

The Kurdistan Regional Government Elections: A Critical Evaluation

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ABSTRACT *This analysis offers an evaluation of the last three elections of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) in Iraq. These three elections included the regional parliamentary elections in September 2013, and the local and federal elections held simultaneously in April 2014. The KRG, as a federal region, exists in the north of Iraq where Kurds have managed their own affairs through a regional government since 1992. The KRG elections have very little in common with elections in the rest of Iraq. Compared to the rest of Iraq, the “region” has experienced a very different trajectory during the last two decades. As a postwar region, the KRG strives to solidify a stable democracy in a landlocked region, which suffers from minimal economic capital and weak democratic culture.*

Political and Electoral Background

The KRG held its regional parliamentary election in September 2013. It was an election of great significance and candidates battled acrimoniously for their seats. In fact, one can argue that for the people in the Kurdistan region, the regional parliamentary election is likely the most important election for the electorate, due to the nature of Iraqi governing system. The KRG includes three governorates in Erbil, Sulaymaniyah and Duhok. This regional government is the only real sovereign political body. In view of this sovereign organization, the region has

been described as “a de facto state.”¹ Electoral and subsequently parliamentary democracy reached the region in 1992, after the withdrawal of the central government due its flagging military, security, and administrative power. The first election in 1992 had a distinct “aura”—an aura of authentic artwork. It was not only the first manifestation of the region’s political power, but also a demonstration of the Kurdish people’s existence. It was an election to form a new state, a novel government. Democracy requires a defined territory and people as well as a cohesive state. However, in 1992, none of these existed. These absences resulted in roadblocks to democracy, which remain in the region

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today. Thus, it was not surprising that the second election did not occur until after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Elections in the region have two faces, like the Roman god Janus: one looking at the past, and the other at the future. Thus, elections might cul-

resulted in entrenched regional unrest. Bad governance, limited information, and personal and factional enmities contributed to the population's disenchantment with the system and the emergence of Islamic political parties. This development resulted in the first distinctions between secular and Islamist ideologies—concepts still not fully understood by the region's populations

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tivate the idea of democracy through practice, while simultaneously, in a post civil war society, maintains and revives pre-modern formats of relationships, which in most cases are anti-democratic.

In the first election, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) emerged with success. Both parties proclaimed their right to govern, as they feared they would lose public support for the next election if they ruled with anything less than full power. This dynamic resulted in a fifty-fifty coalition government. This inconclusive competition for dominance damaged the region's democracy and government formation. The fifty-fifty model divided the government body and the geographical organization of the electorate, and has

In post-Saddam Iraq, the KRG region has leapt forward in many areas. The Ba'ath regime had been an existential threat to the Iraqi Kurds, and its demise changed the nature of the country. Not even a century old today, the Iraqi state came to being as a post-Ottoman, Western creation, but there is no commonality among its populations. As former Iraqi minister Ali Allawi put it, "Iraq as a limited geographical expression does not have the civilizational unity."² Despite this traditional discord, the post-Saddam era set the stage for post-partisan politics in the KRG. Under these conditions emerged the *Gorran* (Change) Movement—the first real opposition movement in the Kurdish political sphere. In its debut election in 2009, the movement won 25 parliamentary seats: a political event that changed and redefined the nature of regional party politics. The movement divided the PUK, halted the Islamists' progress, and applied pressure to the KDP.

The Three Elections

Only against this background can we comprehensively analyze the last



Kurdistan Region President Massoud Barzani speaks during a meeting with Iraqi tribal leaders from Mosul province on January 19, 2009 in Arbil, the capital of Iraq's Kurdish regional government.
AFP / Safin Hamed

three elections in the region. These elections included the regional parliamentary elections in September 2013, the Iraqi National Parliamentary elections, and the provincial elections in April 2014. One can hardly find any differences between these elections, and this repetition indicates serious deficiencies in conducting the electoral democratic practice. It signifies an inability to address different issues in each election, or to relate the election based on these issues.

The campaigns are all similar, if not the same and have exhibited similar problems. Campaign officials cover every city and town in the region with party flags and candidates' pictures. Unlike Turkey, in the KRG, the MPs are not the most important political figures. Party leaders never run for seats in parliament. Although the governing system in the KRG is

nominally parliamentary, neither the ministers nor the prime minister are members of parliament. Therefore, the Kurdish political elite is not composed of current MP's, mostly due to the insignificant role played by parliament within the governing system in the KRG. Until the emergence of the Gorran opposition, the parliament was a place for compensation, and the two main parties would compensate their devoted servants with parliament seats. This trend still continues, albeit in different fashions. Thus, those in parliament were party delegates and not representatives of the people. When the Gorran movement emerged, the nature of the parliament tremendously changed. For the first time, the parliament debated regional budgets and discussed laws. Above all, the people became informed about the nature of governing the region.

Making of Kanded (Candidates)

Before coming to the nitty-gritty of the last three elections, it is important to shed light on the public's perceptions of the figure of the candidates. The Kurdish people refer to candidates for parliament as *kanded*—a word (Why they use a foreign word, while there is more than one Kurdish word for it, is another issue). The word is derived from the English word *candidate*, not from the word *candid*. Since the main perception of a candidate is not that he/she is “candid.” The connotations of *kanded* are distinct, and include none of the prestige and respect common to the English term. The public views the candidate as someone running for parliament and not representing his constituency, but to make money instead. People generally view these figures as inefficient, overpaid, and lazy, and they angrily compare their generous salaries to those of teachers and other low-paid civil servants. This negative public image, however, one can argue, is universal but somehow impacts negatively the already weakened institution of parliament. While the MPs salaries merit readjustment, they are by no means the main source of waste of public revenue.

The KRG region suffers from severe, systematic corruption, as visible from Iraq's low rank on the International Transparency Index. Reflecting public outrage, many writers have criticized this corruption and the MP candidates. The region's famous anti-establishment author, Bakhtyar Ali, wrote a piece entitled “Kand-

ed.”³ He describes the candidate as an empty minded, greedy figure who tries to gratify himself through public acceptance. He is obsessed with his worth, his position, and his aura; all are attributed to him from the outside world. Ali's view originates from Jean Baudrillard's perception by demonstrating human relations with unreal objects.⁴ Ali's writing is part of a destructive, nihilist movement to devalue activity by government institutions and political parties. This destructive criticism has resulted in little positive change.

The previous three elections, in 2013 and 2014, were held in this tense political environment. Campaigns for the most recent two elections began slowly in early April 2014. Disenchanted intellectuals argued for abstinence, and marginal, political parties of the far left endorsed their message. In addition, many argued against voting itself, based on the futility of reform attempts in the region. They claimed that a small group of elites controls the region and organizes society for its own benefit, at the expense of the masses. The powerful have consolidated political power amongst themselves and have used their power to amass wealth. However, as Election Day approached, this argument against voting lost momentum, and it was replaced by a harsh polemical exchange. This sort of brutal polemics has been the common form of political discourse among different parties. There is no respect or acknowledgment of the rights of their opponents. There is no dialogue. The whole exchange is mere polemical.

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In most cases, the content of debates is irrelevant. Candidates' expression of Eastern-style leadership, through rhetoric, charisma, and strength of voice, matters above all else. It is always Kennedy versus Nixon (referring to the famous Sep. 26, 1960 USA election debate) but all sides are aware of the importance of extensive television presence in order to reach every household, as underlined in Kurdistan by the use of TV as a central media source. The TV has to a certain degree a magical power. It is a tool of reaching and convincing ordinary people. People from all parts of society spend most of their free time in front of the TV, and many watch even during work, as there are TVs in offices, including every regional civil servant office. Like many other places in the world, in keeping with global trends, Kurdistan has left the radio far behind and embraced the televised age.

The majority of the election debate consists of polemics and rhetoric. This emphasis on polemics over the relevant issues is harmful in a society at the early stages of democracy. To the polemicist, "the person he confronts is not a partner in search for the truth but an adversary, an enemy

who is wrong, who is harmful, and whose very existence constitutes a threat. For him, then the game consists not of recognizing this person as a subject having the right to speak but of abolishing him as interlocutor, from any possible dialogue; and his final objective will be not to come as close as possible to a difficult truth but to bring about the triumph of the just cause he has been manifestly upholding from the beginning."⁵ While candidates undertake this self-interested, competitive approach to politics, how do the voters behave? Before answering this question, it is necessary to provide an analysis of the typology of the political parties.

Typology of the KRG Political Parties

In general, there are five main political parties vying for the voters' preference. The parties are distinguished primarily as pro-status quo or pro-change, but can also be divided along secular and religious lines. The KDP and the PUK both support the status quo, while the Gorran movement and the Islamist political parties call for change. The local media has also labeled Gorran and the Islamists, which include the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) and Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG), as the "opposition block," in view of their informal coalition in the parliament over the past four years. However, the two Islamic parties have different origins and views. The KIU focuses on charity and civil society, due to the Muslim Brotherhood's (Ikhwan al Muslimin) world view and

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its considerable influence, while the KIG has a paramilitary past and more radical views. The KIG's flamboyant leader regularly advertises alleged visions of Allah and the Prophet from his dreams, employing an archaic method of obtaining legitimacy in the eye of the followers. While both parties have increased their numbers of votes since their emergence onto the political stage, they both suffered a decrease in votes in the last election. The KIU suffered more than the KIG in this election, and it currently struggles from a lack of *raison d'état* or a fraying political consensus.

In an interview with the local newspaper *Awene*, Abubakir Haladni, one of the leading KIU politburo members, stated that party leadership had been shocked by the results of the Iraqi parliamentary elections and Kurdistan's local election results.⁶ He pinned the undesirable result on the candidates' weakness. Although votes for the Islamists might have declined, Denise Natali argues, "Islamic influences are penetrating Iraqi Kurdistan in another more subtle way. According to one Erbil resident, "The secular parties' own second generation is becoming part of Islamic institutions from within." Others have described

a "whole new generation of Kurds following the Quran." Some residents argue that this trend is a reaction to the rapid lifestyle changes linked to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq's vast oil wealth; nightclubs, massage parlors, bars and immodest attire — even if they benefit materially from the oil wealth.⁷ Natali points out a significant trend, but this tendency towards religion is neither politically inclined, nor highly conservative. In fact, many people are simultaneously practicing religion and immersing themselves in the pleasures of consumption. In addition, Islam is becoming more and more localized and nationalized rather than pan connected to an Umma approach. The discourses of pan-Islamic, Khalifa style are going out of fashion. Currently, the KIU tries to consolidate its followers by arguing that its party stands for "religiosity, patriotism, pacifism, honesty, fidelity, creativity, and care."⁸

Voters display complex behavior toward these political parties. Some citizens are loyal party cardholders, others make a rational choice each Election Day, and many vote for their economic well-being. Most of the population is affiliated with a particular political party based on their location, ancestry, fears, blood ties, and frustrations. On this subject, drawing "the usual analogy between the voting 'decision' and the more or less carefully calculated decisions of consumers or businessmen or courts ... may be quite incorrect. For many voters political preferences may better be considered analogous to cultural tastes—in music, literature,



Kurdish people of Northern Iraq cast their ballot in the country's first parliamentary election on April 30, 2014.

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recreational activities, dress, ethics, speech, social behavior. ... Both have their origin in ethnic, sectional, class, and family traditions. Both exhibit stability and resistance to change for individuals but flexibility and adjustment over generations for the society as a whole. Both seem to be matters of sentiment and disposition rather than 'reasoned preferences.' While both are responsive to changed conditions and unusual stimuli, they are relatively invulnerable to direct argumentation and vulnerable to indirect social influences. Both are characterized more by faith than by conviction and by wishful expectation rather than careful prediction of consequences."⁹

In keeping with this model, KRG election campaigns rely heavily on sentimental attachment, brand recog-

nition, hero-making, and savior figures. Moreover, candidates frequently attempt pork barrel spending, in order to please their local constituencies. Affirming Tip O'Neill's phrase, "all politics is local," all KRG elections are contested on the same local stage, whether the election is national, regional, or local. For example, leading up to the April 2014 elections, mainstream political officials had delayed the second local election many times, in order to block the power of local decision-making and the spread of support for the opposition.

Each of the five main political parties of the KRG had different preconceptions leading up to the April elections. The Gorran party was confident, and as some analysts argued, overconfident. The PUK entered the

election amidst factional squabbles and without the guidance of its general secretary Jalal Talabani. The PUK battled with disarray and low morale, and looked forward to little success in the elections. The KDP approached the elections with an expectation of its traditional share of about forty percent of the vote. Sure enough, the party won 38 seats of the hundred available. Both Islamic parties expected to gain support based on their stances as opposition parties against corruption. The two Islamic parties maintained their share of the vote in the parliamentary election, but in the Iraq general parliamentary election, the KIU's vote declined significantly. As a result, many believe that the two Islamist parties have reached their peak and are headed towards decline, unless they engage a wider population. This sort of transition could be difficult to achieve due to their Muslim Brotherhood background, some argue.

on its feet, disproving those who believed the group was drawing its final breath.”¹⁰ No doubt Ebdullah's view is optimistic, but the PUK has indeed boosted its morale, at least temporarily. The Gorran and the PUK battled it out in a neck breaking campaign, especially in the Sulaymaniyah area. The PUK managed to increase its popular vote, in the Iraqi parliamentary election relative to its result in the previous regional election, but this boost seems more like a bubble than a definite upwards trend. The PUK has not made any serious changes to its formation or ideology. The party acted as an opposition group, and promised its voters that it would not participate in the coming government. Moreover, during the campaign, the party's established, older figures did not publicly participate, and the party benefited from an illusion of reform and renewal. But soon after Election Day, this enthusiasm quickly dissipated. The Gorran

Province	Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)	Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)	Gorran Movement	Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU)	Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG)	Other minorities
Erbil	340,668	91,072	130,000	46,000	46,300	52,448
Dohuk	310,816	52,172	12,772	56,660	4,814	33,566
Sulaymaniyah	92,500	234,252	333,961	84,081	67,285	6,401
Total Seats	38	18	24	10	6	15

The KRG last parliamentary election results, Sep. 2013 Source National Democratic Institute NDI: Iraq Election Watch: <https://www.ndi.org/files/NDI-Iraq-Election-Watch-Ed7.pdf>

The PUK yielded a most unexpected result in the elections, and the party claims that to have been revived. Hemin Ebdullah asserted, “In less than a year the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) has managed to get back

Movement gained votes in some regions, and lost votes in others: depending on the geographical location, for a mixed result. Despite its appearance of stability, the KDP faces serious challenges. Sixty per-

cent of the population opposed the party in these elections, and the party has so far failed to secure support beyond its core constituencies. The KDP is not dominant in matters of politics, security, and economics, and its opponents regularly cite these weaknesses. In addition, the close correlation between regional dominance and votes for the KDP raises questions about electoral procedure. The KDP had won one hundred percent of the vote in some regions—a rare, if not an impossible, result in a free democracy.

Conclusions

The 2014 parliamentary election resulted in a broad coalition government, including all of the KRG's main political parties. The government formation was difficult and time consuming, primarily due to the lack of trust among the three most powerful parties—the KDP, the PUK, and the Gorran. Up until this point, inter-party cooperation has functioned, but the KRG is now entering an especially trying phase. After the recent electoral realignments, the KRG faces challenges in managing economic, political, geopolitical issues, and governing. Tensions with the central Iraqi government have reached a high, after the latter cut the KRG budget in a dispute over oil sales. Iraq currently faces a critical juncture, following the fall of Mosul and the emergence of the Islamic state in the country's Sunni region. On the international stage, Iraq has once again risen to prominence as an

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unstable, fragile country, and a threat to world peace.

The reign of the Islamic caliphate has transformed the region in many ways. In a significant mobilization, Kurdish forces from all parts of Kurdistan came together in order to protect their territory. This shift indicates the Kurds' identification with KRG as their government, and it also suggests reorganization in the existing system of Middle Eastern states. Both the caliphate and Kurds are challenging the system set forth by the Sykes-Picot state system, albeit in different ways. While the caliphate refuses to recognize established borders, the Kurds have blurred them and created a free liberal zone of movement; contributing to shifting geopolitics to geo-economics, especially with Turkey.

In this commentary I attempted to evaluate the last three elections in the KRG critically. This region is in a transition from a long brutal dictatorship to democracy and over the last two decades, there have been many ups and downs, but in sum, there has been significant progress. Still, the transition paradigm should not encourage a false impression of the region's situation. In many cas-

es, a transition is not what it seems, as Thomas Carothers explains in his article “The End of the Transition Paradigm.”¹¹ The last three elections have proved that all the KRG political parties, except maybe the KDP, are vulnerable, especially with the possible emergence of swing voters. Even KDP’s stability seems to be in doubt, and many are questioning the legitimacy of the electoral process in general—especially in the districts where the KDP has won one hundred percent of the vote. There have been many positive developments, but the region is far from a true democracy. The intimate relationship between the economy and the political system has blocked the emergence of democracy, as the country has moved towards both a political- and economic dynasty. To borrow from Thomas Piketty there has been an emergence of “patrimonial capitalism” in the region¹² ■

Endnotes

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