

# Gorran: A Party of Words, not Deeds

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Hawkar Abdullah Azeez is an independent researcher who has worked as a journalist for several local Kurdish newspapers. In 2018, he published a book titled *ISIS: Between Sectarian Conflict and the Failure of the Arab Spring*.



## Brief Analysis

**A**mong the opposition parties operating in Iraqi Kurdistan, the largest is the Gorran Movement (Movement for Change). Founded in 2009 by Nawshirwan Mustafa, former Deputy Secretary of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Gorran movement advocates for reform measures and its members have vowed to fight against corruption, nepotism, and social injustices. Yet, despite widespread discontent with Iraqi Kurdistan's most influential political parties, the PUK and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), Gorran is failing to present a lasting challenge to the KDP-PUK duopoly.

Until the Iraqi Kurdistan parliamentary election this year, Gorran's star appeared to be on the rise. In 2009, the party won 25 out of 111 seats in the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament. The following year, 8 Gorran members were elected to the national parliament. Nonetheless, during the past decade, the movement's popularity has been declining. Mostly notably, in the regional parliamentary election of 2018, Gorran suffered a harsh blow, winning only **12 seats** (<http://www.rudaw.net/kurmanci/kurdistan/031020189>). In comparison, the KDP was able to maintain its status as Iraqi Kurdistan's largest party by winning 45 seats, whereas the PUK secured 21 seats.

The decrease in Gorran's popularity has several causes. First, the party's decision to join the Kurdish Cabinet despite Nawshirwan Mustafa and his cohorts' repeated accusations of corruption within the KRG damaged its reputation, leading voters to doubt its legitimacy and efficacy as an opposition party. Also undermining Gorran's credibility was its affiliation with the PUK. The attempted "Dabashan Agreement" – signed in 2016 with the intention of facilitating a merger between the PUK and Gorran – turned out to be a mistake, as it signaled to voters that Gorran was ignoring legitimate critiques of the PUK.

But as it was forming an imprudent alliance with the PUK, Gorran was also injudiciously feuding with the KDP.

The tension between Gorran and former President Massoud Barzani boiled over when parliament chairman and Gorran member Yousif Mohammed pressured Barzani to step down by calling a special session to remove him from office. Mohammed's rejection of US, UK, UN, and local pressures to postpone this attempt did contribute to Barzani's eventual resignation. Nevertheless, for Iraqi-Kurds outside of Sulaymaniyah, Gorran's stronghold, the fact that Barzani was able to stop Mohammed from entering Erbil during the spat was a sign of the chairman's weakness and ineffectiveness as a leader. Thus, many of the voters in provinces such as Hawler and Duhok, who in 2014 gave Gorran a major boost, abandoned the movement during the most recent election.

Another factor contributing to Gorran's downward spiral is the tension between ex-PUK members and ex-Kurdistan Islamic Union members within Gorran. Both factions have conflicting visions for the movement and the clash between their worldviews complicates the movement's decision-making process.

Outside the political arena, many Iraqi-Kurds resent Gorran due to its failure to enact any significant change in Iraqi Kurdistan's regional politics even after joining the KRG.

Indeed, during its time in the coalition, Gorran did not introduce initiatives to promote its stated goals. For example, despite its place in the government, the party did not take serious action to push forward desperately needed infrastructure projects in Sulimaniyah and Garmiyah.

To top it all off, in 2017, following its founder's death, Gorran suffered an additional blow to its reputation. Fearing that the KRG would confiscate Gorran's headquarters if it was listed as the party's property, Mustafa registered the land under his name. After his passing, however, the land was passed on to his sons rather than the party. The brothers' ownership of the property is seen by many in a negative light and drew allegations of hypocrisy.

Granted, Gorran's failures must also be read in light of the real challenges plaguing the Kurdish political system. Indeed, all Kurdish political parties suffer from the absence of a democratic infrastructure and many lack a reliable source of income. Thus, when a Kurdish party runs into difficulties, it may be hard for it to bounce back.

Even so, these issues did lead some of Gorran's members to criticize the party via anonymous Facebook accounts. To make matters worse, the results of the most recent election revealed that the total number of votes for Gorran shrunk by 60 percent since the previous elections. As a matter of fact, support for the party has decreased even in areas such as Halabja and Sulaymaniyah.

Nevertheless, the party's leadership does not seem to take these signs of discontent seriously. So far, it has failed to investigate why Gorran has lost a significant number of followers and several prominent members. Instead, those who have left the movement, like Muhammad Haji, who has joined the KDP, and Hevi Hayyaf, a member of the Erbil Provincial Council who resigned from Gorran after failing to secure enough votes in the 2018 election, have simply been labeled as traitors or KDP and PUK followers.

Despite the above, however, all is not lost for Gorran. The party still has many supporters who believe in the opposition group's ability to challenge the KDP and the PUK, which are facing challenges of their own. Nevertheless, if it hopes to reclaim its status as a corruption-fighting opposition force, Gorran must take serious steps to address voters' concerns. ❖

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