

Patriotic Union of Kurdistan: Revival or Mere Survival?

by [Ahmed Ali](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Ahmed Ali](#)

Ahmed Ali is a program officer at the National Endowment for Democracy.



Articles & Testimony

While all Iraqi political factions are competing strongly in lead up to the March 7 parliamentary elections, in Iraqi Kurdistan the internal competition is especially intense. In particular, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK, the more secular and less tribal of the two major Iraqi Kurdish political parties) stands to lose or regain much. The PUK suffered major losses in the July 2009 provincial elections in its main powerbase of Suleimaniyah at the hands of the newly-formed Gorran (Change) list. This has created the perception that the PUK has become a junior partner to the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) in the power-sharing arrangement between the two major factions in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). Among the many important implications of the upcoming elections will be a signal as to whether the PUK can bounce back or Gorran is here to stay as a new force in Iraqi politics.

KDP-PUK Relations

For now, the KDP seems to be sticking to its 2005 agreement to share power equitably with the PUK. The agreement dictates the rotation of senior positions (i.e. president, prime minister, and speaker of parliament) between the two parties. The KDP is behaving this way because it would prefer for the PUK to win back support from Gorran, which has been highly critical of the KDP as well as the PUK. There are also past animosities between Gorran leader Noshewan Mustafa and KDP leader (and President of Iraqi Kurdistan) Masoud Barzani.

The KDP has shown more subtly that it feels it has the upper hand with the PUK, however, via a series of appointments. For example, in the discussions leading up to the formation of a new KRG, there were rumors that Prime Minister Barham Salih (PUK) would not reappoint incumbent Minister of Natural Resources Ashti Hawrami, given his reported ties to controversial oil deals. But Hawrami, who is considered close to KDP leaders, retained his position despite a public outcry. The reappointment signified a blow to Salih's efforts to implement the PUK electoral slogan, "Renewal and Reform." The KDP is reportedly resistant to reappointing PUK Deputy Leader Kosrat Rasul Ali to the vice presidency of Iraqi Kurdistan.

The KDP also is flexing its muscles regarding appointments to the Iraqi central government. The deputy prime minister position recently vacated by Salih, for example, has typically gone to the PUK, but this time it went to Barzani's Baghdad-based representative, Rozh Nouri Shawes.

Ongoing PUK-Gorran Tensions

The fact that Gorran won 25 percent of Iraqi Kurdistan parliament seats was a wake-up call for the PUK. The group took steps to regain voters' trust in Suleimaniyah and to reenergize its political base, including a decision to expel Gorran members and to establish an internal integrity commission. PUK leader Jalal Talabani was the first to disclose his assets. Steps by the KRG, including the unprecedented disclosure of the budget and the announcement that 10,000 new KRG jobs will be created, also have helped the PUK.

Gorran says there is a less attractive side to the competition: continuous harassment and attacks on its members in PUK-controlled territory. Gorran alleges that the office of a one of its parliamentarians in the town of Koya was burned down, that salaries of teachers suspected of ties to Gorran have been reduced, and that security officers and peshmerga fighters sympathetic to Gorran have been punished.

Tensions mounted in January 2010 when Talabani strongly criticized Noshewan Mustafa during the PUK plenum, drawing a strong response from Mustafa in his newspaper Rozhnama. The media war only stopped when President Barzani intervened, saying that "we will never allow for the Kurds' blood to be shed by their Kurdish brothers again," a reference to the KDP-PUK civil war of the 1990s.

Kurdish Parties in the Upcoming Elections

The KDP is likely to do better than the PUK in the March 7 elections, which will strengthen its position as the senior partner in the KDP-PUK partnership. The PUK will face stiff competition from Gorran not only in Suleimaniyah but in Kirkuk, where Gorran has been establishing a presence (and where the PUK is now concentrating resources). In addition to Gorran, competition from the northern-based Islamist parties will produce a more diverse Kurdish representation in Baghdad. Once the national elections are over, all the parties will begin to regroup for the Iraqi Kurdistan provincial elections scheduled for October 2010.

The parliamentary seat allocation has guaranteed the Iraqi Kurdish parties at least 43 future members of parliament (out of a total of 325), which will make them sought-after government partners by either Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's State of Law alliance or its competitor, the Iraqi National Alliance. Either way, Iraqi Kurdish parties will lend their support only if they receive guarantees on the issues of oil revenue, effective power-sharing mechanisms, Kirkuk, and the status of the peshmerga. Whatever the electoral results among Kurdish parties, they will likely continue to speak with one voice on Kirkuk or other disputed internal boundaries. Although the three parties' positions on these issues differ a bit -- Gorran has a more hard-line stance than the other two -- no Kurdish party wants to be the one that surrendered an inch of "Kurdistani" land.

Ahmed Ali is a Marcia Robbins-Wilf research associate at The Washington Institute, focusing on the political dynamics of Iraq. ❖

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