

# Gorran Leader Mustafa's Hard Choices

by [Kamal Chomani \(/experts/kamal-chomani\)](/experts/kamal-chomani)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Kamal Chomani \(/experts/kamal-chomani\)](/experts/kamal-chomani)

Kamal Chomani is a Kurdish journalist who focuses on Kurdish political issues. He hosts a regular column in The Kurdistan Tribune.



## Articles & Testimony

Five months ago Nawshirwan Mustafa, general organizer of the Change Movement (Gorran) party in Kurdistan, left Iraq for London under the pretext of receiving medical treatment for chronic back pain. His extended stay has puzzled not only his rivals, but also his supporters. Silence over Mustafa's condition, as well as Kurdistan's worsening situation, is generating significant discussion about his political future in the region. Optimists in Mustafa's camp are romanticizing a return in which he rallies the masses to protest and unseat the ruling Kurds. But this fantasy is far removed from Mustafa's pragmatic approach, and these supporters are naïve if they do not understand that Mustafa's path forward will entail navigating a dizzying array of difficult political decisions and impasses.

Since Saddam's regime was overthrown in 2003, the dual protagonists in KRG's narrative have been the booming economy and thriving democracy. Yet it has increasingly been revealed that the story of the KRG's rise was based more in fiction than fact. Instead, the KRG's successes were mainly in papering over the economy's low-growth with the billions of dollars it received from the Iraqi government and independent oil exports. Likewise, periodic crackdowns on freedom of speech undermined the myth of KRG's liberal democracy, revealing that the early 21st century was Kurdistan's gilded, rather than golden, age.

Now, the current KRG debt has surpassed 20 billion dollars, accounting for almost 200 percent of KRG's annual budget. Reforms ushered in by KRG's de facto president Masoud Barzani have done little to dent the quickly growing loans his government owes to creditors.

The KRG is not only bankrupted economically, but also politically and legally. The KDP paralyzed the parliament when on October 12, 2015, the speaker was denied entry to Erbil to convene a parliament session. Since then, the speaker and four Gorran ministers in the cabinet, including Peshmerga Minister Mustafa Sayd Qadir, have been banned from the capital. The current president has continued to govern the country past his elected term, which technically ended last August. These destabilizing development have pushed the Kurdish region towards its worst days in the past two decades. Parties have become divided over a myriad issues, the political gridlock continues, and the disagreeing sides are not close to reaching any substantial agreements.

This current situation has shocked and puzzled many in Iraqi Kurdistan. The choices facing Nawshirwan Mustafa are hard as well.

After April 2013, when Gorran and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) led by Masoud Barzani reached an agreement to form the KRG's eighth cabinet, Gorran's leader Nawshirwan Mustafa promised four years of stability and development. Although Nawshirwan preferred that Gorran remain an opposition party in the KRG, his colleagues pushed Gorran into the government because they feared that continued operation outside of the government would risk loss of support and members due to the party's financial difficulties. Entrance into the government was also seen as beneficial to Gorran members, since they would be able to enter and obtain jobs in the administration to strengthen Gorran's presence there. Meanwhile, the KDP showed its willingness to address Gorran's demands in the cabinet.

But when Gorran did enter the government, things did not go as Gorran and Nawshirwan had expected. Soon they were stopped from pushing any reforms.

Nawshirwan met Barzani a number of times in an attempt to convince him that the Kurdish region should take radical reform measures and that the Parliament should pass the Constitution. Nawshirwan focused on changing the Kurdish political system a parliamentary system, one which would by definition weaken the presidency and Barzani. Soon, Barzani and the KDP opposed the attempts of Gorran to shift the power structure of the government and the sides' latent conflict reemerged.

In 2015, Gorran, the PUK, Islamic Union and Islamic Group requested an amendment of the 2005 Presidency law, which Masoud Barzani and the KDP opposed. Nawshirwan realized that he had miscalculated Masoud Barzani's response to this push towards reforming the Presidency Law, as he had expected Barzani to step down. However, Nawshirwan had no other choice but to support the Speaker and his faction's struggle to amend the law, since at that point this position was also supported by many in the Kurdish media, reformists, the educated circles, PUK members, Islamists, and Gorran members. This support was key since Gorran had lost thousands of votes in the Iraqi general election after it reached an agreement with the KDP in April 2014. By contesting the presidency issue, it appeared that Gorran had regained the popular support it had lost to the PUK in 2013. Gorran and the Islamic Group stood as the only two parties that remained committed to their reforms plans and this seems to have bolstered their appeal during the recent turmoil.

This danger of voters switching to another opposition party will remain as long as Nawshirwan remains unsuccessful in officially forming an alliance of PUK, Gorran and Islamists. Yet he remains one of the strongest figures in the Kurdish opposition and the only option for leading a joint opposition group against the KDP: he is still the only figure with which the KDP is interested in cooperating.

Gorran's strength is also relative to other opposition groups' weaknesses. The PUK's internal conflicts have weakened their leadership, and the performance of PUK member and KRG Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani has embarrassed others in the party. Although many PUK members and outsiders alike support PUK leader Barham Salih, he is opposed by Talabani's family wing as well as the KDP. His inability to mount an effective leadership has been demonstrated by his failure to formulate an official platform outlining his ideas.

Moreover, the KDP's recent actions suggest potential future cooperation with Gorran. Surprisingly, the KDP's latest moves hint that the KDP has regretted denying the parliament Speaker's entrance into Erbil and that they have realized that there will be no resolution of the current political crisis without Gorran. Nazhat Hali, a KDP leadership member and head of KDP intelligence, has written several pieces in which he claimed that only Nawshirwan Mustafa and Masoud Barzani can end the deadlock and save Kurdistan.

KDP now has two choices with Gorran. The first is to normalize the situation by reactivating Parliament and its speaker, requesting that Gorran ministers return to the government, and extending Masoud Barzani's term outside the Parliament. This course is supported by the KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani.

The second option—supported by KDP National Security Chancellor Masrour Barzani—would be for the KDP to reach an agreement with the PUK and form a new cabinet, pushing Gorran back and out into an opposition party. Gorran would actually prefer the second option. A retreat from the center of policy making would allow them to focus their efforts on the current failures of the government, bringing to light the KDP shortcomings and, were they to join them, the PUK. In this scenario, Gorran might have a chance at becoming the top party in subsequent elections, allowing for more sweeping reforms.

But until the KDP decides how to manage Gorran, the future of Gorran remains uncertain and the challenges facing Nawshirwan Mustafa will force him to stay in London for several more months at least. Had the ISIS threat not existed, Nawshirwan Mustafa might have led a popular general strike, but Nawshirwan fears that political upheaval might leave Kurdistan fragmented like Syria, Afghanistan, or Yemen. In light of this, Mustafa may remain in London up until ISIS is removed from Mosul. Alternatively, Nawshirwan may return if Masoud Barzani engages Gorran in negotiations to extend Masoud's presidential term in return for political reforms, a process which has already appeared to have started.

Until a viable chance for reform arises, it is unlikely that Mustafa will risk his dream to form a united democratic Kurdistan by dividing Kurdistan. He is patient but behind this patience is a calculated preparation for a battle of radical civil disobedience. This non-violent struggle and anti-corruption campaign may be waged independently or as part of an opposition coalition, but it will likely start in time to bear fruits for the 2017 elections. In the meantime, Mustafa's supporters will have to await his return from London.

*Kamal Chomani is a Kurdish journalist who focuses on Kurdish political issues. He hosts a regular column in The Kurdistan Tribune. This article was originally published on [the Fikra website \(http://fikraforum.org/?p=8925&lang=en#.VvvoweIrLIU\)](http://fikraforum.org/?p=8925&lang=en#.VvvoweIrLIU). ❖*

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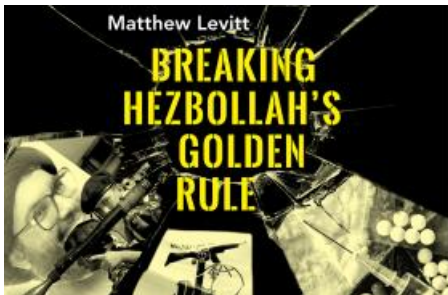
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