



Kurdistan's Islamist Parties Strategize in Upcoming Elections

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Brief Analysis

With elections for Iraq's Kurdistan region slated for September 30, one key and often overlooked actor in the political arena is the changing role of the Islamic political movement in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). While the usual players, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) parties that have jointly ruled the KRG since 1991, will continue to dominate in the elections, this election season marks a shift in Islamist politicians' involvement in the larger opposition movement that has developed in the KRG over the last decade. Many key Islamist politicians have resigned from their parties to make alliances with the Kurdistan region's secular opposition, suggesting that opposition to the political status quo is now more important to Islamist party leaders than specific political positions. These new partnerships also have important implications for the future of KRG politics, as a more formidable oppositionist coalition may be able to disrupt the current parliamentary agenda.

This shift in strategy reflects the challenges the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) and Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG)—founded 1994 and 2001 respectively—have traditionally faced in Kurdish elections. Both parties' platforms are considered reformist; they promote investments and free trade as well as an end to corruption, nepotism, and the manipulation of power that characterizes the current ruling establishment. The parties also emphasize the rule of law and **free, fair, and credible elections**, hoping to establish an **Islamic state** with the components of a Western-style democracy. However, these platforms struggle to compete with the established base of the older Kurdish parties.

While the KIU and KIG have repeatedly endeavored to unseat the KDP and PUK given that both are accused of **corruption**, widespread nepotism in their dealings, failing to **provide basic services** such as electricity and water, and **loss of disputed territories** including the oil-rich city of Kirkuk, neither party has gained much traction. During the previous elections in 2013, the KIU and KIG secured only **16** out of 111 seats in the Kurdistan parliament.

The continued sway between the KDP and PUK is one major roadblock to the Islamic parties' ability to mobilize voters. The KIU and KIG's past attempted partnerships with the established parties have disincentivized their potential voter base to participate in elections, since their parties held little leverage within the larger coalitions. In contrast, the KDP and the PUK continue to motivate their voter base despite accusations of corruption and governmental mismanagement.

The KDP and PUK are able to rely on an institutional history of charismatic leaders with historical ties to the founding of the KRG. During elections, the parties rely on their loyal bases and patronage networks that continue to garner support and votes rather than the appeal of specific policy platforms. Additionally, the manipulation of security forces, nationalistic rhetoric, and widespread allegations of electoral fraud have helped them secure a majority of parliamentary seats in the last four national elections.

However, there is a significant minority of politicians and voters who have broken off from these two established groups in response to these accusations. Gorran, also known as the Change Movement, was founded in 2009 by the former deputy secretary of PUK, Nawshirwan Mustafa, and is the largest secular opposition party in Iraqi Kurdistan. The more recently formed CDJ, established in 2017 by former senior PUK member Barham Salih, holds a similar agenda to that of Gorran regarding ideology, focusing specifically on halting the KDP and PUK's bad governance and mismanagement of the economy. While Barham Salih recently rejoined the PUK in order to vie for the presidency post of Iraq, the CDJ still plans to hold a congress in the near future to choose a leadership, and while they are formally boycotting the elections, their voter demographic is likely to support other opposition groups.

In contrast to the weakness of the Islamist parties, the opposition bloc may stand a major chance as a united third option for voters frustrated with the PUK and the KDP. Consequently, many Islamist politicians have joined the broader opposition despite the other parties' explicitly secular ideology. Prominent Islamist political figures, including KIG co-founder Aram Qadr and KIU's former nominee for president Mohamed Rauf, are now members of CDJ's executive council. In fact, when the CDJ elects its new leader, the party will be led by one of these two politicians. Moreover, former KIU member Havel Abubakr joined Gorran and became the governor of Sulaimani.

Growing concern among both blocs over electoral fraud has also paved the way for increased institutional partnerships. In the most recent national elections held in May, Islamic parties joined with other Kurdish opposition parties to publicly reject the electronic results for the Kurdistan region after accusing the KDP and PUK of rigging the elections. The KIU and KIG have since formed a coalition with CDJ and Gorran representatives in the Iraqi federal parliament, suggesting their commitment to work closely within the KRG parliament as well.

Though this shift towards uniting with the broader Kurdish opposition represents a new tactic for Islamist parties, the alliance with Gorran and CDJ is politically astute. Indeed, it provides Islamic parties with a chance for some measure of power in government. Both Islamist and secular opposition parties share a number of policy goals, including economic reform--through nationalizing the region's oil sector, establishing a more secure rule of law, creating jobs, and stabilizing the banking system. Most importantly, the opposition parties all support the reunification of the security forces, which are currently split due to their total control by the KDP and PUK rather than the KRG as a whole.

There is also a relatively large amount of voter interest in bringing politicians into parliament who support these platforms. Support for the secular opposition has increased since the previous regional elections due to building frustrations with the governance of the region, including an economic downturn and the disastrous results of the Kurdish referendum in 2017. This informal alliance will most likely increase the turnout of KIU and KIG's voter base for their own candidates if they believe politicians will have enough power to effect change.

Moreover, the role of Islamist politicians in the two secular opposition parties is mutually beneficial. On one hand,

the Islamists who have joined the opposition parties have demonstrated their ability to bring a new voter demographic for the opposition. For instance, when Haval Abubakr headed Gorran's list for provincial elections in 2014, he obtained **more than 240,000 votes**. On the other hand, the KIU and KIG ties with the Gorran and CDJ have helped the Islamists strengthen the role they play in shaping political affairs, as they make up a larger portion of the total opposition and thus hold increased influence in shaping the opposition's suggested policies.

In fact, solidification of the opposition into a single party under the banner of Gorran as the largest opposition party is the most beneficial long-term outcome for the KRG's opposition. By ensuring that voters interested in supporting are not split between parties, a unified opposition bloc is the most likely political configuration to create a fundamental shift in the dynamics of Kurdish regional politics. However, this merging is not set in stone—this election cycle, a new opposition party called the New Generation secured four seats in national elections. The three opposition parties currently hold no relations with the New Generation, claiming this group was “created” by KDP and PUK politicians in order to split the opposition, and it is unclear if this lack of trust will dissipate or ossify in the future.

Nevertheless, the KIU and KIG are exposing the benefits of a political strategy that has sidelined certain features of their political ideology in order to become more effective actors in Iraqi Kurdistan's opposition movement. It is worth paying special attention to their election campaign as political observers begin to analyze the upcoming results of elections for the KRG parliament. ❖



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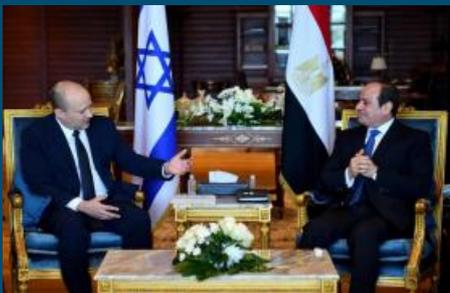


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