

Kurdish Opposition Parties Lost in May 12th Election: Does Fraud Explain it?

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Brief Analysis

The Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) announced the [official results \(http://election.nrttv.com/\)](http://election.nrttv.com/) of the Iraqi parliamentary election on the early hours of May 19 after several delays. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the unofficial and the official results were mired by claims of [widespread electoral fraud \(http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/130520181\)](http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/130520181) in favor of the two ruling parties—the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). To the surprise of many, the PUK made a comeback compared to the last two elections by garnering eighteen parliamentary seats, while the KDP retained most of its seats by winning twenty-eight. Opposition groups such as the Change Movement (Gorran) fared more poorly, with Gorran winning only five seats, the New Generation Movement four seats, and only two seats each for the Coalition for Democracy and Justice (CDJ), Islamic Group (Komal) and Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU). Other smaller Kurdish parties failed to win any seats.

Following the official closing of polling stations and early preliminary results on May 12, the situation in Sulaymaniyah province, the bastion of the opposition groups as well as the PUK, became so tense that it [resulted in violence \(http://drawmedia.net/page_detail?smart-id=803\)](http://drawmedia.net/page_detail?smart-id=803). A PUK commander ordered his armed men to attack the main headquarters of Gorran, which split from the PUK in 2006. Gorran has contested the results of the election, claiming it would not accept the outcome because of inconsistency and fraud. Reportedly, armed PUK men also surrounded the headquarters of CDJ—led by former PUK Kurdish Prime Minister Bahram Salih—but Salih's effective communication skills with other PUK leaders thwarted the attack. Although there were no reports of injuries, this threat of violence is an indication that the ruling Kurdish parties are unlikely to quit power easily. They are willing to resort to force in order to ensure their grip on both political and economic power, which have provided them with strong patronage networks, and in turn a loyal electoral base.

In the past two elections, Gorran had capitalized on the [widespread dissatisfaction \(https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_54_Hassan_11.pdf\)](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CMEC_54_Hassan_11.pdf) with the KDP and PUK's hold on the Kurdistan Region, which was plagued with bad governance, corruption, failed institutions, and an economy that only rewarded those at the top while ignoring the rest of society. This economic model further came under stress when Baghdad cut

the Kurdish Regional Government's (KRG) budget in 2014, which meant that the KRG was unable to pay salaries on time and is still behind payments by several months.

Running on a reformist, anti-corruption platform, Gorran did very well in both 2013 KRG and 2014 Iraqi parliamentary elections. The new party won over many of the PUK's electoral constituents and garnered **nine seats** (<http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/5/govt2297.htm>) in the national parliamentary election, while the PUK received twenty-one. But Gorran's electoral win did not translate into real power within KRG institutions, since the PUK and KDP continued to control security, military, and other important institutions of the Kurdistan Region. In addition, Gorran's appointment of incompetent ministers in the KRG cabinet can also be blamed for the party's recent electoral shrink.

Consequently, this led to both the party's leaders and voters becoming frustrated by Gorran's inability to fulfil its previous electoral promises. In turn, there was pessimism and disappointment about the ability to make any meaningful change through the Kurdistan Region's electoral process.

The May 12 elections reflected such disappointment, where national Iraqi turnout reached only 44.5 percent, and with KRG provinces faring little better at a **48 percent** (http://drawmedia.net/page_detail?smart-id=737) turnout—with 50 percent in Sulaymaniyah, 43 percent in Erbil, and 51 percent in Duhok. This implies that 52 percent of the Kurdistan Region's eligible voters did not vote for any party. The question remains: who are these disaffected voters? One possible explanation is that this majority of voters has lost faith in the electoral process and all political parties, including Gorran, the Islamist parties, the newly formed CDJ, and the New Generation Movement. These voters appear to believe that there is no distinction between any of the political parties and that casting their votes would only enrich candidates while they themselves remain impoverished.

In contrast, the 48 percent of voters who took part in the democratic process seem to represent the loyal bases of all the Kurdish political parties. Like the American “Trump base,” they vote for their respective factions regardless of past failures or successes. In other words, ideology trumps policy. For example, the KDP has proven to have an extremely loyal base in its traditional stronghold of Erbil and Duhok. However, the low turnout in these two provinces, for example, compares to the over 90 percent turnout for the independence referendum just six months ago. These figures should alert the party that its loyal base, while still present, is shrinking in the face of failed policies, corruption, and bad governance. The PUK also appears to have a strong loyal base, retaining its six seats in Kirkuk and garnering eight seats in Sulaymaniyah compared to its **six seats** (<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/16052018>) in 2014.

In fact, this notion of a “loyal base” can be corroborated by the low voter turnout in opposition strongholds such as Sulaymaniyah, Halabja, and other areas during last year's independence referendum. Gorran challenged and stood against the referendum, calling on its supporters to not take part in the process. In the KDP's traditional strongholds of Duhok and Erbil, the turnout was over **90 percent** (<https://www.awene.com/2017/10/11/62828/>). But in Sulaymaniyah, Gorran's stronghold, the turnout was 50 percent, and in Halabja 55 percent. Again, these numbers indicate that the KDP and PUK's loyal bases in these areas voted for the referendum, while opposition constituents and others who had lost faith in the process stayed home.

Furthermore, in the 2014 provincial election, the regional voter turnout was **72.1 percent** (<http://www.orsam.org.tr/files/Raporlar/rapor190/190eng.pdf>)—with 70.6 percent in Erbil, 72 percent in Sulaymaniyah, and 73.9 percent in Duhok. With such a high turnout, Gorran emerged as the winner in the province of Sulaymaniyah, garnering **twelve out** (<http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/5/state8008.htm>) of thirty-two provincial seats, equal in number to the PUK's twelve seats. In addition, Gorran made inroads into KDP strongholds, winning **four** (<http://ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2014/5/state8008.htm>) out of thirty seats in Erbil and another seat in the pro-KDP province of Duhok.

However, Gorran's Iraqi parliamentary seats in Sulaymaniyah decreased from seven in 2014 to five in 2018 elections. Although there are legitimate concerns of widespread fraud and election rigging, supported by leaked documents from IHEC and statements made by IHEC member and Gorran official Said Kakae, the shrinking of Gorran's electoral base also appears to have resulted from losing electoral ground to newcomers such as the CDJ and the New Generation Movement in the KRG's already crowded and competitive electoral battlefield. The New Generation Movement led by Shaswar Abdulwahid won four seats—two each in Sulaymaniyah and Erbil—while CDJ also gained a seat in Sulaymaniyah and another in Erbil. Like Gorran, both CDJ and the New Generation Movement also ran on anti-KDP and PUK platforms, promising good governance and accountability. This indicates that six potential seats could have gone to Gorran in the absence of CDJ and the New Generation Movement, which would have brought Gorran's total seats to nine, the same number as in 2014.

Moreover, PUK's total parliamentary seats have actually decreased from twenty-one seats in 2014 to eighteen in 2018. The two Islamic parties, Komal and KIU, lost 50 percent of their seats compared to last election as well. Another reason for Gorran's bad performance could be the failure of the movement to fire up its base and inspire independents to vote for the party. The death of Gorran's charismatic leader Nawshirwan Mustafa in May 2017 also could also be a reason that the party did not attract more votes in 2018, since the current leaders of Gorran lack the characteristics of its late leader.

Democracy in the Kurdistan Region has been tainted with fraud both in the 2018 and past elections, where the ruling parties have used their power to intimidate dissidents and rig the elections in their favor. To bolster the image of the KRG internationally and to reinject faith in the electoral system as a way of peaceful conflict resolution, the fraud claims by Gorran and other parties warrant a thorough investigation. Having said that, the low turnout, fueled by pessimism that any meaningful change can occur, could also explain the loss of Gorran and other smaller Kurdish parties to the established parties like KDP and PUK, which enjoy better organization and a stronger patronage system. Lastly, the Kurdistan Region will hold a parliamentary election in September 2018. This month's failure to get 52 percent of the eligible voters out to vote should be a wake-up call for Gorran and other parties. The way forward to win the next election will depend on how much opposition parties can tap into this disappointed reserve of voters.

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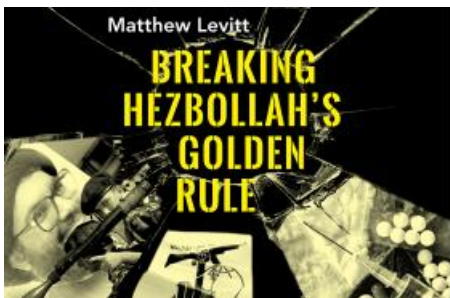
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