growing grip on the party apparatus. Appointments – such as Bafel's elevation of Wahab Halabjay to head the PUK's Counter-Terrorism Group, and putting Azhi Amin in charge of the Parastin and Zanyari Intelligence Agency – were strategic moves designed to further entrench their control.<sup>44</sup>

Lahur, despite losing control of key political and military assets, remained a prominent figure among the PUK's base, which threatened the Talabani family's dominance. The Talabanis sought to neutralize this threat through both political and coercive means; they issued ultimatums and used legal tools to force Lahur into political exile. However, Lahur's continued defiance, along with his vocal criticism of the Talabani-led PUK, intensified divisions within the party and exacerbated its tensions with the KDP. The KDP, which had long accused Lahur of having colluded with the Iraqi government during the 2017 Kurdish independence referendum process, seized on this division to weaken the PUK and erode its influence by mending ties with Lahur.

Lahur's political rhetoric, which was characterized by aggressive attacks on both KDP and PUK leaders, exacerbated a climate of escalating conflict. His public denunciations of the KRG, including accusations of its oil smuggling and budgetary mismanagement, further alienated him. This situation deteriorated further when PUK military and intelligence officials defected to the KDP, which represented a significant loss of support for the Talabani family within the party's military and security apparatus.

One key incident in this power struggle occurred in November 2021 near Ranya, where the PUK commando forces affiliated to Bafel Talabani allegedly tried to arrest Kani Kurdayi, a police commander loyal to Lahur. A confrontation between Kurdayi and the PUK force led to his death, triggering further conflict.<sup>45</sup> The death was reportedly a part of the PUK's plan to eliminate Lahur's military allies. The ensuing public relations fallout was compounded by internal recriminations within the PUK leadership, particularly regarding the incident's handling by figures like Amin.<sup>46</sup> Amid these tensions, in May 2022 Amin defected to the KDP, taking with him a substantial portion of the PUK's intelligence personnel and potentially sensitive



Posters of candidates are displayed on the streets of Erbil, Iraq, as campaigning for parliamentary elections began in September 2024 for Iraq's Kurdistan Regional Government. (Ahsan Mohammed Ahmed Ahmed / Anadolu via Getty Images)

information.<sup>47</sup> His defection added another layer of complexity to the intraparty conflict and highlighted the fragility of Bafel's leadership. The KDP-PUK rift further deepened in an October 2022 after a sticky bomb attached to the vehicle of Col. Hawkar Jaff in Erbil, detonated and killed him. Jaff was a former PUK CTG but had been fired from his post in 2021 due to his close ties with Lahur. This attack in the heart of the Kurdistan Region's capital and the symbol of KDP's impeccable security, and the subsequent arrest warrants issued by an Erbil court for senior PUK figures, paralyzed KDP -PUK relations in a way that led the PUK's boycott of the KDP-led government for seven months.<sup>48</sup>

Amid these hostilities, a political shift began to take shape: Lahur launched a new political party, the People's Front, in preparation for the October 2024 elections, in defiance of the Talabani family.<sup>49</sup> Lahur hoped that this party, which campaigned on anticorruption rhetoric and a commitment to represent the people's interests, would draw support from

disillusioned PUK voters. However, the People's Front won only two seats.<sup>50</sup> For the KDP, Lahur's efforts represented a potential opportunity to further chip away at the PUK's electoral prospects and solidify its own political dominance.

The discontent within the PUK, particularly among its traditional leaders and independent intellectuals, underscores the broader implications of the Talabani family's consolidation of power. The purge of dissenting voices, which was framed as necessary for party revitalization and centralization, has risked alienating the PUK's support base and tarnishing its public image as a party not just tolerated but welcomed diverse views. Moreover, this ongoing political turmoil suggests that the PUK's internal struggles are unlikely to subside soon even though Lahur is not a part of the party anymore. Although the 2024 election results might have validated the PUK's political legitimacy and its leadership's viability under Bafel, it still only gained two more seats than the previous election.<sup>51</sup>



## Kurdish Division, Federal Intervention, and Electoral Restructuring

Despite the PUK's major electoral declines and internal conflicts worsened by its factional divisions, it has unwaveringly chosen to overlook its own failures. Its prioritization of individual gains over collective unity and good governance, and its inability to present a persuasive vision after Jalal Talabani's death, have led to its decline<sup>52</sup> Instead of confronting these challenges, the PUK has increasingly depended on hard power to dominate, as the projection of its soft power that once used to be the party's strongest element to counter the KDP. This hard power mindset has been deeply ingrained within the PUK leadership, as articulated by its former leader, Mala Bakhtyar, who famously stated that election results did not matter since PUK has military force.<sup>53</sup> While military might has helped the PUK remain a key player in successive coalition governments, the lack of electoral mandate has translated into a weakened political legitimacy, thereby relatively poor governance compared to the KDP's sphere of influence in Erbil and Duhok. Thus, the repercussions have been detrimental not just to the political and democratic landscape of the Kurdistan Region but also to provision of services to citizens who fall under the PUK dominion. This is not to suggest that there has not been protest or lack of service under the KDP-controlled areas. In fact, there are frequent protests in the impoverished neighborhoods of Erbil due to drinking water shortages.<sup>54</sup>

The "might makes right" mindset drove the PUK's claims for government positions after the 2018 elections.<sup>55</sup> The party's demands for "50/50 status" in the government, coupled with its internal factionalism, led to a protracted government formation process that lasted nine months. Within the party, the deputy prime minister position became a point of contention. Powerful PUK figures sought to replace Qubad Talabani with Shalaw Kosrat, the son of a veteran PUK leader, Kosrat Rasul. This factionalism exacerbated intraparty tensions, which undermined its negotiations with the KDP. A senior PUK official claimed that the conflict was strategically orchestrated to exact ministerial appointments from the Talabani family. Ultimately, a compromise was reached: The Talabani family ceded multiple ministerial portfolios to rival factions, leaving Qubad Talabani without

direct control over ministerial appointments.<sup>56</sup> This decision drew widespread public criticism for prioritizing loyalty over merit. While the PUK now faces fewer internal problems due to its more coherent leadership, its maximalist demands, which lacks electorate legitimacy, such as resignation of the deputy prime minister, would trigger the dissolution of the next coalition government or the posts of KRG prime minister for two years or president of the Kurdistan Region after the 2024 elections is likely to lead to a lengthy government formation period with unpredictable political ramifications.<sup>57</sup>

After the 2018 elections, the PUK faced a newly emboldened KDP, which had been galvanized by election victories and a shift in leadership. The replacement of longtime Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani who assumed the post of the Kurdistan Region Presidency with his cousin Masrour Barzani, the former head of the Kurdistan Region's Security Council, marked a significant transformation of governance style. Nechirvan Barzani's cabinets had cultivated decentralized decision-making, which empowered his deputy, Qubad Talabani, with substantial authority over budgets, employment, and projects in PUK strongholds. This power-sharing arrangement, while rooted in compromise, has also been a product of the political history of the Kurdish self-governance dictated by the 1990s KDP-PUK civil war and institutionalized by the 2007 strategic agreement between the KDP and PUK.<sup>58</sup>

Despite calls to maintain the status quo, the KDP argued that the election results necessitated a reassessment of the previous strategic agreement. The party sought a government with greater centralized authority over decision-making and finances.

The shift from decades of informal decentralized governance, shaped by historical and geographical factors, ignited tensions within the newly formed Cabinet. Therefore, Prime Minister Masrour Barzani's centralized approach, emphasizing the concentration of power within his office, clashed with the region's pre-existing power-sharing framework.<sup>59</sup>

Masrour Barzani aimed to expand the KRG's influence beyond its traditional strongholds to encompass the entire Kurdistan Region, including PUK-dominated



areas. He actively engaged with various cities and towns, inaugurating development projects and conducting town hall meetings with local residents.<sup>60</sup> However, this unprecedented approach to governance, while potentially strengthening the KRG's sovereignty, was perceived as a threat to the PUK's authority. Thus, it led to significant opposition from the PUK, which viewed the extension of centralized executive power from Erbil as a challenge to its political and financial interests.<sup>61</sup> Historical distrust between the two parties – coupled with weak government institutions, the lack of an independent judiciary, and parliamentary oversight – have exacerbated these concerns.

The working relationship between the prime minister and his deputy became strained, as Talabani, accustomed to former prime minister Nechirvan Barzani's laissez-faire style, struggled to adapt to the new centralized approach. The PUK accused the KDP of violating the government formation accord and withholding the budget for Sulaymaniyah. In protest, the PUK team boycotted Cabinet meetings. One of the boycotts after the October 2022 security incidents in Erbil lasted seven months, plunging the region into political limbo and raising concerns about the future of the KRG as a unified government.<sup>62</sup>

Western powers, including the United Nations, warned of the negative effects of the conflict on Kurdish autonomy.<sup>63</sup> The United States made several unsuccessful attempts to mediate between the KDP and the PUK. In March 2023, U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin conditioned his planned meeting in Erbil on the KRG having a united Cabinet.<sup>64</sup> However, this failed to convince both parties, leading Austin to meet only with Nechirvan Barzani.<sup>65</sup> Other Western diplomats also urged the KDP and PUK to set aside their differences. Ultimately, it took the intervention of U.S. Assistant Secretary of State Barbara Leaf to broker a deal that ended the boycott in May 2023.<sup>66</sup> While the deal managed to lower tensions and restore a working relationship between the KDP and PUK, it did not address the underlying structural problems driving their conflict.

Accordingly, a complex interplay of factors – including the protracted struggle for the Iraqi presidency between the KDP and the PUK and internal turmoil within the PUK triggered by the removal of its

co-president – led to a delay of the elections originally scheduled for October 2022. The PUK's demands to reevaluate the distribution of minority quota seats further complicated the situation. While the PUK portrayed itself as advocating for equitable representation, its actions seemed more strategically motivated, focused on postponing the elections to buy time for internal reorganization<sup>67</sup> while undermining the KDP's control over minority seats by relocating some of the seats to Sulaymaniyah, under its control.<sup>68</sup>

The PUK would have faced the prospect of significant electoral and political losses if the elections had been held on schedule without taking steps to address its internal issues, amend the election law, and restructure the Kurdistan Region's electoral map.<sup>69</sup> In the 2018 election, the KDP won 45 seats out of 111.<sup>70</sup> In addition, those holding the parliament's 11 minority seats usually aligned with the KDP. This would give the party the votes needed to pass laws and form a government without the PUK. In an unprecedented move, the KDP acted unilaterally in May 2022 to renew the Kurdistan Region's Independent High Electoral and Referendum Commission by enlisting support from the minority members of parliament. This unsettled the PUK and other parties; the PUK's leadership felt an existential threat to its power because the KDP's move deviated from the usual process of obtaining a consensus before passing such important resolutions. The PUK and other parties accused the KDP of exploiting the minority quota to advance its own legislative agenda and advocated for revisions to ensure fairer representation for minorities. This required an amendment of the 1992 Election Law No. 1, which established the 111-seat parliament with spots allocated to Turkmen, Christian, and Armenian minorities through a quota system.<sup>71</sup>

For the KDP, this reform, which would have cost it a substantial number of minority proxy seats, was a nonstarter. Again, multiple external mediations failed to achieve a deal on an election law, further delaying the polls. The KDP not only maintained its position on minority seats but also launched a media and diplomatic campaign, framing the PUK's demands as a violation of minority rights and positioning itself as a defender of vulnerable populations.<sup>72</sup> While this narrative aimed to influence public opinion and garner



Patriotic Union of Kurdistan leader Bafel Talabani speaks at a campaign rally in Sulaymaniyah, Kurdistan, on Sept. 29, 2024. (Giles Clarke / Getty Images)

international support, there is little evidence of its effectiveness within the diplomatic circles of Erbil.

The PUK countered the KDP's campaign by emphasizing the need for fair representation of minorities in Kurdistan, highlighting that because of its influence over the quota seats, the KDP had, in effect, already "won" them before the elections were held. There is little doubt regarding the PUK's assertion about the KDP's unfair advantage in the elections, but its call for inclusiveness and fair representation could itself be seen as self-serving and disingenuous. Like the KDP, the PUK also instrumentalized the minority seats for its political ends, as evidenced by the 2024 elections. The PUK-aligned minority candidate in Sulaymaniyah, Dana Amanj Najeeb, a Christian, won 6,023 votes<sup>73</sup> in a province with "very few Christians."<sup>74</sup> The same was true for the Turkmen candidate Najdat Mohammed in Garmyan, who secured 5,664 votes.<sup>75</sup>

The gridlock over the election law pushed the PUK to seek help from its allies outside the Kurdistan Region. In this endeavor, Baghdad emerged as a valuable ally. The PUK has cultivated good relationships with pro-Iranian Shiite allies in Baghdad who exert significant influence on the Iraqi political, legislative, and judiciary branches. They, too, see the KDP as a threat because of its political orientation and regional and international alignment, which is in opposition to their own. The PUK has maintained its ties with pro-Iranian forces in Iraq, though it has downplayed these relationships publicly since Trump's election, the fall of the Assad regime, Hezbollah's defeat in Lebanon, and the broader shift in Iranian influence across the Middle East. Therefore, the formation of the next KRG Cabinet may occur sooner than expected, driven by the impact of regional geopolitical shifts that have prompted local actors in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq to reevaluate their strategies and options.



Over the past 10 months, PUK leader Bafel Talabani has visited Washington twice. Additionally, Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani attended a reception in Washington for Trump's inauguration. In a significant diplomatic move, in February 2025, Talabani and Prime Minister Masrour Barzani made an official visit to the United Arab Emirates. The symbolism of their joint appearance given their historically tense relationship cannot be understated, particularly as they were seen arriving together and meeting with Emirati officials.<sup>76</sup> The KDP and PUK have engaged in several rounds of negotiations aimed at forming the next government as swiftly as possible. Joint statements from these discussions highlight positive outcomes. Additionally, leaders from both parties have begun acknowledging the critical role each plays in governing the Kurdistan Region.<sup>77</sup> Notably, PUK President Bafel Talabani has embraced the previously contentious issue of the "My Account Initiative," which is closely associated with the image of Prime Minister Masrour Barzani.<sup>78</sup>

In May 2023, after exhausting other avenues for reaching an agreement with the KDP over minority seats, the PUK initiated legal proceedings by asking the Iraqi Supreme Court to revise the 1992 election law. As a former Kurdish official stated, "While the PUK may not be able to directly confront the KDP, it can certainly disrupt the KDP's objectives."<sup>79</sup> In February 2024, the Supreme Court in Baghdad issued its ruling to annul the minority seats and reconfigure the Kurdistan Region's electoral map into four electoral districts and that Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission would now oversee elections.<sup>80</sup> According to some, the decision was politically motivated, influenced by the considerable power wielded by pro-Iranian groups within Iraq's highest court.<sup>81</sup> These groups were reportedly determined to undermine the KDP by eliminating the minority seats that usually caucus with the KDP, and gerrymandering the Kurdistan electoral map, thereby weakening the political influence of the Kurdistan Region as a whole.<sup>82</sup> This ruling can be interpreted as a continuation of efforts by Iraq to weaken the Kurdistan Region, which includes invalidating the region's Oil and Gas Law in 2022<sup>83</sup> and dissolving the Kurdish parliament on the grounds that its mandate has been fulfilled. The Kurdish parliament voted to renew its mandate in 2022 after the elections were delayed.<sup>84</sup>

The court's decision was hailed by the PUK and sparked outrage from the KDP and other minority factions.<sup>85</sup> The severity of their dissatisfaction was heightened by a glaring contradiction: Although the quota system for minorities remained intact at the federal level, it was invalidated within the Kurdistan Region. In March 2024, President Nechirvan Barzani set June 7 as the new election date. While other parties registered candidates with the Independent High Electoral Commission, the KDP, along with the minority political groups, declared they would abstain from participation unless the rights of minority groups were reinstated.<sup>86</sup>

At this point, the KDP leadership was at a crossroads: it needed to reassess its strategies and consider a different approach toward power brokers in Baghdad. The party had witnessed how the Iraqi Supreme Court could undermine not only the KDP but also the autonomy of the Kurdistan Region, as evidenced by issuance of "15 anti-Kurdistani decisions since 2019," according to former Deputy Speaker of the Kurdistan Region Parliament Hemin Hewrami.<sup>87</sup> To manage the political crisis and control further fallout, the KDP employed a multifaceted strategy involving legal, political, and diplomatic efforts. Central to this approach was a lawsuit filed by Barzani with the Supreme Court in May 2024, which challenged the method used for distributing parliamentary seats among electoral districts. Barzani argued that the electoral system, which allocated seats based on voter turnout rather than population, violated the Iraqi Constitution and previous rulings by the Supreme Court. He also asserted that the removal of minority seats jeopardized the principle of fair representation for all groups in Iraq.<sup>88</sup> By taking this legal action, the KDP was able to neutralize the immediate electoral threat posed by seat distribution, seeking both delayed elections and a revised electoral framework that could work in its favor. This move was a calculated attempt to regain control of the narrative and prevent further erosion of its political capital, especially amid mounting pressure from rival factions like the PUK.

These legal proceedings were accompanied by diplomatic and political engagements with influential figures who were part of the Coordination Framework in Baghdad in order to build alliances and secure support for the KDP's position on the elections.



Barzani met with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohamed Shia Al Sudani, former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, and several prominent Shiite leaders. He also interacted with Qais al-Khazali, the leader of Asaib al-Haq (an Iranian-backed militia and party designated as a foreign terrorist organization by the United States), and with Hadi al-Ameri, the commander of the Popular Mobilization Forces,<sup>89</sup> despite the KRG's history of distancing itself from Iran and its affiliates. It relied instead on the United States and its diplomatic efforts to mitigate security risks and block attempts to erode the political and economic power of the Kurdistan Region. However, despite these efforts, the region's situation continued to deteriorate.

In February 2024, Prime Minister Barzani traveled to Washington to advocate for the acquisition of an aerial defense system to protect the Kurdistan Region from drone and missile attacks. At this time, the KRG was refusing to engage in political negotiations with those believed to be behind drone attacks on Erbil. A senior official accompanying the prime minister expressed the KRG's frustration: "How can we negotiate with those who strike us under the cover of darkness?"<sup>90</sup> The KDP's subsequent efforts to connect with figures like Qais al-Khazali and its strengthening relationship with Tehran can be seen signs of its growing disenchantment with the United States under the Biden administration.

Washington, however, under the previous administration actively encouraged the KRG to engage directly with the Iraqi government in Baghdad. U.S. diplomats explicitly conveyed to the KDP and the PUK that the U.S. is no longer able to advocate on their behalf.<sup>91</sup> This means that the KRG must reach out to Baghdad and negotiate a compromise on its own, even if this means engaging with U.S. adversaries. The United States justified this strategy by citing its diminished leverage in Iraq. Its influence and mechanisms of power have been significantly weakened, so it prudently needs to steer a neutral course between Erbil and Baghdad to preserve its minimal influence and safeguard its interests in the country.<sup>92</sup> Kurdish officials who engaged with senior representatives from the Trump administration have assessed that it presents an opportunity to renew and strengthen the Kurdish-American relationship. A Kurdish official, who participated in extensive

discussions with American officials in Washington, stated, "While there are both risks and opportunities in working with the Trump administration, the Biden administration presented only risks."<sup>93</sup> This was a reinforcement of the conviction that the previous administration was less favorable or responsive to Kurdish interests while seeking to make the center strong.

On the regional front, President Barzani undertook diplomatic missions to Baghdad and Tehran, meeting with top leaders, including Iran's supreme leader and Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi.<sup>94</sup> These efforts yielded results. In May 2024, Iraq's highest judicial body, in response to Prime Minister Barzani's lawsuit, issued a temporary order halting preparations for the parliamentary elections in the Kurdistan Region. Later the same month, the high court issued a revised decree that reconfigured the electoral system. While the decision to divide the region into four constituencies remained unchanged, the court restored five quota seats for minority groups, bringing the total number of seats to 100.<sup>95</sup>

While the Iraqi Supreme Court has been accused of politicization, the Kurds facilitated this federal intervention by initiating legal proceedings against their own region and institutions. The erosion of the KRG's autonomy can thus be attributed to internal Kurdish divisions rather than external interventions. The ongoing dispute over Kurdish leadership has weakened political cohesion, leaving the region more vulnerable to domestic and regional pressures.

The root of the problem lies in the Kurdish political parties' approach to governance. For them, politics is not merely "the art of the possible" but also a zero-sum game that they are willing to take to extremes, even at the risk of self-destruction. It seems easier for these parties to negotiate with historical adversaries and thus to undermine one another than to seek common ground among themselves. Unless Kurdish leaders recognize that compromise is essential for survival and progress, they are destined to repeat past mistakes that have led to their current predicament. To prevent further losses, a fundamental shift in political strategy and mindset is not merely desirable but imperative.



## Turnout, Money, and the New Election

Low voter turnout in recent elections in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region has been a troubling trend, reflecting a crisis of civic engagement. In the 2013 elections, voter participation was at 74%, but this number fell to 58% in 2018,<sup>96</sup> and only 41% of eligible voters participated in the 2021 Iraqi elections.<sup>97</sup> Voter apathy has not just been a symptom of indifference; it has stemmed directly from a sense of disillusionment. People feel that their votes hold no power to effect change or improve their quality of life.<sup>98</sup>

With each passing election, the inconvenient truth has been that though the living conditions of the average Kurdish citizen have continued to deteriorate, those who have secured power – whether through parliamentary seats or positions of influence – experience a dramatic and often extravagant improvement in their own fortunes. This growing divide between the political elite and the people has not only tarnished democracy but also is often viewed as a betrayal of the people the elite are meant to serve.<sup>99</sup> Thus, the elections, rather than offering a pathway to a better future, have perpetuated inequality and despair among the electorate.

During the 2013 campaign, Kurdish social media reported that a candidate remarked “It’s true I cannot change your life, but you can change my life” when he was challenged by citizens who doubted his ability to improve their circumstances.<sup>100</sup> Upon being elected a member of parliament, individuals receive a monthly salary of \$5,500, the option to purchase a new Land Cruiser on monthly payments, three bodyguards – often chosen from their own family members – an allowance, free housing, and a lifetime monthly pension of at least \$2,700, even before reaching the legal retirement age.<sup>101</sup> This stark contrast between the privileges of elected officials and the struggles of ordinary citizens has taken a heavy toll on the integrity of the political system and casts doubt on the true motivations behind public service in Kurdistan.

This pervasive disenchantment is indicative of a more profound concern in the Kurdistan parliament, which has deteriorated in both its efficacy and influence in the last two electoral cycles. Voters are concerned about the subpar quality of representatives, who lack

the necessary experience, qualifications, vision, and commitment to represent their constituents.<sup>102</sup> The reason for this is that the increasing prioritization of candidates’ electability, and their potential to garner votes over competence and expertise, is often the determinant for nominating them<sup>103</sup> This shift in party selection practices has undermined the overall caliber of the legislative body and limits its capacity to address the complex challenges facing the region. Concurrently, the ruling parties have systematically sought to subvert parliament’s autonomy by ensuring that it prioritizes their own interests with weak candidates who respond to party wishes.

The declining quality of members of parliament has exacerbated the steady erosion of parliament’s institutional integrity and effectiveness. This transformation has compromised parliament’s fundamental functions, especially its capacity for legislation, oversight, and accountability. Its ability to enact legislation and impose checks on the executive branch has considerably diminished, leading to a governance system that is more opaque and less responsive to public demands. This is evidenced by a lack of effort to hold government officials and public servants accountable or initiate essential inquiries. Parliament also has not passed a budget law in 17 years, which has severely undermined its own legislative authority and resulted in the government’s failure to provide or improve basic services.<sup>104</sup>

According to the Pay Foundation for Education and Development, which monitors parliamentary activities, the newly elected parliament does not appear to be promising. More than 57% of the candidates did not have educational degrees in the 2024 election cycle. Family and tribal affiliation were again prioritized over merit.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, parliament’s legislative record has been underwhelming. The previous assembly passed only 39 laws, making it the least active parliament in the body’s history.<sup>106</sup> On the national level, when it is compared with the relatively nascent Iraqi parliament, it does not fare well either. The Kurdistan parliament passed only 406 laws in the span of three decades in all its five rounds, while in 18 years the Iraqi parliament has passed over 692 laws.<sup>107</sup> In a survey conducted by Rudaw Research Center, only 40% of people said they are satisfied with the parliament in the Kurdistan Region, and people in Sulaymaniyah



and Halabja had only 20% approval of the Kurdish legislative branch.<sup>108</sup>

Nonetheless, turnout in the 2024 election was 72%,<sup>109</sup> defying expectations.<sup>110</sup> Several key factors contributed to this outcome: the restructuring of the electoral map in the Kurdistan Region, dividing it into four districts, which made each one more competitive; the increased emphasis on the electability of candidates rather than their quality; the fiercely contested campaign, fueled by populist rhetoric and unconventional electioneering tactics; a high level of canvassing and organization; financial resources directed at influencing voters; escalating political tensions; and a widespread belief that the election's supervision by Baghdad would safeguard it from fraud.<sup>111</sup>

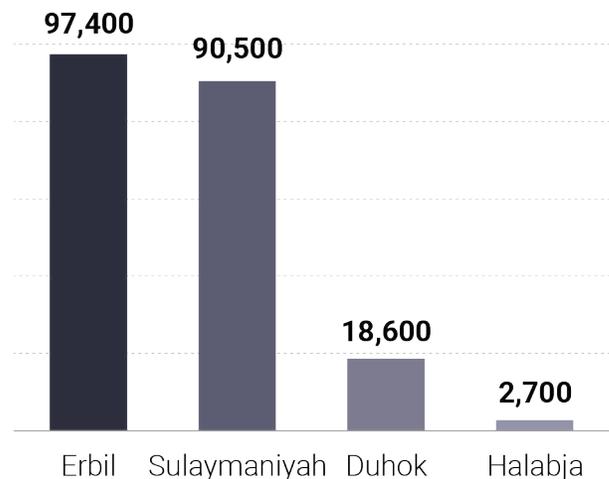
However, while voter turnout increased, this does not necessarily mean that the public has more confidence in political parties or the political system. Two important facts need to be taken into account. First, nearly 24% of people eligible to vote did not register to vote, which likely indicates voter apathy and a lack of confidence that the elections would bring any meaningful change. Second, 209,200 ballots, more than 10% of the total votes cast, were marked as invalid. These invalid ballots, some of which had been intentionally ruined, could indicate a message from voters that though they are ready to become a part of the democratic process, they are dissatisfied with the current state of governance and the economy. For example, some voters reported that they went to the polls and burned their ballots before casting them to ensure that their votes would not be manipulated by the ruling parties.<sup>112</sup>

The PUK employed unconventional, populist campaign tactics built on direct attacks on Prime Minister Barzani. The PUK mounted personal assaults on Barzani's leadership and administration while simultaneously attempting to diminish the accomplishments of the Barzani-led KRG government. This approach aimed to cast Barzani as the primary source of the region's challenges and failures, despite the fact that the PUK was a coalition partner in the same government and was equally responsible for the Kurdistan Region's problems. "The PUK wanted to remind its base that it was not an extension of the KDP," said Aram Saeed, a political analyst in

Sulaymaniyah. "The PUK was established in opposition to the KDP. The more it appeared anti-KDP, the more responsive its political base would be."<sup>113</sup>

Another part of its strategy was to field candidates who were social media influencers who had made names for themselves by insulting the KDP and the PUK and by disguising themselves as anticorruption champions. These individuals created a following on Facebook based on provocation and making unsubstantiated claims regarding the Talabani and Barzani families.<sup>114</sup> However, the PUK was able to give them buy-in and utilize them against the KDP.<sup>115</sup> "These were grifters who were up for sale," said an independent journalist. "They would have been on the KDP ticket if the KDP [had chosen] to pay them more."

### Invalid/Spoiled Votes in the 2024 Kurdistan Region Parliament Election by Region



Source: Kurdistan Watch

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This strategy served another purpose, which was to deepen disillusionment among the electorate regarding opposition groups. Ironically, this also indirectly benefited the KDP as a ruling party that had also successfully lured opposition figures through financial inducements. "To make the most critical voice of the PUK and the Talabani family the public face of its election campaign, the PUK wanted to tell the voters, 'If this person can be bought by money, who are you?'"<sup>116</sup> said one election expert. While the plan was to exacerbate voter skepticism, implying



that even the most “anti-ruling party” champion can be seduced or compromised by monetary rewards, at best these candidates were void of motivation rooted in public service, instead demonstrating a propensity for self-interest and personal enrichment, which fundamentally undermines the principles associated with the responsibilities of public office.<sup>117</sup>

Unlike the PUK, the KDP ran a more muted campaign focused on service provision. It generally avoided responding to the PUK’s provocative personal attacks, instead focusing on governance and touting its ability to build a better future for Kurdistan. This included project openings and proposals and visits by the prime minister to farms, factories, and dams. The KDP’s approach likely contributed to an election environment that, despite being rhetorically fierce, never descended into violence. Although the PUK said it would provide its governance program during the election, it has not yet presented such a manifesto.

One notable controversy in the KDP campaign was the release of an audio file on Oct. 8, 2024, that allegedly captured a conversation between the Talabani brothers discussing election rigging. Observers overwhelmingly believed that the audio was generated by artificial intelligence, but independent bodies have yet to verify or refute its authenticity.<sup>118</sup>

The reconfiguration of the Kurdistan Region’s electoral map into four districts helped the political parties become more focused and organized, structuring their strategies and advertisements toward locals and connecting directly with the electorate. Canvassing became an important tool of electioneering.

While money has always played an important role in elections, its role was unprecedented in 2024 for the amount spent on campaigning and on voter buyout. Due to a lack of transparency, it is impossible to track all the money spent on elections, but projections indicate that \$30 million to \$50 million was allocated for the 2024 elections, making this campaign cycle the most lavish in the history of the Kurdish Region.<sup>119</sup> The practice of offering monetary rewards to supporters – and, in some cases, even to independents and other voters, regardless of their political affiliation – by

both the KDP and the PUK seems to have uncovered a key factor behind declining voter turnout in recent elections. However, the monetary rewards offered to voters varied in scale and timing. Young voters, in particular, received only about \$100 just days before the election, distributed in installments. To access this money, they were required to visit the offices of either the PUK or the KDP, where they had to register their names, sign, and renew their commitment to vote. On election day, party loyalists were deployed at voting centers to track those who had received not just the monetary incentives but also the members of the party. If any of these individuals failed to show up to vote, they were contacted and urged to participate. Additionally, some voters were asked to provide photographic proof of their participation, either by sending a picture of their dyed fingers (a common marker of voting) or a snapshot of their completed ballot. In return, they received an additional 25 Iraqi dinars (roughly \$18). This quid pro quo strategy effectively addressed the problem of low turnout, particularly among unemployed youth who were often in dire need of financial support.<sup>120</sup>

In addition, targeting government employment to the security sector became another tool to gain voter loyalty and further strengthen the already-entrenched patronage system. In the weeks leading up to the election, the ruling parties added thousands of new employees to the government workforce, which was already bloated and overstaffed<sup>121</sup> – even though the government often struggles to pay salaries on time. Moreover, the KRG authorized local governments to start distributing land plots to eligible government employees just before the election.<sup>122</sup>

The surge in funding is apparent not only in conventional campaign methods but also in more contentious approaches like voter buyouts, which underscore the growing affluence and competitiveness of electoral contests. While the use of financial strategies in elections is not a novel concept, such unprecedented monetary rewards and financial incentives highlight the major transformation of the political arena, where financial influence is increasingly driving voter participation and influencing electoral results.



## Conclusion

The fierce political competition between the Kurdistan Region's dominant parties intensified into political, economic, and social fractures, which jeopardize governance, dilute democracy, and shake the very foundations of Kurdish autonomy in Iraq. Given the highly polarized election campaign – marked by fierce, personalized attacks that focused more on a blame game by some of the political parties than substantive policy platforms – the 2024 Kurdish elections exacerbated political tensions, weakening the fragile autonomy of the Kurdistan Region.

However, the unexpected regional and international geopolitical shifts have altered the postelection political landscape. These shifts—including Trump's election, the Assad regime's fall, and the decline of Iranian influence in the Middle East—seem to have undermined the PUK's traditional allies both within Iraq and across the broader regional front, thereby contributing to the weakening of the PUK itself. These allies now seem more focused on consolidating their existing power than projecting influence through force, prioritizing stability over aggressive expansion. In the meantime, the KDP also acknowledges the emerging opportunities to reinforce its political position and maintain its previous Cabinet roles while working toward a governing coalition with the PUK. This coalition would facilitate the implementation of the prime minister's programs across the Kurdistan Region without obstacles, potentially contributing to the gradual consolidation of the KRG's authority. However, this process may present challenges for the PUK's political influence. This new reality appears to be driving Kurdish political parties to demand representation within the government proportionate to their electoral performance. Consequently, government formation may proceed more swiftly than initially anticipated.

## Recommendations for the Iraqi Federal Government

Iraq needs to maintain its political neutrality: The best approach for the federal government and the influential Shiite parties is to maintain neutrality toward different political parties. While from Iraq's perspective, internal divisions among Kurdish factions might



The Kurdish flag flies in Iraqi Kurdistan. (John Wreford / Getty Images)

seem a desirable state, history shows this just leads to broader instability in Iraq.<sup>123</sup> A politically coherent and economically thriving Kurdistan contributes to the stability of Iraq. Not only does stability in Kurdistan help foster prosperity at the regional level; it is also essential for Iraq's own economic development because it allows the federal authorities to focus on the many economic and environmental challenges all of Iraq faces as a nation.

## Recommendations for International Partners

First, the international community should advise the Iraqi government against interfering in the internal matters of the Kurdistan Region. The prevailing political, economic, and social circumstances in the region are already precarious, and any initiatives by Baghdad to intrude upon postelection negotiations will only intensify existing tensions, which will make stability and government formation increasingly arduous. The international community needs to acknowledge the fragile balance of power within the region, advocate for its federal status, and ensure that its government remains free from external influence and coercion. This will help the region's continued progress and bolster its security. The international community should promote cooperation across Iraq by creating a climate that honors regional autonomy.

Second, the international community should condition aid with reform. The KRG's international partners have relative influence to ensure orderly and consistent financial, political, and military reforms through their financial and security aid that aligns with the region's long-term stability and development goals. With Coalition forces slated to depart from Iraq, Kurdish



leadership should be reminded of the importance of such reforms to ensure the survival of the region in the absence of international protection. Thus, strengthening the Kurdistan Region’s governance, military, and economy will be crucial to mitigate potential vulnerabilities and enhance resilience against external and internal pressures.

## Recommendations for Kurdish Parties

First, Kurdish political parties need to focus on collective governance. Shared

governance means more than an equal distribution of government positions among parties. Truly collaborative governance is expected to develop a cooperative culture that will support greater political participation by various stakeholders in the decision-making process, which will result in less politicization. This, in return, promotes a culture of ownership, which is the core need for any type of governance to be effective and successful. It has the power to restore public trust in government institutions, which facilitates efficient outcomes that ultimately favor the people. It is in the context of postelection negotiations that political parties must embrace the principles of shared governance with clear duties and responsibilities.

Second, Kurdish political parties need to decentralize power by helping local authorities in governorates deal with their own issues by managing their own finances, so the community feels empowered and involved. This will increase accountability and will bring innovative solutions to each community’s needs, will make decision-making processes more efficient and responsive, and will end up providing better services and higher citizen satisfaction. In this context, Erbil

should become accountable by monitoring local governments to make sure public money is being used effectively. This can be done through systematic audits, community feedback mechanisms, and transparent reporting that involves citizens in the governance framework.

Third, Kurdish political parties need to work together in the new parliament to enable it to fulfill its fundamental duty: to pass a comprehensive budget law. This is crucial to set clear priorities to guide fiscal policy and resource allocation. By passing a budget law, parliament can increase transparency and accountability in financial matters, which are both essential to build public trust and to manage public resources wisely. Moreover, the existing public financial problems and the uncertainty of the revenue sources has increased political tensions between the KDP and the PUK. Passing the budget law thus is a step to reducing these political tensions and creating a more united political atmosphere.

Fourth, Kurdish political parties need to depoliticize the region’s institutions. Independent institutions, such as the judiciary and the security apparatus, are indispensable pillars of political and social stability in the Kurdistan Region. In the absence of politicized government institutions, some Kurdish parties have opted to choose federal institutions to address their perceived political grievances. This in turn has led to a weakening of the KRG. Thus, it is imperative for the new Cabinet to restore trust in the independence of its institutions as impartial venues for mediating intra-Kurdish political disputes. This restoration will require a commitment to transparency, to accountability, and to establishing clear mechanisms for conflict resolution that prioritize the interests of the Kurdistan Region over partisan agendas.

## Biography



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