

Renewing the KRG's Opposition Parties for 2024 Parliamentary Elections

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 Brief Analysis

As the February 2024 elections approach, the quest for a new political era in Iraqi Kurdistan is encountering formidable challenges.

Amidst mounting pressures and discontent within the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), dissident politicians are fervently working to establish a formidable opposition front to democratically challenge the enduring rule of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) in the February 2024 elections. This endeavor, while fueled by a desire for change, is rife with complexities and obstacles that underscore the tough challenge of toppling the entrenched duopoly.

The KDP and PUK, stalwart ruling parties in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for over three decades, currently face an unprecedented confluence of political and economic challenges. The federal government in Baghdad, leveraging the Supreme Federal Court, is actively seeking to legally undermine key institutions in the KRG. Simultaneously, financial constraints imposed by Baghdad have led to a dire situation in which millions of public servants have gone without salaries for months, intensifying public dissatisfaction and fueling resentment against the Kurdish leadership.

Even before the recent economic and political crises, the popularity of the KDP and PUK was in steady **decline** (https://url.emailprotection.link/?bm856s_s8epbYUGu5tgy747yPh515sDNS4zLOJNLE3AebjoMIHz9NY7m2vd69TU8Mt0V_kNsUbGw-rdPZMGZe0sTCB1ZH3BmaSdsXbu6-lcR2jE7Fuc3zEYcJu86lBkH3SHk-eadirtt_VDb5s81zQjN_oYrcJySpKvKJhwp6_Wt6TPSuoSbHwCieQpIaYJV5oYuWe0CJtgelmTI940U2uIQpZ9ejaGelnhfvd3aYx5ztuz9Xye5BWHWT7ocgljN).

In the 2021 Iraqi parliamentary elections, these parties garnered only 22.7 percent of the total eligible votes in the KRI, their lowest level of support in the last thirty years. A significant 77.3 percent of eligible voters either boycotted the elections or cast their votes for alternative parties, signaling widespread disillusionment with the status quo. Dissident politicians perceive this decline as an opportune moment to challenge the long-standing dominance of the ruling parties.

The KRG has three distinct opposition fronts, each with a unique set of limitations. The New Generation, spearheaded by businessman-turned-politician Shaswar Abdulwahid, stands out as the most popular and well-organized opposition party in the KRG. In the 2018 Iraqi parliamentary elections, this nascent party secured four seats, and by 2021, it had expanded to nine. Notably, New Generation was the sole Kurdish party to experience a **surge** (https://url.emailprotection.link/?b5KqmDwwZ1uilvwBI_dVmAUbnD--vf80anSrZmJPE_Fi_fQArDS3odCDtWigxC5rJowa_jjE0oAm7oeh2h-f0tys021JRQAQnkUPEVHaQ07SbeggxLEt7s4oc00xom4zS) in votes during that election, while the two dominant ruling parties saw a substantial decline. The party also made a significant impact in its inaugural participation in Kurdistan's parliamentary elections in 2018, securing eight seats.

The Islamic parties, the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) and Kurdistan Justice Party (KJP), constitute another opposition front in the KRI. In the 2018 elections, the two parties together garnered 12 percent of the votes—seven seats for KJP and five for KIU. Despite their active involvement in politics for decades, the Islamic parties have never been able to surpass 15 percent of the votes. Their emergence as opposition forces to the KDP and PUK occurred after 2009, coinciding with the founding of the Gorran Movement, which became the region's most prominent opposition party.

The third front is in its formative stages, aspiring to bring an end to the three-decade rule of the KDP and the PUK. Former Gorran leaders have engaged in extensive discussions over several months, both internally and with other dissenting figures, to create a coalition that not only serves as a successor to the Gorran Movement, but also learns from its mistakes.

The Gorran Movement, founded in 2009 by Nawshirwan Mustafa, a seasoned politician, initially posed a formidable challenge to the KDP-PUK duopoly. During Gorran's inaugural foray into elections, the movement secured a noteworthy achievement by capturing a quarter of the seats in the Kurdistan parliament, solidifying its position as the second-largest party in the region. However, internal discord, participation in the government, the death of its founder, and leadership changes led to Gorran's losing 95 percent of its votes in the last Iraqi elections.

Individuals who left Gorran in recent years are now diligently working toward leading another popular opposition party, reaching out to other dissident politicians and activists to establish a cohesive political front. Noteworthy figures potentially joining this initiative include former Kurdistan parliament speaker Yousuf Mohammed; Ali Hama Salih, widely regarded as one of the most popular lawmakers in the history of the Kurdistan parliament; Abdulla Mala

Nuri, another esteemed former lawmaker; Gorran co-founder Osman Haji Mahmood, a veteran Kurdish politician and former KRG interior minister; and Masoud Abdulkaliq, an Erbil-based Kurdish political activist and author.

Initially, Gorran ran on a platform advocating a comprehensive change in the KRG political system, opposing corruption and family rule and positioning itself as an alternative to the KDP and PUK. However, the movement has shifted focus and now emphasizes limited reforms within the existing administration. While it does not prominently highlight specific policy issues, Gorran's evolution suggests a departure from its initial radical change agenda toward a more pragmatic approach centered on internal reforms. The failures in the initial approach cost the movement dearly in the last elections.

Yusef Mohammed, the former Kurdistan parliament speaker, has emerged as a prominent figure in the nascent opposition front, asserting that the departure of his former party, the Gorran Movement, has left a considerable void that demands attention. Acknowledging Gorran's missteps, Mohammed emphasizes a commitment to learning crucial lessons from the party's trajectory.

In a conversation with the author, Mohammed remarked that "Gorran gave a lot of hope to people, then brought them down to the bottom." Reflecting on the movement's past failures, he added, "We in Gorran gave false hope to the people that things could change entirely in one or two elections. But you need patience in the change process." Currently engaged in collaborative efforts with prominent political figures in the KRG, Mohammed underscores the ongoing process of seeking common ground and establishing a foundation for united action. Despite these discussions, the group has not yet reached any concrete decisions.

Many in the KRG do not believe that a new party can democratically disrupt the dominance of the two main parties. This skepticism arises from the perception that these parties wield great influence, bolstered by their control over crucial institutions, including the military, courts, security apparatus, and, notably, the economy. Mohammed recognizes the formidable challenge at hand, emphasizing the need to rebuild trust in the electoral and democratic processes in the KRG. He suggests strategies such as approaching the federal court to highlight that the KDP and PUK do not monopolize the political landscape. Mohammed, addressing skepticism about the democratic process in the region and answering the crucial question whether the KDP and PUK willingly hand over power if they lose the election, contends that current regional politics do not favor the two ruling parties. He emphasizes that their actual strength is not as formidable as is commonly believed and optimistically notes, "Out of the over 60 percent of those who boycotted the election, if we could persuade half of it to go to vote and vote to us, we would win."

The opposition's vision of a united front faces internal challenges that complicate the path forward. Disagreements over leadership, mistrust among dissident figures, and concerns about potential electoral losses hinder the formation of a cohesive opposition.

Financial constraints also pose a significant hurdle for this fledgling opposition front. Mohammed emphasizes their decision not to seek support from regional powers, as traditional Kurdish parties often do, but to approach Kurdish businessmen for support in establishing a potent media outlet to amplify their voice and garner broad support.

However, beneath the surface, internal issues among the key figures within the prospective opposition front run deeper than initial appearances suggest. Despite multiple meetings, a cohesive framework for collaboration remains elusive. Central to the challenges is the question of leadership—a critical consideration that has yet to be resolved unanimously. While establishing a leadership council rather than having a single leader is an option, not all members endorse this.

Ali Hama Salih confirmed that discussions to establish an opposition front are underway but have not yielded any conclusive outcomes, and he declined to offer further details or explanations.

Mistrust further complicates the dynamics among dissident figures, with Salih contemplating whether to forge his own political path or align with the broader front. Additionally, a palpable apprehension pervades their ranks, a fear that active participation in the upcoming elections could result in a substantial defeat, potentially spelling the end of the careers of certain veteran politicians. This intricate web of internal challenges underscores the complexity of forging a unified front capable of effectively challenging the entrenched ruling parties.

As the February 2024 elections approach, the quest for a new political era in Iraqi Kurdistan is encountering formidable challenges. The dissident politicians, motivated by a fervent desire for change and armed with lessons from the past, are striving to overcome internal divisions and build a united front against the existing duopoly. The outcome remains uncertain, but the opposition's unwavering determination reflects a broader shift in the political dynamics of the KRG. ❖

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