



## Iraq Election Watch: KRG Parliamentary Elections

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*On September 21, 2013, voters in Iraq's autonomous Kurdish region cast ballots to elect members of parliament (MPs) to the Kurdistan Parliament of Iraq (KPI). Polling in September's election—the first to be held in the region since 2009—took place in the provinces of Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah. The results of the election upended the region's traditional political landscape and will have important considerations as national elections, scheduled for April 2014, draw near.*

*This report by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) is the seventh in an occasional series on provincial and national election frameworks, political developments, campaigns, and election results in Iraq.*

On September 21, more than 73 percent of eligible voters turned out to decide which of the more than 1,100 candidates would win their endorsement to the 111-seat KPI. The election, widely judged to be free and fair, was spared the violence that has plagued Iraq since April. For voters in the Kurdish region, their concerns about corruption, clientelism, and poor service delivery echoed those of their counterparts across Iraq.

The region's two main political parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—have governed together under the coalition banner of the Kurdistan Alliance (KA). For the first

time since 1992, they ran on separate electoral lists. Though KDP, led by Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) Massoud Barzani, has emerged as the more dominant coalition partner, both parties successfully carved out separate spheres of influence within government ministries and the Peshmerga, the KRG's armed forces, during their alliance.

The election showed a change in fortunes for the two parties. Garnering 38 seats, KDP reaffirmed its dominant position in the region, as well as Barzani's status as the kingmaker of Kurdish politics. The prospects of KDP's success in elections, however, were never in doubt. Instead, the election has been viewed as a referendum on PUK. The party—which has suffered from a dearth of leadership since its founder and leader, Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, suffered a stroke in December 2012—has increasingly had its base of supporters challenged by the Change Movement (Goran). Goran, whose founding members broke off from PUK in 2009, ran a campaign portraying PUK as the embodiment of corruption and mismanagement, using negative public perceptions to their advantage.

When election results were announced by Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) on October 2, it was clear that PUK suffered significant losses. Despite running on an electoral platform that

was limited in substance, Goran’s anti-PUK message clearly resonated, as voters delivered to the party 24 seats—and the status of the KRG’s second most powerful party. Any coalition that possesses more than 56 seats can form a government, and the election results suddenly cast doubt on the prospect of KDP and PUK once again joining together to govern.

IHEC’s Electoral Judicial Panel announced on October 29 that it ruled all 60 of the electoral appeals it received to be invalid, finalizing the results. With that, speculation over the composition of a future governing coalition began and—more than a month after elections took place—there is no resolution.

mismanagement of key ministries, and what one PUK official referred to as a “preoccupation...with business deals and maintaining their personal interests.” The explanations, however, have done little to improve the party’s internal dynamics. That is largely because party members continue to battle over how to address the looming absence of Jalal Talabani.

Talabani, who turned 80 in November, continues to receive treatment in Germany. Despite a recent report by a KRG representative that he can now speak, read, and write—an indication itself of the severity of Talabani’s stroke—his imminent return to politics remains a poor bet.

<b>2013 KRG Parliamentary Election Results</b>						
<b>Province</b>	<b>Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)</b>	<b>Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)</b>	<b>Change Movement (Goran)</b>	<b>Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU)</b>	<b>Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG)</b>	<b>Other; Minority Seats</b>
Erbil	340,668	91,072	130,000	46,000	46,300	52,448
Dohuk	310,816	25,176	12,775	56,660	4,814	33,566
Sulaymaniyah	92,500	234,252	333,961	84,081	67,285	6,401
<b>Total Seats</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>15</b>

### **PUK: Picking up the Pieces**

As PUK members faced the realization that they had been beaten in Sulaymaniyah—long a PUK stronghold—divisions within the party were laid bare. The election results have forced the party into a period of self-reflection. PUK has blamed its losses on a wide array of factors, including public anger over the party’s acquiescence to a two-year extension of President Barzani’s mandate,

Persistent calls within the party to replace him before September parliamentary elections were met by intransigence by party leaders, and it now appears that a final decision will not be made until the party convention on January 31, 2014. Beginning in October, internal meetings and a “mini conference” culminated in an apparent working paper on the future of the party, but it is clear that PUK is playing for time as it reassesses its tenuous position.

In the meantime, four key players continue to fight over the future of the party: Kosrat Rasul, vice-president of PUK; senior PUK leader Mullah Bakhtiar; Talbani's wife, Hero, who resigned as leader of PUK's Sulaymaniyah politburo in the wake of the election; and former KRG Vice-President Barham Salih. Party leaders face ongoing internal criticism that they have not made space for youth members, sentiments Salih recently echoed in a statement conceding that the party has not updated its message to appeal to youth, who comprise the majority of the Kurdish population. The two most likely candidates for succession—Salih and former KRG representative to the U.S. Qubad Talabani—face an uphill battle, however, to spearhead the reforms necessary to rejuvenate the party.

On October 29, KDP offered PUK the first choice in forming a government. KDP would clearly prefer a weakened PUK as a coalition partner to Goran, a party emboldened by its electoral performance and persistent in its calls for reform. PUK's leadership has publicly struggled with this existential quandary—to rejoin government or embrace a role in the opposition and a chance to rejuvenate their party. For the party, both choices are fraught with pitfalls. Wary of being perceived as an ineffectual partner to KDP, PUK has yet to publicly commit to rejoining government. It is likely to accept the offer in order to preserve its spheres of influence and lucrative patronage networks. By entering into a coalition with KDP, a confrontation with Goran will be difficult to avoid.

### **Goran: A Party in Transition**

Since the election, Goran has struck a delicate balance between its traditional allies and prospective partners, all the while

girding against a recalcitrant PUK. Along with the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) and Kurdistan Islamist Group (KIG), Goran has served as a stalwart member of the Kurdish opposition since 2009. As KDP courts all four parties as potential partners, it remains unclear whether Goran will accept a secondary role in a governing coalition to a leadership role in the opposition.

Eying ministerial posts, but fearful of being marginalized in any broad-based coalition, KIU has been encouraging Goran and KIG to act in unison. KIG, meanwhile, seems content to remain in opposition. Of greater concern to Goran, however, is its ability to deliver on its campaign pledge of government reform. Although Goran has yet to provide a detailed plan, frequent statements over the past weeks that the party would withdraw from a governing coalition if reforms were not enacted have convinced KDP that it would make an untrustworthy partner.

As coalition negotiations drag on, Goran has become increasingly frustrated with PUK's apparent refusal to bow to Goran's predominance in Sulaymaniyah, and tensions are escalating. Publicly complaining that it is being "excluded and marginalized" in a city in which they represent a "major force," Goran's leader, Nawsherwan Mustafa, recently demanded that the PUK-appointed governor of Sulaymaniyah step down. PUK, which retains control over Peshmerga units in the area, replied by warning that it would "take legal measures against any attempts to cause trouble." As KDP maneuvers to ensure the next governing coalition will be as pliable as possible in its efforts to project itself as the party of growth and stability, it must keep a wary eye on developments in Sulaymaniyah.

## **Provincial Elections Postponed, National Elections on Track**

Initially scheduled to take place on November 21, provincial elections in the Kurdish region have since been postponed. IHEC announced on October 8 that it had decided to delay elections for “technical reasons” and expressed frustration with uncooperative political parties, explaining “political entities failed to nominate candidates on time, despite repeated extensions of the deadline, or failed to do so altogether.” In a historically sclerotic political environment, faced with an altered balance of power, the reticence of Kurdish political parties is hardly surprising. Although the new date must be set by the KRG’s Council of Ministers, IHEC’s suggestion that elections be held in tandem with national elections, scheduled for April 30, would allow political parties in the Kurdish region time to adjust to the altered political reality. Particularly for PUK, the delay has been welcomed with relief.

The delay in KRG provincial polls coincided with a heated debate over amending Iraq’s 2005 election law. Under discussion were a broad range of issues, including open vs. closed lists; single vs. multi-district systems; and compensatory seats. In debates in the Council of Representatives (CoR), Kurds pushed for a single-district system and a dramatic increase in compensatory seats. They sought to avoid a repeat of 2010 elections, the framework of which they girded against as unrepresentative. Although support for the election law could have been found in a voting arrangement that excluded Kurds—as occurred with the 2013 federal budget—CoR Speaker Osama al-Nujaifi repeatedly delayed votes. His home constituency of Ninewa province is predominately Sunni, but borders the

Kurdish region, and he has been eager to maintain good relations with his neighbors.

The debate itself mirrored Iraq’s complex sectarian mosaic. Each of the country’s distinct electoral groupings has unique interests, and they often exist in conflict with one another. Protests in western Iraq have been ongoing since December 2012 and, though they are largely led by Sunnis, public frustration with the political process has echoed across Iraq’s sectarian and ethnic divides. Recent public opinion research conducted by NDI-Iraq indicated that discontent with elected officials continues to be a pervasive problem.

The eventual agreement that was passed on November 4 maintained an open-list system and was devoid of radical changes; instead, the most significant alterations were to the seat distribution method, which was brought closer to the Saint Laguë method—a formula expected to improve the electoral chances of some small parties—and a modest increase in the number of seats to 328, up from 320. While many of the broader reforms pressed for by the Kurds were not included, President Barzani has endorsed the law, and they do have cause to celebrate. The generally high turnout of Kurdish voters and party cohesiveness and discipline will provide an opportunity to take advantage of the additional seats in Dohuk, Erbil, and Sulaymaniyah, at the very least.<sup>1</sup>

As both KRG provincial and national elections approach, the country continues to suffer from a resurgent al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI), coupled with rising sectarian

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<sup>1</sup> The provinces of Anbar, Babil, Baghdad, Basra, Diyala, Dohuk, Erbil, Thi-Qar, and Sulaymaniyah were each allocated an additional seat.

tensions. Violence claimed the lives of more than 2,800 Iraqis between July and October, much of it at the hands of AQI. An important dynamic in the lead-up to elections will be pressure from—and reactions to—Iraqis' increasing involvement in the Syrian civil war. Voters are likely to be influenced by other regional factors, including Iraq's evolving relationship with Iran and Turkey, and Kurdish nationalism. The volatility of the latter issue has escalated in recent weeks, as Syrian Kurds announced the formation of an autonomous government in northeast Syria. The move, which was publicly rebuked by President Barzani, is likely to complicate his efforts to convene the Kurdish National Congress, originally scheduled for August 2013. As April approaches and Iraqis prepare to choose their representatives for the next four years, they look upon their western border with wariness.

### **NDI in Iraq**

NDI began working with reform-minded Iraqi politicians in 1999 and established an in-country presence throughout Iraq in June 2003. The Institute currently has training facilities in Baghdad and Erbil for work with partners in Iraqi political parties, the Council of Representatives, and the Kurdistan Parliament of Iraq.

Programs aim to strengthen the political will and capacity of political parties and governing institutions to engage Iraqi citizens in policymaking and legislative processes and to equip citizens and civil society organizations with the skills to advocate for policy changes directly with parties and governing institutions at all levels.

To achieve its objectives, NDI implements

governance and political party strengthening programs. The Institute works with legislative institutions to build the technical capacity of members and staff and to increase citizen involvement in the legislative process through outreach activities inside parliament and throughout the country. NDI works with political parties to develop policies that address citizens' needs, craft and implement effective communications strategies, and strengthen capacity to conduct policy-oriented campaigns.

In support of its programs in Iraq, NDI has maintained a longstanding public opinion research series, which provides Iraqi partners with up-to-date information on public attitudes and priorities. Since June 2003, the Institute has conducted 38 nationwide surveys and more than 400 focus group sessions, lending insight to Iraqi political parties and governing institutions.

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