



# Analysis: Looking Back on the 2018 Kurdish Elections

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March 2019



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# Analysis: Looking Back on the 2018 Kurdish Elections

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## Introduction

In the Kurdistan region of Iraq, citizens headed to the polls last September 30, 2018, to vote in the first parliamentary elections in five years.<sup>5</sup> The 2018 electoral process, tainted by voter discontent, historically low turnout and allegations of electoral fraud, are a window to understand the ongoing citizen disillusionment and political impasse that characterize Kurdish politics today. Attempts to form the next Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) following these elections have stalled, due to a political deadlock between the two ruling parties and the ongoing fragmentation of the opposition front. New alliances between the opposition and the ruling elite continue to splinter the reform agenda of opposition and “protest” parties and further frustrate a citizenry disillusioned with the status quo.

Indeed, the elections occurred at a moment of political turmoil in Iraqi Kurdistan. The controversial September 2017 Kurdish referendum for independence led to the sudden loss of control over Kirkuk and the rest of the disputed territories. On election day, salaries of employees in the KRG had not been paid in full for nearly three years. Near daily anti-establishment protests erupted in Sulaimani between 2015 and 2017. Mass protests occurred in Erbil and Dohuk in March 2018, and were violently suppressed by security forces.<sup>6</sup>

This policy memo analyzes the 2018 Kurdish electoral process, from the pre-election campaign strategies and slogans to the post-election allegations of voter fraud, to better understand the Kurdish body politic today. The ongoing fragmentation of political blocs, compounded by increasing citizen disengagement and voter apathy, threaten the credibility of the Kurdish electoral process and the formation of a unified KRG.

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<sup>5</sup> A total of 773 candidates from 23 different political blocs vied for 111 seats.

<sup>6</sup> Raya Jalabi, “Three people killed as protests turn violent again in Iraqi Kurdistan,” *Reuters*, December 9, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-iraq-kurds-protests/three-people-killed-as-protests-turn-violent-again-in-iraqi-kurdistan-idUSKBN1ED1W1>. See also:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/02/28/kurdistan-region-iraq-protesters-journalists-detained>.

## Campaign Strategies & Slogans

The two traditional ruling parties relied on rhetoric promising jobs and services in order to mobilize their electorate, in effect co-opting the discourse employed by opposition or “protest” parties in the past. The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan’s (PUK) campaign rhetoric focused on restoring economic security to Kurds under the slogan of “For Stability, Job Opportunities, and Service.” The leader of the PUK list, KRG Deputy Prime Minister Qubad Talabani, promised to build more factories and reinstate full salaries.<sup>7</sup> The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) also focused on economic stability and job creation in their campaign messaging, while also relying on the ethno-nationalist rhetoric that has long solidified their base. The party’s main slogans included “Building a stronger Kurdistan” and “For more benefits for Kurdistan vote for [KDP].” Barzani’s party also reasserted the aims of the KDP-led independence referendum of September 2017.

Opposition parties attacked the KDP-PUK duopoly. Gorran, or the Change Movement, mixed calls for reform with attacks on the two ruling parties. Gorran’s main slogan was “Towards Justice and Welfare in the Kurdistan Region.”<sup>8</sup> New Generation, formed in July 2017 by Sulaimani businessman Shaswar Abdulwahid, continued to court anti-establishment voters. The party has positioned itself to appeal to an electorate seen as disillusioned with the status quo by employing the slogans of “Just try us for once” and “Yes to a new life.” New Generation directly attacked the failures of the KDP-PUK duopoly, “If you vote for KDP and PUK it means you’re voting for your budget to be cut.” The Coalition for Democracy and Justice (CDJ), launched by now President Barham Salih in 2017, also adopted a discourse of reform throughout the campaign season. The CDJ decision not to participate in elections served to further disappoint supporters looking for a way out of the duopolistic system.

The Islamist parties likewise spoke in the language of reform and anti-establishment sentiment. Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) ran in the 2018 elections alongside the Islamic Movement under a unified list called “Towards Reform.” The party attacked the ruling establishment for alleged corruption and bad governance. The Kurdistan Islamic Group (KIG), known as Komal, is an Islamist and opposition party that campaigned on the main slogan of “We will struggle in order to bring a better life to you.” The party relies less on religious slogans than KIU, and like other opposition parties, uses rhetoric that levies culpability at the two ruling parties for corruption, economic mismanagement, and loss of Kurdish rights. Soran Omer, head of Komal’s list, said that people are “fed up with empty promises” made by the PUK and KDP for 27 years.

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<sup>7</sup> “An important message from Qubad Talabani: We’ll end saving your salary and we’ll return what has already been saved,” *Slemani News Network*, September 16, 2018, <http://snnc.co/news.aspx?id=32734&mapid=1>; “Qubad Talabani reduces his pledge of 50k jobs creation to 40k,” *Rudaw*, September 25, 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/NewsDetails.aspx?PageID=403037>. See also: <https://www.facebook.com/qubadtalabaniofficial/videos/236009777260382/>.

<sup>8</sup> See Gorran’s official media website: <https://www.knnc.net/en/>.

## Results

KRG parliamentary election results were nothing exceptional in terms of the overall ranking of winners and losers. The KDP retained its first place position, and the PUK regained the second from Gorran. While the electoral dominance of the KDP and PUK was expected, that the two parties retained power after so much economic, political and security turmoil and failure was remarkable.

Gorran dropped a position to become the party with the third highest number of seats in Parliament, its lowest faring in KRG election history. Gorran's low numbers perhaps explain in part the party's gradual change in its position vis-a-vis the KDP in the post-election period from one of rivalry to endorsement.<sup>9</sup> New Generation came in fourth, followed by Komal, and then the other Islamist parties and other smaller "protest" parties and coalitions.<sup>10</sup> However, this was not business as usual. Overall voter turnout was very low, and the once promising opposition parties appeared entirely deflated, losing 275,3741 votes and 7 seats compared to 2013. The graphic below shows the distribution of votes and seats by party in 2018 compared to 2013.

Table 2: Political Party Gains and Losses

<i>Parties</i>	<i>2013 Votes</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>2018 Votes</i>	<i>Seats</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Difference</i>
KDP	743,984	38	37.79 %	686,070	45	44.7%	+7
PUK	350,500	18	17.80 %	319,912	21	20.9%	+3
Gorran	476,736	24	24.21 %	186,903	12	12.2%	-12
NG	-	-	-	127,115	8	8.3%	-
KIU*	186,741	10	9.49%	79,434	5	5.2%	-5
KIG	118,399	6	16%	109,494	7	7.1%	+1
Sardam	-	-	-	15,581	1	1%	-
Azadi	12,392	1	0.6%	8,063	1	0.53%	0

\*KIU ran in a coalition with KIM known as "Towards Reform" in the 2018 elections.

<sup>9</sup> See the Conclusion for more information on government formation.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.



Gorran's losses—half the seats it won in 2013 from 24 or to 1—was due to a variety of dynamics. Many Kurds felt that the party failed to implement its reform agenda. In addition, following the death of its founder Nawshirwan Mustafa in 2017, the party's leadership has been divided and many supporters returned to the PUK.<sup>11</sup> Accusations of accepting payments from the PUK<sup>12</sup> also tainted Gorran's reform reputation.<sup>13</sup> Amidst these struggles, Gorran did not generate a new platform to maintain and rekindle its voter base. Similarly, KIU lost half of the 10 seats it won in the 2013 elections for a variety of reasons, including support for the KDP-led independence referendum and a moderate stance towards the ruling party, which affected the voting patterns of KIU's base. The only party to maintain its base and increase its seats other than KDP was Komal, the oppositionist Islamist group, largely due to its core religious voter base. The party's refusal to accept the KDP-led call to postpone the elections solidified support among Kurds calling for reform. New Generation, which ran for the first time in the KRG parliamentary elections in 2018, won eight seats, which they initially contested. The party's stature in the 2018 elections serves to further divide and fragment the opposition front.

The KDP maintained its dominance in its strongholds of Erbil and Dohuk, and the PUK's nominal gain of 3 seats reasserted and maintained their hold on power as the KRG's second largest party. The relative wins of the KDP and PUK, amidst a backdrop of the massive economic downturn, a war against ISIS, and political failures, indicate a remarkable level of support for the two ruling parties. While the voter turnout in the elections was at a historic low, as the section below explains, low turnout benefits the traditional parties and their patronage networks. The ruling KDP and PUK parties control the security and military apparatuses and are the custodians of the region's wealth, which affords them the means to heavily influence the outcome of elections. As such, the two parties' large patronage-based networks, where votes are tied to financial handouts and jobs, usually dominate in elections.

## Turnout

Low voter turnout became a major storyline in the days and weeks following the election. Out of 3.08 million eligible voters,<sup>14</sup> an estimated 1.78 million people, or 58%, turned out at the polls,<sup>15</sup> a sharp decline from 74% in 2013,<sup>16</sup> and the lowest in the KRG's history. The May federal elections also saw low voter turnout, as 30% less voters showed up at the polls in Erbil, Dohuk and Sulaimani.<sup>17</sup> Table 3

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<sup>11</sup> Interviews conducted by the author and research assistants.

<sup>12</sup> "A journalist: Change Movement has received sums of \$250k from the PUK on monthly basis," *Snur Media*, June 28, 2018,

[http://www.snurmedia.com/all-details.aspx?jimare=36181&fb\\_comment\\_id=1874975572583848\\_1875148729233199](http://www.snurmedia.com/all-details.aspx?jimare=36181&fb_comment_id=1874975572583848_1875148729233199).

<sup>13</sup> Fazel Hawramy, "Iraqi Kurdistan's Movement for Change faces rebellion from within," *Al-Monitor*, July 9, 2018, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2018/07/change-movement-nawshirwan-mustafa-kurdistan-iraq.html#ixzz5UaALHTzU>.

<sup>14</sup> Kurdistan High Electoral Commission, see [http://www.khec.krd/dreje\\_amarakan.aspx?jimare=19&type=9/](http://www.khec.krd/dreje_amarakan.aspx?jimare=19&type=9/).

<sup>15</sup> Karwan Faidhi Dri, "KRG election: Why such a low turnout?" *Rudaw English*, October 3, 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/analysis/03102018>

<sup>16</sup> See 2013 voter turnout results from the KRG, available at: <http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=010000&l=12&a=49185>.

<sup>17</sup> "The 2018 Iraqi Federal Elections: A Population in Transition?" Institute of Regional and International Studies, July 2018, [http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89698/7/MEC\\_Iraqi-elections\\_Report\\_2018.pdf](http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/89698/7/MEC_Iraqi-elections_Report_2018.pdf).

shows the gains and losses for voter turnout between the 2013 and 2018 KRG elections respectively.

Table 3: Voter Turnout 2013 vs. 2018<sup>18</sup>

<i>Province</i>	<i>2013 Turnout Percentage</i>	<i>2018 Turnout Percentage</i>	<i>Difference</i>
Sulaimani	73%	43%	-30%
Erbil	71.7%	58.57%	-13.13%
Dohuk	76%	61 -64%	-12 to 15%
Halabja*	--	61%	--
Total (KRG-wide)	74%	58%	-16%

\*Halabja was designated an official province in January 2015.

Some party officials and election observers speculate that turnout was even lower than reported, given the stark contrast in the numbers released before noon and those released after the polls closed at 6 p.m. local time. According to the Kurdistan High Electoral Commission (KHEC), turnout in each province by noon was recorded as 9% in Sulaimani, 16% in Erbil, 22% in Duhok and 23% in Halabja. Journalists from international media outlets also noted low turnout numbers at various polling stations before noon.

The low voter turnout is in part explained by a disillusionment in the Kurdish population with both the status quo and opposition or reformist parties. Interviews of voters across the political parties and provinces revealed shared themes of discontent. A male voter, 25, from Sulaimani said “I am not excited by any of these parties. I voted in all four elections for four different parties and I won’t vote this time.”<sup>19</sup> A female voter, 25, in Erbil said she did not vote because “you don’t need to go, they fill [the ballot] out for you” in reference to allegations that the KDP and PUK would commit fraud.<sup>20</sup> In Dohuk, a male voter, 27, expressed a similar sentiment, stating “I did not vote because they might vote for me,” referring to widespread suspicions among Kurdish voters that votes are rigged by the ruling elite.<sup>21</sup> The opposition, once viewed as an alternative to the KDP-PUK duopoly, is widely perceived as on the decline. In Dohuk, a male voter, 46, said, “I did not vote in this election because I do not see a political party that deserves my vote. Gorran movement, the strongest opposition party, after the death of Nashirwan, is going through the leadership crisis, internal divisions, and has failed in the government to implement their electoral program in the past five years.”<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Turnout results taken from <http://cabinet.gov.krd/a/d.aspx?s=010000&l=12&a=49185>; Osamah Golpy, “Halabja: City of Peace becomes Kurdistan’s fourth province,” *Rudaw English*, February 2, 2015, <http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/08022015>.

<sup>19</sup> Interview in Sulaimani on September 30, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Interview in Erbil on September 27, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Interview in Dohuk on October 8, 2018.

<sup>22</sup> Interview in Dohuk on October 8, 2018.

# Allegations of Fraud

Allegations of fraud have plagued Kurdish and Iraqi elections since 2003, but there were faint hopes that this election might be different due to a last minute ruling by KHEC. On the evening of September 29, KHEC ruled that voters were required to present two forms of identification in order to vote: an identity card known as taskara, accompanied by proof of Iraqi citizenship, either through an Iraqi passport or Iraqi national ID.<sup>23</sup> In past elections, both parties have been accused of forging tens of thousands of identity cards to enable people to vote two to three times.<sup>24</sup> While the KHEC move appeared to mitigate the likelihood of large-scale voter fraud, it also highlighted intra-party tensions. The decision drew complaints from the PUK that the rules of the game cannot be changed in the last inning. Some alleged that the KDP had pushed for the ruling knowing it would limit breathing room for the PUK to close the gap between the two parties. Other reports state that Gorran led the calls amidst rumors that the PUK had plans for large-scale fraud on election day. In a statement, Gorran accused the PUK of “taking measures that are a serious threat to the credibility of the parliamentary election.”<sup>25</sup>

The election proved to be much like the previous ones, as swirling rumors and accusations of fraud intensified with each passing hour. On the day of the elections, reports alleged that the PUK and security forces attacked polling stations in the Sulaimani province,<sup>26</sup> and that the KDP and PUK attacked and arrested each other’s election observers.<sup>27</sup> East of Erbil, a special armed force in Qasre reportedly attacked Gorran candidate Karookh Osman and injured him while he voted. Journalists from international media outlets also reported acts of violence at various polling stations in the Sulaimani province.<sup>28</sup> Parties levied allegations at one another over electoral fraud. A PUK official accused over 230,000 people in KDP controlled areas as having voted with just the Iraqi ID card, thus not meeting KHEC’s requirements. A New Generation official accused the PUK and KDP of forging 150,000 and 200,000 Kurdish ID cards respectively.<sup>29</sup> A Gorran official later accused the KDP specifically of carrying out “systematic fraud” by preparing in advance which polling stations would be manipulated. Gorran also accused KHEC of keeping polls open three hours past the allotted time.<sup>30</sup> After the polls closed, several political parties issued statements rejecting the votes.

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<sup>23</sup> Tweet from the Kurdistan High Electoral Commission, see:

<https://twitter.com/KHECmedia/status/1046403514400993280>.

<sup>24</sup> “PUK claim Sulaimani victory, Gorran, CDJ demand manual recount,” *Rudaw English*, May 12, 2018,

<http://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/120520185>.

<sup>25</sup> Ahmed Aboulenein, Raya Jalabi, “Main Iraqi Kurdish party says it may reject regional election result,” *Reuters*, September 30, 2018,

<https://in.reuters.com/article/iraq-kurds/kurdish-puk-party-says-it-will-not-recognise-poll-result-idINKCN1MA04G>.

<sup>26</sup> “Footage shows moment polling station in Sulaimani is attacked,” *NRT English*, October 2, 2018,

<http://www.nrttv.com/En/News.aspx?id=5705&MapID=1>.

<sup>27</sup> “New Generation to boycott Kurdistan Parliament over fraudulent election results,” *NRT English*, October 1, 2018,

<http://www.nrttv.com/En/News.aspx?id=5672&MapID=1>; IRIS interview with Gorran official on October 7, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Tweet from journalist Raya Jalabi, see <https://twitter.com/rayajalabi/status/1046363018173591552>.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with New Generation official on October 7, 2018.

<sup>30</sup> IRIS interview with Gorran official on October 7, 2018.



Days after the elections, KHEC released preliminary results but would not release the official results until suspected rigged ballot boxes were investigated. After results were officially announced on Oct. 21, Gorran, KIU and Komal rejected the results and deemed them illegal.<sup>31</sup> New Generation and KIU also formally rejected the results, while the PUK declared support for the results. Most voters interviewed for this report, regardless of political party, indicated an overall sense of distrust in the election day process and the resulting vote counts.

## Conclusion

The 2018 KRG election reflects a population and a political establishment at a crossroads. There has undoubtedly been a shift in Kurdish popular sentiment—evidenced by the lowest voter turnout in KRG election history. Kurds are disillusioned with both the ruling elite as well as with the opposition and the newly formed “protest parties.” The core constituencies of the KDP and PUK are shrinking due to governance failures near and far and the growth of the opposition front, with the two parties losing between 25 to 30% of their support since 2013. Fewer citizens voted for opposition parties than in previous elections, and new parties established in 2017 did not receive enough votes to enable them to make real political impact. Meanwhile, the opposition front has lost support and become fragmented, raising questions about the strategy and direction of the reform movement and the “protest parties” moving forward. While more Kurds are losing trust and faith with the traditional ruling parties due to allegations of corruption and economic mismanagement, their disillusionment with the duopoly does not necessarily manifest into votes for opposition or protest parties.

This political unrest has persisted throughout the post-election period as political parties wrestle to form a government. Unlike any other formation of government in KRG history, the struggles of government formation following the September 2018 elections are unprecedented. The KDP-PUK alliance has disintegrated, due largely to the events of October 16, 2017, with the emergence of a trend toward breaking up the region into two administrations. Gorran’s endorsement of the KDP and the KDP’s subsequent co-optation of the party against the will and interests of the PUK further fragment the Kurdish body politic in Iraq as well as the opposition front. The formation of such new alliances and the disintegration of existing ones threaten the formation of a unified KRG. As a result, many citizens are left even more frustrated and disillusioned with the Kurdish electoral process and the extent to which change can be brought in the Kurdistan region through elections. In the eyes of many voters, elections have become tools to reinforce the status quo of patronage, intimidation, and corruption. As Iraq and the KRG move on from the ISIS period towards post-conflict reconstruction and reform, restoring the legitimacy of the electoral process should be at the forefront of a unified KRG.

*Acknowledgement: The author thanks Mohammed Nasib, Hawar Shefaq Ahmed, and Mohammed Fatih for their contributions to the research.*

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<sup>31</sup> “Four election commissioners reject the result of the election,” *Rudaw*, October 12, 2018, <http://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/211020182>. See also: <http://www.nrttv.com/AR/Default.aspx>.