

# New Generation and the New Opposition in Iraq's Parliament

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Brief Analysis

**Calls to reject the results of Iraq's October 10 parliamentary election by the Fateh alliance and other parties affiliated with the Popular Mobilization Forces that underperformed have garnered much attention. Yet the successful strategies and ideologies of relatively new parties that took seats in the recent election cycle deserve a closer look.**

**T**he Sulaymaniyah-based New Generation (NG) was founded in 2017 by businessman Shaswar Abdulwahid, known for his Nalia Radio and Television (NRT) media empire and business investments in housing projects in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI). That same year, the party's negative stance on the independence referendum earned him scorn from fellow political leaders in Kurdistan—but this stance echoed concerns shared by many Iraqi and international observers. While others in the KRI enthusiastically embraced the idea of an (unrealistic) independence movement from Iraq, Shaswar and NG boldly went against the public tide and had a strong “No For Now” campaign tinged with nationalism and realism. As the referendum results went unrecognized by the international community, their perspective was proven right.

While winning four seats in Iraq's 2018 parliamentary election as a newly established party, New Generation exceeded expectations this elections cycle, winning nine seats. While their main competitors in the Kurdistan Region, KDP and PUK, mostly maintained their seat share, NG doubling their seats allowed them to assume fully the role of the opposition – both in the region nationally, leading the opposition through the recently formed Coalition for People with Emtidad and winning independent candidates. They competed in six provinces across Iraq—though it was likely that their candidates in Baghdad and Karbala were designed to allow the party to claim a ‘nationwide,’ non-sectarian strategy. Forty percent of their candidates won seats, and with only one exception, they won in the first or second position. Coalition partner Emtidad also won nine seats, but they fielded 38 – for a win rate of 23

percent. In comparison to other parties and coalitions, NG had the 5<sup>th</sup> highest winning percentage Iraq wide, after the Babylon movement with 80 percent, the Sadrist bloc with 76 percent, the KDP with 60 percent and the State of Law with 46 percent.

A clear strategy and cohesive messaging helped the party greatly. Candidates messaged strongly that they were the alternative for voters frustrated with corruption and disillusioned with incumbent parties. It ran just one candidate per constituency, and their 23 candidates (including eleven women) focused on party name and platform recognition rather than building their individual brands—though party leader Shaswar Abdulwahid and his sister Srwa do both have strong individual recognition. Assessing that the new electoral system of single non-transferable vote (SNTV) could equally benefit individual or party name recognition with the proper candidate strategy, NG relied on advertising the party, its logo and its brand of ‘opposition, outspoken’ to attract voters.

This message was potentially risky: NG had to be sure that, despite Iraqis’ overall fatigue and distrust of political parties, the party platform and approach would convince enough voters. However, their risk was well-rewarded. Srwa won the largest number of votes of any female candidate running, with 28,987 votes. Nor did any of NG’s winning female candidates need to rely on the Iraq’s newly established quota system that states that 25 percent of parliamentary seats are reserved for women.

Nevertheless, their strategy was not successful in every region. This was particularly the case in Dohuk province, where their candidates fared rather poorly. While the NG applied their same approach of one candidate per constituency, their poor showing helps underscore the continuing dominance of near single-party rule by the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in the province, a feature of conventional politics in the KRI. It also shows that while NG may have some support there, securing more seats in future elections will require significant effort to build the party’s reputation, which may prove challenging given NG’s known antagonistic approach towards the KDP.

Adapting candidate strategy based on an assessment of competitiveness and level of support is expected—but it seems that NG, in part, used this election to conduct ‘market research’ in order to drive a strategy for future elections. NG, like many parties, may adopt a tiered strategy in the next elections cycle similar to that of the Sadrists, who had four different tiers of strategy based on the nature and the level of support in each constituency they chose to run in, which was proven successful given that 76 percent of their candidates secured seats.

NG’s strategy also presents an instructive contrast with that of Emtidad, a newly established party that emerged from the 2019 Tishreen movement. Emtidad relied on individual name recognition, often of those who became known through the protest squares, and had a weaker party name and brand overall. In contrast, NG leveraged its party name, young leadership, and relatively recent establishment, as well as its reputation for opposing the ruling class and speaking out about corruption and the mismanagement of service delivery by incumbent parties. Running only one candidate in each constituency allowed for more cost-effective and coherent messaging and advertising by the party itself.

NG’s electoral fortunes were also buoyed by the near complete collapse of other parties that had positioned themselves as opposition in the Kurdistan Region—especially Gorran. While originally formed as an opposition party, Gorran’s decision to run in a coalition with the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the KRI’s second largest party, seems to have drastically reduced their appeal. Several Islamist parties are active in the region, but their share of the electorate is far narrower; they also lack the ‘opposition’ positioning that NG and Gorran could more credibly claim. For these parties and Gorran, their alignment towards or coalition with the ruling parties in the Kurdistan region cost them badly this time around—underscoring that voters seeking alternatives are unwilling to cast their ballots for parties who are “opposition” on paper, and expect opposition parties to follow through once they obtain seats.

Following several meetings with Emtidad and a number of independent candidates, NG has made their decision to not participate in the parliament’s still developing coalition. However, they have said that they will seek to influence the choices of ministers and the overall political process. This message resonates well with NG’s revolutionary approach and their opposition to incumbent parties in the Kurdistan region, which they will now apply nationwide.

Unlike other players who might join the opposition in parliament, the opposition has been NG’s comfort zone since their founding in 2017. While their knowledge of operating as an opposition party may be beneficial to the Tishreeni movement, which encompasses both Emtidad and various independent parliamentarians, whether they can maintain their opposition focus despite pressure imposed on NG’s MPs by other Kurdish parties to redirect their loyalty will be key to watch in the months and years to come. Following the conclusion of the government formation process, MPs can shift between parties easily and with little to no consequences from their original party, which increases the risk for NG that their MPs could be convinced to join with another party or coalition, shrinking the size of the opposition.

NG’s opposition credentials brought them to victory in parts of the Kurdistan Region and Kirkuk—but if they want to achieve similar success in Dohuk province, they’ll need a different strategy. Similarly, if they want to expand their reach throughout federal Iraq, NG will need to smartly manage their partnerships with the newly emerging parties, encouraging voters to see them as more than “just” a Kurdish party, but rather a nationally relevant opposition voice that stands in support of public issues. ❖

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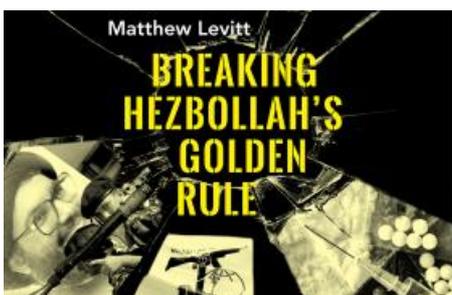
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