

Strength in Dialogue: A Case for the KRG Parliament

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Brief Analysis

While Kurdish parliamentary elections are scheduled for September 30, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) is facing a number of crises—political, economic, and more broad social issues. These range from inadequate services, a dysfunctional bureaucracy, political fragmentation, widespread distrust among political elites, strong regional intervention, and more. The impact of these crises is clearly visible on the people of Kurdistan, and may affect voter turnout and participation, as well as the more general trust in political institutions. If politicians do not focus on these issues and ensure a greater sense of transparency between the political process and the Kurdish people, the gap between citizens and the elite will continue to widen. Emphasizing the role of parliament and ensuring its strength—rather than shifting to a form of government that provides increasing powers to the president—is one key way of ensuring that the negative trends in Kurdish politics are reversed.

The institution of parliament lies at the center of the current crises in Kurdish political life. While voices from the general population often expect that there will be more power given to parliament, political elites are now attempting to ‘rationalize’ the institution in the French style, weakening the ability of the legislative body to govern. The battle over the future role of parliament in relation to the executive branch is one of many challenges facing the region, but the preservation of this institution is crucial in order to provide the KRG with the governing power adequate to face other challenges of governance. Parliament operates as an important space where different parties can come together and deal with their differences peacefully rather than relying on media wars or even force. Both tactics, when applied in the past, have torn the region apart and threaten to do so again. By allowing for a space where all sides of a debate are able to be heard on an equal footing, this negates a sense of disenfranchisement that pushes groups away from politics and into these more dangerous forms of conflict.

Face-to-face meetings, debate, and exchange are necessary for the health of Kurdish politics more than ever. While Kurds have long faced external challenges, the internal friction is now the most dangerous to Kurdish interests. More importantly, the lack of avenues to mediate political conflicts has meant that political arguments increasingly consume the time and energy of politicians who could be focusing on the many other challenges facing Kurdistan, such as inflation and unemployment. A prioritization of political conflict over the challenges facing the general population alienates voters, especially the youth. Demographically in the majority, the KRG’s youth now sees little chance to benefit from the region’s wealth, leading to deep frustration.

A common argument made in order to weaken the parliamentary system is that the KRG parliament is not optimally functional. Yet a well-functioning parliament does not appear spontaneously; it develops over time through practice and by learning through the mistakes of previous politicians. After all, the parliamentary structure in the Kurdistan region is only a quarter-century old. Instead of emphasizing its defects, the system should be understood in the context of its alternatives: revolutions and coups. These alternatives are complicated by the fact that in the Middle East, there is often a confusion between the two.

In contrast, the parliamentary system introduces the habit of stability and measured development of political goals; power and political prestige is less likely centered around a few individuals and is encouraged to be linked to parties' successes at legislating. Parliament introduces the habit of stability and accumulation; which Iranian scholar Homa Katouzian (https://www.jstor.org/stable/195668?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents) argues is one of the major factors of stability missing in the Middle East political systems, a reality that can apply to Iraqi Kurdistan as well. One of the major obstacles of the region as it stands today is the continued in-fighting between political groups—parliaments also encourage political compromises and alliances that can protect from tribal political methods, which favor smaller groups over the good of both individual and regional interests. If democracy is the desired political model, then there must be a functioning parliament.

Given the deep importance of the parliamentary system to an eventual positive outcome for Kurdish politics, there are a few steps that can be taken in order to ameliorate the current crisis. First, there must be a focus on enhancing the institution to make it the focal point of all regional issues, including challenges such as fragmented forces, the absence of a civil-military relationship, rule of law, good government and other challenges that are often discussed in unregulated frameworks outside of parliament. Second, parliament must be given greater latitude to function properly, allowing it the power of governance to develop legislative solutions for the unification of Peshmerga forces, the support of civil society, the enhancement of judiciary, and a systemization of the economy based on the institution's debates.

The Kurdish parliament occupies a unique position in the region; when running effectively, it can serve as an example for the process of democratization in the wider Middle East region, especially as it is the only sub-national parliament there. On the other hand, its weakening is also a sign of weakened democratization in the Middle East. If U.S. policy is to support a 'strong Kurdistan and strong Iraq,' then a functional representative parliament in Erbil is crucial.

In the past, when external powers dealt with strong executive governments and strongmen in the Middle East, the result was both fragile governments that repressed their citizens in response to their own weakness and alienated masses with little trust in their own governments. While the United States' presidential system may appear an appealing model to follow, the history and society of Iraq require a system—not an individual—in order to bring together different interests while avoiding fragmentation or repressive centralization. Through a robust, functional parliament, the government can work towards narrowing the gap between the people and governing elites—the sign of a truly strong government. ❖

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