

# Gorran and the End of Populism in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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Brief Analysis

After months of back and forth, the leading parties of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—are engaged in negotiations to finalize the cabinet, which must be completed by July 12. Yet as the shape of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)’s coalition government becomes clearer, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq’s (KRI) opposition party Gorran appears to have accepted its minor role in the coalition government. As a formerly popular movement now with only twelve seats in a 111 seat parliament, the rise and fall of Gorran as a strong opposition party demonstrates the waning of populism in the Kurdish political arena.

## From Populist Outsider to Coalition Member

Gorran’s original platform as designed in 2009 by the party’s charismatic leader Nawshirwan Mustafa, a key figure in the Kurdish movement against the former Baathist regime of Iraq, was outspoken in its promotion of anti-corruption efforts, democracy, and the rule of law. This vision resonated with many ordinary Kurds, who experienced corruption, nepotism, and weak rule of law for years in the government of the region’s two mainstream parties. Voters were readily mobilized by the movement’s promises; Gorran came in second with 25 seats during the first election in which it ran. After this remarkable success, Gorran asserted that it would make frustrated voters’ aspirations come to fruition.

Yet after years of promises, none of Gorran’s guiding principles have materialized. Despite the success of the party’s initial focus on populist rhetoric, Gorran has since abandoned this oratory style in the wake of last September’s elections. Instead, Gorran leadership has focused on an agreement with the KDP to form the government. The agreement has brought a tremendous amount of criticism against Gorran from its supporters, who see it as hypocritical given how Gorran used to portray the KDP as its enemy.

During Gorran’s first years in power, its politicians were actively combative against the KDP and the PUK. Though Gorran promised “four years of stability” when it joined the government in 2014, a year later Gorran and other opposition parties in the KRG tried to change presidential law. A change that may have forced Masoud Barzani to step down as the president of the IKR after almost a decade in the position. The attempt backfired and Gorran’s

efforts resulted in the dismissal of the speaker of parliament—a Gorran member—preventing Gorran’s parliamentary ministers from entering Erbil, the capital region of IKR. Furthermore, the KDP shut down parliament for a year and half. Gorran should have taken this incident as a lesson that the KRG’s two ruling parties would stop legal and democratic procedures if those processes radically challenged their rule.

In May 2017, Gorran faced further setbacks when its charismatic leader passed away. The party’s constituency strongly criticized its newly elected leadership since many were older politicians and former PUK leaders. Moreover, when the land title of Nawshirwan’s properties—including Zargata hill, where Gorran’s HQ, television station, and radio station are all based—were transferred to his sons Chya and Nma, Gorran’s rank and file protested that nepotism was interfering with the party’s governance. Concerns over Zargata hill added to [allegations of nepotism \(https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/07/change-movement-nawshirwan-mustafa-kurdistan-iraq.html\)](https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/07/change-movement-nawshirwan-mustafa-kurdistan-iraq.html) against the party’s two prominent leaders, Osman Haji Mahmood and Qadir Haji Ali, who eventually resigned from the party.

The current accusations against Gorran have been several years in the making and reflect concerns with the party’s leadership and message. And despite widespread criticism, it is in some ways legitimate that a party would need to adjust its rhetoric in order to join the government after years of being an opposition party.

What is more shocking, however, is Gorran’s shift on a major policy issue that had previously separated the party from the KDP and the PUK. In mid-June, Gorran leadership issued an announcement that it agreed with KDP and PUK policy that the Kurdistan Region has the right to [administer its natural resources \(http://drawmedia.net/page\\_detail?smart-id=4050&fbclid=IwAR0\\_XJ-fq2-tOdeDH5uAQblxumhgWpP\\_UKSu7PwnX3vwGSB-PkqrPS9w4WQ\)](http://drawmedia.net/page_detail?smart-id=4050&fbclid=IwAR0_XJ-fq2-tOdeDH5uAQblxumhgWpP_UKSu7PwnX3vwGSB-PkqrPS9w4WQ) outside of Baghdad. The Kurdistan Regional Government has pursued this policy for years, which has benefited Kurdish elite tremendously but has caused many regular Kurds to suffer. Because of the dispute over oil revenues, Baghdad has in several cases cut Kurdistan’s funding in the Iraqi budget.

Highlighting the dissonance between the party’s messaging and actions, Gorran issued its announcement after attempts by three of its MPs and two other Kurdish MPs in Baghdad to push the KRG to export oil through Iraq. The politicians had argued that such a move would allow the KRI’s economy to prosper and set up a road map for the restoration of disputes between the federal government and the KRG.

### **The Future of Gorran**

This major shift in policy indicates that Gorran may have learned that it does not possess the capabilities to carry out radical changes in the KRG within a short period of time. Since Gorran is primarily a civic movement, it must negotiate with the KRG’s two major parties to effect change within the system. Even as part of the government, trying to implement radical reforms would ultimately work against Gorran’s ability to create more modest reforms with the help of the KDP and the PUK. Moreover, it is unreasonable to assume that radical improvements could be possible in such a short period of time. The KRG is an established system based on party and personal interests that has developed over almost three decades, and any reforms to this system should not be expected to be instantaneous.

Alternatively, it may result in a major disappointment if the party completely merges into the establishment, stops its efforts to fight corruption, and becomes a willing participant in the KRG’s partisan institutions. While many political analysts are already accusing Gorran of trending towards this outcome, it may be too early to judge the efficacy of a Gorran that actively works within the KRG government system.

Gorran may have given up its ability to mobilize voters through the populist rhetoric it had previously relied upon. In the past, Gorran’s ability to mobilize its supporters through this language meant that the decisions of the party were heavily shaped by the people’s perceptions of the political landscape rather than a structured political plan to

effect change. Gorran's rhetorical responsiveness to voter concerns led to high expectations, especially in terms of reform and unseating the binary rule of the KDP and the PUK. The party's subsequent shift into a coalition participant, along with its failure to deliver on its promises, has led to disillusionment and disappointment based on inflated expectations. Ultimately, the rise and fall of Gorran's populist rhetoric has shaped KRG politics primarily by making many people believe that neither a power transition nor reform can be accomplished through democratic means.

This outcome occurred in part because Gorran leadership did not have a long-term vision of how to carry out reform in the region. While the process of institutionalization, strengthening the rule of law, and democracy realistically requires years of gradual reform, Gorran politicians spoke as if it were possible to achieve these goals within one term of parliament—thereby setting themselves up for failure.

### **New Party, Old Mistakes**

Aside from fomenting voter frustration with the democratic process, disappointment in Gorran has also created an opposition vacuum. In the previous elections cycle, prominent Iraqi Kurdish businessman Shaswar Abdul Wahid co-founded the New Generation party, which secured four seats in federal elections and eight seats in regional elections. For a new party, this was considered a major victory, especially when compared to Gorran's five seats in the same election. Shaswar's campaign against the timing of the Kurdistan independence referendum also bolsters his credentials, as he claimed that a possible outcome of the referendum could include the KRG losing control of disputed areas to Baghdad. When this partially occurred, Shaswar's prescience led thousands of people, especially Kurdish youth, to be more likely to view him as a political leader.

However, the New Generation party's platform is striking in its similarity to that of the initial Gorran platform, though its populist rhetoric is even stronger than that of Gorran. The party has made unbelievable promises, such as the commitment to bring electric cars to the region despite many individuals lacking electricity at home. These messages have been able to spread effectively through the popular NRT TV, owned by Shaswar. Subsequently, some of the party's key figures, including Rabun Marouf, Sarkawt Shamsadin and Aram Saeed, have been suspended from the party and have left the party after accusing Shaswar of mixing party affairs with his business and dominating the collective decisions of the New Generation party.

It is imperative for opposition parties in the KRI to be wary of populist rhetoric. As Kurds begin to see this style as a cliché rather than a serious policy stance, populist rhetoric becomes less likely to mobilize people in upcoming elections. Therefore, it is likely New Generation will face the same problems as Gorran in the near future due to the radical nature of its promises. It is important for opposition groups to consider new strategies that will actually lead to reform and help restore people's trust in them. No matter how many seats a party secures or how critical it is of the KDP and the PUK, any opposition party will eventually have to deal with the KRG's larger parties in order to effect change. Otherwise, the KRI's opposition groups will continue to disappoint people through unrealized commitments and will help the KDP and the PUK to maintain the status quo. ❖

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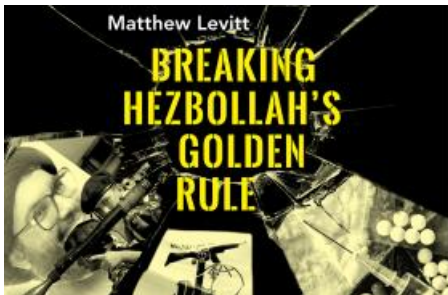
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