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Viability of political opposition parties:

A critical analysis of the role and status of opposition parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq



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Abstract

This paper addresses the question of the viability of opposition political parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Faced with the permanent grip on power exerted by the two dominant parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), what role do opposition political parties play. Moreover, what obstacles hinder their ability to carry out their roles effectively. Drawing on the literature and data from interviews with key players, the paper examines the options available to opposition parties and the key weaknesses that undermine their effectiveness in Kurdistan. It finds that most opposition parties in Kurdistan suffer from fragmentation, are built around individual personalities, and face internal conflicts, as well as a lack of a strong mass base. The paper concludes that opposition parties are unable to capitalize on public resentment and, at present, are incapable of posing any significant threat to the ruling duopoly of the PUK and KDP. Furthermore, they are unable to fundamentally challenge the current political system. As a result, voters who have long harbored grievances against the PUK and KDP are left with limited choices. They have little to gain but much to lose by supporting opposition parties.

Introduction

This paper addresses the question of the viability of opposition political parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Faced with the permanent grip on power exerted by the two dominant parties - the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – what is the role of the opposition political parties. And what obstacles stand in the way of them carrying out their roles.

It is widely acknowledged that the existence of opposition parties is a crucial element of democracy. Shapiro states that democracy is an ideology of opposition as much as it is one of government[1]. Dahl regards opposition parties as essential to any democratic system[2]. Schumpeter defines democracy as a system for arriving at political decisions whereby individuals have the power to decide which political party wins the people's vote[3]. A society without opposition parties leaves people without a choice of governing party. A second role for opposition parties in democracies is that of holding the incumbent government to account by scrutinizing its actions. This role requires access to information on the government's performance. However, while obtaining information to facilitate the scrutinizing of the incumbent government's actions is an important task of opposition parties, one could argue that the media, social groups, NGOs and independent judiciary system may monitor the government more effectively than opposition parties. One aspect of the scrutinizing role that can only be performed by opposition political parties is the examination of proposed legislation[4].

This analysis applies to democratic systems that are traditionally called two-party systems, with one party in government and the other party outside the government. But how about forms of democracy that have more than two parties? Here scholars argue that opposition parties should have one more dimension – cohesiveness. Cohesiveness means opposition political parties should create a coalition or a distinct bloc against the government[5]. However, they should not reject the entire political system and create a threat to the stability of democracy.

However, what is the role of opposition political parties in an authoritarian regime? The central question addressed in this paper is what is the role of opposition parties in a country where the two main parties permanently share power together? This is the situation of the seven opposition parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, who face the perpetual dominance of the two major parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – which together hold all executive and legislative power. In the November 2024 general election for 95 seats in the Kurdistan Regional Parliament, the KDP and the PUK won 62 seats between them, while the other seven parties won a total of 33 seats between them.

Given the fact that the KDP and the PUK collaborate closely in distributing political posts exclusively to each other, and form a united front in Parliament, the opposition parties have no hope of ever forming a government by themselves. So, should they coalesce with each other to challenge the policies put forward by the two dominant parties? Or should they keep their separate identities and chart independent courses, which might include aligning with the dominant parties to obtain favours from them?

Two dominant parties sharing political power between them

The KDP was founded in 1946 in Mahabad in Iranian Kurdistan. led by the Barzani family. It claims to combine ‘democratic values and social justice to form a system whereby everyone in Kurdistan can live on an equal basis with great emphasis given to rights of individuals and freedom of expression’. Elements of its ideology include lawfulness, secularism, Kurdish nationalism, a ‘social-oriented’ economy, and civil solidarity. The PUK was established in 1975. It traces its political heritage to Sulaymaniyah and is currently under the leadership of Bafel Talabani. The PUK describes its goals as self-determination, human rights, democracy, and peace for the Kurdish people of Kurdistan and Iraq.

Both the KDP and the PUK have great influence over the economy, media, public administration, as well as private sector. Beside of these, thousands of security forces such as peshmerga force, Komando, Ziravani are under their controls. Together, the KDP and PUK control the top positions in the cabinet of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Kurdistan parliament. They also distribute jobs and favors in the ministries and regional government departments and impact on the appointment of judges, their power being divided into two exclusive geographic zones. Approximately two-thirds of Peshmerga soldiers are members of party-funded groups under the leadership of partisan officers. The two parties hold complete authority over the internal security forces. They control the oil and gas sector, have access to governmental resources, and have close relationships with the corporate community. Overall, this gives the KDP and the PUK a significant institutional edge over the opposition parties, enabling them to monopolize a great deal of the region’s authority and resources. However, despite these great influences and control, but they are deeply lacking of social and political truth by substantial population, according to Arab Barometer Survey 63% of respondents from the region “No truth at all” in the Kurdistan regional government KRG[6]. Over the past decades in Kurdistan there were mass demonstrations, public anger, and even violence against both parties under the slogans “you are both corrupt, both thieves”[7].

1. New Generation Movement (NGM)

The New Generation Movement (NGM) was founded by young Kurdish businessman Shaswar Abdulwahid, shortly after he led the “No for Now” campaign against the KRI independence referendum in Sept 2017. The campaign challenged the push for Kurdish independence at the time, citing poor timing. As a popular social movement, the NGM has gradually emerged as the main alternative to the KRI’s two-party political order, with its questionable standards of democracy and weak rule of law. The New Generation Movement, established in 2017, has participated only in the 2018 election, when it obtained 8 seats. Bearing in mind that the NGM participated in two Iraqi general elections at the level of Iraqi federal parliament in 2018 the NGM won 4 seats, while in the 2021 the Iraqi general election, it made gains of securing 9 seats, which was very shocking for the big parties in the region.

NGM under the leadership of Shaswar Abdul Wahid is a new movement in the region and has significant potential to drive change and development, contributing to a more prosperous and stable future for the region. However, although there is a desire for change, many other political parties, either in power or opposition groups, accused NGM of being a “populist-oriented movement and the party works to attract young, deprived people”[8]. Many young voters feel that the NGM’s current candidates do not adequately represent their interests or values. This is partly because many of the party’s previous MPs did not have experience of implementing its policies in previous years. It is also because some of its MPs left the party while in the parliament, some of whom transferred their affiliations to the PUK or PDK. These behaviors by NGM’s MPs have led to frustration and disengagement among voters, especially young voters, some observers expected of decrease in the party’s likely voter turnout in the election in 2024 in the region. Unexpectedly, NGM obtained 15 seats in the October 2024 election in the Kurdistan parliament. According to one commentator Shaswar learnt from the past now he does not want to give the party’s MPs much freedom of movement[9].

2. Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU)

The Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) is another Islamic party in the Kurdistan that was founded on February 6, 1994. In its first General Conference, Salahaddin Mohammed was elected as the Secretary General of the party. Later, in the second, the third, and the fourth conferences he was also elected as the Secretary General. Subsequently succeeded by Mohammed Faraj, in 2016 Salahaddin was again elected Secretary-General. The Kurdistan Islamic Union in 2013 won 10 seats. In 2018, its seats decreased to 5. In this election, 2024 KIU won 7 seats.

3. Helwest Movement (HM) (or Attitude)

A new faction rose in the election under the name of Helwest -Attitude- under the leadership of Ali Hama Salih, former Gorran MP- which consists of many former members of parliament of the Change movement and other parties. They do not have a strong media or resources to show themselves to be a better alternative for the current political situation. Many people could ask why they did not change anything while they were in the parliament. Although the Halwest has not quite prepared for the Oct election 2024 with no clear vision for the current situation in the region, the party got 4 seats in the parliament.

4. Kurdistan Justice Group (KJG)

The Kurdistan Justice Group was established in 2001 by Ali Bapir, who was a long-time commander of the Islamic Movement in Kurdistan (IMK) – an umbrella group of Islamic political forces formed in 1987. It sought territorial control of parts of the Kurdistan Region and the implementation of Islamic law (Sharia). Ali Bapir has been leader of the Justice Group party since its inception, voted in with no rivals. The Justice Party in 2013 won 6 seats, while in 2018, won 7 seats. In the Oct 2024 election Justice Group only got 3 seats in parliament. This result indicated that the Justice Group has fewer voters than in years.

5. People's Front (PF) (or Barai Gal)

The Barai Gal (People's Front) is a breakaway party from the PUK and was formed in January 2024 by Lahur Sheikh Jangi, a prominent figure in Kurdish politics who played a leading role in the PUK but was subsequently expelled. After the founder and leader of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, Jalal Talabani, died in 2017, a struggle for the leadership of the party ignited between Jalal's son Bafel Talabani and Lahur Sheikh Jangi. At the PUK's fourth congress in December 2019, Lahur Sheikh Jangi received the most votes for the General Leadership Council. They proclaimed him and Bafel Talabani as co-presidents in a compromise agreement. However, in 2021, Bafel Talabani was declared the sole leader of the party, and in November 2022, Lahur Sheikh Jangi was expelled from the PUK along with a few others, and Bafel Talabani took full control over the party. In February 2023, the judicial authority on Iraqi elections in Baghdad declared Bafel Talabani the sole leader of the PUK. After that, Lahur Sheikh Jangi founded his own party, the Barai Gala "People's Front" joined by several former PUK members. His new party received its license from Iraq's Interior Ministry on 17 January 2024. The People's Front strategy is to connect with younger voters and promote a more progressive agenda, addressing issues like economic development and good governance. As the 2024 election day approaches, Lahur's role in campaign strategy has emphasised the party's united front and its commitment to human rights and civil liberties. The geographical focus of Lahur is Sulaymaniyah. Many political analysts believed this election could be the last chance for Lahur to survive in the political landscape. But the prospects for the People's Front were weaker than many expected.

The People's Front got only 2 seats in the Oct 2024 Kurdistan parliament because many political leaders and supporters who were previously close to Lahur have remained in the PUK party to avoid losing their privileges, and they are not likely to vote for the People's Front.

7. Gorran Movement (GM) or (Change Movement)

The Gorran Movement, also known as the Change Movement, emerged in 2009 as a reformist political party in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. It was founded by Nawshirwan Mustafa as a response to widespread dissatisfaction with the KDP and PUK's long-standing political dominance. Gorran stands for political reform, transparency, and anti-corruption measures. With regard to the Gorran Movement's strategy, as a reformist party, Gorran initially attracted support by promising significant changes. Its platform focuses on addressing the economic challenges facing the region and improving public services. Gorran has successfully attracted younger voters by emphasizing issues like education, job creation, and democratic participation – a strategy that paid off in the 2009 election when it gained 25 out of 111 seats, which was an astonishing result against the two main dominant parties. Gorran has positioned itself as a viable alternative to the traditional parties, often criticizing the established political elite for their failure to address the needs of the populace. Goran was a “quality shift in the Kurdish politics”[10]. Goran emerged as a strong opposition party. A commentator argues that Goran has “Charismatic leader, money and media- KNN TV”[11], which all were important elements for building a strong opposition party.

However, the party's ability to maintain its support has declined in recent years, as indicated in its election result in 2018 when its seats dropped from 25 to 12. Some observers believe that its reformist stance and appeal to younger voters make it still a significant player in Kurdish politics, but it faces four challenges that have contributed to its weakened position in recent years. First, like other political parties, Gorran has experienced factionalism and disagreements among its leadership and members, which has diluted its effectiveness and public image. Second, the economic difficulties in the region, including unemployment, have strained public trust in all political parties, including Gorran. Third, Gorran has sometimes found itself in coalitions that dilute its message or force compromises that do not align with its reformist agenda, leading to criticism from its base. Fourth, the dominance of the KDP and PUK in media narratives has overshadowed Gorran's initiatives and messages, making it harder for the party to reach potential voters. These factors have made it difficult for Gorran to maintain its earlier momentum and influence within the Kurdistan Region's political arena, and clearly these factors together have had a serious impact on this recent election outcome. Goran seats has dropped drastically and they secured only one seat in the October election 2024.

The challenges facing the opposition political parties

The experience of opposition parties in the Kurdistan region started in 2009, when the Goran Movement established, compared with other countries in the region, it's a great step towards democratization. There is no true work on opposition parties in the region. Being as opposition in Kurdistan would not be dangerous but it difficult to exercise fully the right to have a role like opposition parties in democratic system. Their political life is under harassment, censorship, impressment, and even expulsion from public benefits. There are six specific challenges that they face.

1. Duopoly

In Kurdistan, in the early year of 1991 until 2009 the feature of political landscape was a duopoly or dominated by two main political parties. Both PUK and PDK parties took political power they both fought against the Ba'athist regime in Baghdad for half a century until 2003, the Saddam's regime was toppled by the US and coalition forces. Thus, both parties have a history of fighting and rebel group legitimacy and ideology in durable fought against the dictator regime. Therefore, both parties claimed that they represented the will of the people. Both parties dominated public administration and public resources, media and military forces and boundaries between parties and public structure remained blurred. The repressive role did have an impact on opposition parties. This situation prevailed in Kurdistan until 2009, when Goran Movement emerged as a strong opposition party with 25 seats in Kurdistan parliament. There were other political parties until 2009 but they were weaker to the extent that they did not make any challenges to both PUK and PDK in power.

2. Fragmentation

Fragmentation is a common feature of opposition political parties, and it can have a variety of effects. According to a study on the European integration process in ten Central and East European democracies, 'fragmented oppositions appear to diminish not only political competition, but may also undermine popular support for democracy'[12]. At the same time, opposition fragmentation can enhance accountability, as a study making use of a survey experiment run in Spain early in 2020 concludes[13].

Opposition parties in Kurdistan are highly fragmented, or even one commentator believed that "they are enemies of each other"[14]. Another interviewee argues that "we never reach an agreement before or after election"[15]. According to him, these fragmented parties have reinforced the power of incumbent parties in the government. According to a high-rank member of Gorran's party, the situation of opposition parties is "competition between each other rather than with other political parties in power"[16]. As noted by a former MP of Goran "ruling parties deliberately employ a "divide and rule" tactic to fragment and weaken the opposition parties"[17].

opposition parties was rather fragmented, sometimes political parties in power motivated this division. Before 2009, opposition parties were small, and even one interview believed that it's mostly an "intellectual activity" [18] but after 2009 the emergence of Goran Movement with 25 seats in parliament out of 111 had become an umbrella for other small opposition parties, and all the other opposition parties had become a strong opposition block in the parliament.

This fragmentation has become a feature of opposition parties, and it seems to appear in some forms of fragmentation. First, before the election, opposition parties were not reaching an agreement, according to a high-rank member from the Helwest -Attitude- Group, and high-rank member from the Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU) before election we proposed to all opposition parties to form a single list i.e., a coalition among all the opposition parties, but we have not reached an agreement because the New Generation Movement rejected being part of this coalition[19]. Second, parliamentary fragmentation, this appeared when opposition parties would not be able to make a strong block against two incumbent political parties (PUK and PDK) in power. Based on fieldwork information, many interviewees mentioned that New Generation Movement under the leadership of businessman Shaswar Abdul-Wahid set a pre-condition in which he asked that the coalition should be under my leadership[20]. A high rank member from Halwest -Attitude- Group explained that KIU also rejected becoming part of a single opposition list, and the Justice group would like to be part of this list if only KIU accepts being part of this broader opposition list[21]. As it becomes clear that the list of the attitude and People's Front is ready to make the opposition list. But other opposition groups have rejected being part of this coalition.

Intraparty division is also increasing the further fragmented opposition, as in the case of the Gorran Movement currently divided into two groups, and both claimed that they are legitimate representatives of what is called in Kurdish "Gorankhwazan" means who is seeking change in the current ruling parties in the government. An interviewee said that the major opposition parties before and after the election were most of the time wasting their time competing and fighting with each other, and they were busy in an intra-party power struggle[22]. Also, another interviewee argued that opposition parties engaged themselves with intra party conflicts that threatened their own survival rather than fighting corruption or becoming a true alternative to the incumbent government[23]. So far in the Kurdistan region, opposition parties are not successful in creating a strong coalition before or after parliamentary elections to stand against the incumbent parties in the government.

Arguably, this can be seen as a weakness of opposition parties in the region that hinders the influence of the opposition parties over the incumbent government. It can be argued that the only hope for the opposition parties to successfully challenge the current political set up is to form a coalition among opposition parties to stand like a block against the incumbent government.

According to high-rank member of the Helwest, coordination among opposition parties can take different forms, such as making a joint list, a joint statement, or a joint response towards a public concern, but now this joint coordination cannot be seen in the attitude of the opposition groups[24]. As noted by high-rank member from the KIU, since both parties in power see creating any coalition by the opposition parties as threaten their stronghold hold of power, both parties do their best to divide the opposition parties[25]. According to an anonymous interview, when he showed me sufficient evidence that one opposition group benefited from the hectares of public lands to be used for investment by a very prominent figure of the party, he strongly believed that could create an obstacle for the parties in power[26]. As an interviewee argues that “parties use trade-off versus not challenge”[27]. Therefore, parties in power use a variety of tools to captivate opposition groups.

3. Personalistic politics

Many opposition parties are established around individual personalities or charismatic leaders. According to one interviewee, Gorran could be the best example in this respect, established by Nawshirwan Mustaffa the former charismatic leader of the PUK party[28]. The leader of Mustaffa had a great impact on Gorran to the extent that the death of Mustaffa had a serious impact on the disruption of Gorran. Fieldwork data shows that democratization in KRI depends on the power of elites, whose involvement in the process of democracy and election is mainly tactical. Sometimes involvement in democracy is a response to internal contradiction and power struggle with a bigger group. In this respect, one interviewee argues that People’s Front- Barai Gal- under the leadership of Lahur and his separation from PUK party and the Attitude- Helwest- under the leadership of Ali Hama Salih his separation from Gorran, can be considered as an example of individual personalities factions[29]. Both parties can be seen as responses to internal contradictions, conflict, and power struggles within a larger group.

Currently, after the fragmentation of the Gorran Movement, personalistic opposition parties, depending on charismatic leadership, will no longer work within the context of KRI. But the most formulaic of opposition parties during 2018 are forms of personalistic opposition, and unlike the traditional parties’ lack of structure and party organizations as decision-making is highly centralized. Perhaps this kind of form of opposition parties will face another split whenever there is another contradiction or conflict among leaders. In this respect a high rank member of Gorran believed that after death of Mustaffa, the power was given to Omer Seed Ali. Saeed Ali’s approach was so different from Mustaffa in which his style was so personalistic and his vision was so important than the Gorran’s vision[30].

This could be a case for other opposition parties whom remained with less influence on the political landscape in the KRI. After the death of Mustaffa Charismatic, the seats and popularity of Gorran had declined to one seat in the Oct 2024 election and Gorran had been fragmented into two groups due to leadership problems. Due to the disintegration of the party, some left for good and got positions from the PUK and PDK parties and some created or recreated at least two other small organizations.

In another case, when political parties formed opposition parties, the leaders of some parties agreed to serve the agenda of the incumbent party. Some anonymous interviewees argued that the consequence of such a personalistic nature of some opposition parties is that they don't like to be institutionalized, and have a formal structure or to select strong or experienced people to take major responsibility within the party. According to an anonymous interviewee "New Generation could be an example of this kind of personalistic party when the main leader controls it"[31]. When the parties are not institutionalized means it's less likely that the leaders are subject to accountability by other members within the party. Instead, they use the leverage to take great benefit or use it to bargain with the parties in power.

Unlike PUK and PDK which pretty much have hierarchy and connection between elites and parties' members are based on a strong patronage network, based on public sector jobs or other public or private benefits that party offered to their members. The linkage between members and parties in power are highly personalistic links. That means parties can offer some public benefits when they are in the office, either in the form of public sector jobs, licenses, preferential treatment, or recruitment for the security jobs. However, the opposition groups do not have access for such public benefits to be distributed among their members. That's to say the connection between the grassroots with opposition parties is weaker than that of parties in power.

4. Lack of vision

One of the sessional problems of the opposition groups in the Kurdistan region is the inability to propose an alternative policy for better governance. As one interviewee argues, that the most fundamental problem of opposition parties in the Kurdistan region is that they are not strong enough to develop a "comprehensive vision for the long-term problems, rather, over the last ten years, opposition parties have been passive and focused on spreading negative messages about the incumbent parties"[32]. One observer believes that some opposition parties have a "populist approach and treat people for their own short-term purpose"[33]. Fieldwork information shows that most of the opposition parties' critic the incumbent government, but they do not offer an alternative policy, or as one independent commentator believed that "opposition parties are not competent and lack of long-term vision"[34].

Means that the opposition parties do not have a dream to be a better alternative for incumbent government. As one interview argues, that ostensibly they show themselves that they would be able to run the government better than the current PUK and PDK leaders[35].

However, another observer argues that people are unhappy with the current governance of both PUK and PDK but they have tried Gorran Movement between 2013-2018 as they participated in the government with a power-sharing arrangement, with PUK and PDK. Since 2013 it has become a part of the government with 75 high and middle official positions. But the situation got worse than ever before. As one interviewee said Gorran has not been able to change or to deal with the challenges that have been facing KRI for a long-time[36]. An independent commentator said the main aim of the Gorran Movement is to participate in the government[37]. While the former Gorran's MP believed that we were under pressure at that time to participate in the government by our leaders, members, and party affiliated people in order to bring our reform program to reality, at that time our idea was to change the political situation from inside the government[38].

However, an independent commentator criticized Gorran's policy while in government cabinet with the PUK and PDK under the power-sharing arrangement as he said that "Gorran worked in the government with an opposition-oriented approach, which made PUK and PDK unhappy with Gorran's approach within the power-sharing arrangement"[39]. But Gorran's team was unable to change anything. One high ranking member of Gorran believed that Gorran has failed because it practices the same approach as PUK and PDK parties, such as nepotism in distributing public benefits. He explained that our members in the government have been captured by either PDK or PUK by offering them many public or special benefits, such as offering cars, houses, and giving them stakes in their different businesses[40]. As a consequence, Gorran's popularity has declined since 2018 to 12 seats and one seat in 2024. According to an independent commentator, "they are not alternatives and they will not be able to have a direct alternative for the political situation"[41].

Currently, opposition parties lack a clear alternative policy for health care, education, agriculture, and unemployment. According to one opposition party member "we do not have a better alternative than parties in power"[42]. One commentator argues that "opposition parties are not an alternative for the incumbent parties in power"[43] if they want to become an alternative, they have to integrate into one coalition, which is impossible.

5. Weak mass base

Many of the opposition parties in Kurdistan are weak in building mass bases and weaker, as one interviewee believes that “Opposition parties are relatively weak in terms of addressing people’s need”[44]. Also, one independent commentator said “opposition parties have a weaker mass based”[45] and weaker in terms of communication with labour union, trade union, lawyer, doctors, and journalist associations. One interviewee believed that “unlike 2009-2013 opposition parties are less influential in the Kurdish community”[46]. In addition to this, political parties in power take control of nearly all NGOs and discourage them from playing a substantial role in the political landscape. Thus, the opposition parties’ relations with these institutions are weaker than those of political parties in power. One important factor is that political parties in power control resources, and they use these resources to fund and finance the activities of NGOs to be another patronage network for the parties. Another important tool of the parties in power is “shadow media such as TVs, Webs, and Radios”[47] that have been built during the last ten years, and the strong point of these media is having an open budget as well as capable cadres compared to local traditional medias. While opposition media are weaker “they would not be able to build a strong media”[48] and not popular except New Generation with a strong TV channel i.e., NRT TV ,which secured 15 seats in the Oct 2024 election and many observers believed the NRT played the crucial role for the achievement.

This is showing how the NGOs and shadow media play the role and are crucial for the opposition parties, and in an interview with the KIU confirmed that the weakest point of the KIU is media and nobody interested in watching our TV channel and as he said many times, I suggested to our leaders that we should have a shadow media[49]. Finally, one of the weaknesses of the opposition groups is a lack of organic connection with civil society and not a broader base connection with the masses.

6. Limited funds

One challenge faced by some opposition parties is poor economic standards compared with political parties in power. In 2014 the law No. 5 was issued in KRI parliament for the funding of political parties. Based on this law, the fund was allocated based on seats of parliament, and only 1% of the total budget of KRI will be allocated for the parties, and its 0,000,375% has been allocated per seat per month. According to the former speaker of the Kurdistan parliament before the economic crisis in 2015 and raising serious issues between Baghdad and Erbil, Kurdistan has a regulation of the allocation of public funds for all-political parties based on their seats in the parliament. However, due to the financial hardship, the budgets of all political parties had been cut[50]. But political parties in power have their own resources to manage their affairs. Since then, opposition parties have suffered because they don’t have sufficient resources for managing their routines and rewarding their members.

Some of the opposition parties are better than others. For instance, New Generation would be better because Mr Shaswar has his own multiple companies that become a source for the party's finance, and he also has TVs and Radios. Lahur Jangi former co-leader of the PUK, and current leader of People's Front although he recently has established the party got a Zoom TV.

Generally, all opposition parties are weak financially. According to Gorran high-rank member "most opposition parties are weak in finding independent income sources"[51]. Also, an independent commentator confirmed that opposition parties "lack sufficient resources"[52]. For instance, in a personal interview, with high-rank member of KIU said, we are very poor economically, our branch member only receives 65,000 equivalent to US\$ 45 per month, our central committee member only receives 400,000 equivalent to US\$ 270 which is a very low salary compared with parties in power whose central committee members receive around 12 million Iraqi dinars equivalent to US\$ 80000[53]. A high rank member from Attitude-Helwest- party said somebody from outside of Kurdistan paid the rent of our headquarters office for around two years, and to be honest with you, we don't have any money to finance our activities[54].

However, according to different anonymous sources, some opposition parties such as Gorran, KIU and Justice Group receive monthly money such as assistance from PUK and PDK leaders. While the members of opposition parties deny this financing. Members of both Islamic parties confirmed that they have depended on various funding sources, though the legitimacy of each type of these available funds is legal based on rules and regulations. These funding sources are membership fees, income from taxes and properties owned by the party, and contributions from businessmen.

An independent commentator believed that many individuals established political parties as a shortcut to rapid personal wealth. This condition could fragment opposition parties as he called them "political shop"[55]. Therefore, many observers feel that receiving funds from PUK and PDK leaders could lead to counterproductive outcomes and make opposition parties captivated by political parties in power. Though ideally the opposition parties should build their own internal sources, the domination of both PUK and PDK parties over national resources and all aspects of political and economic life does not allow the opposition parties to grow and enrich.

Policy conclusion

All of these opposition parties offer themselves as an alternative to the PUK and KDP, but in reality, and based on their previous results, they are not at this level to be able to form, a cabinet, and are fragmented and would not be able to capitalize on public resentment, and one can conclude that at present they will not be able to create any threat to the PUK and PDK ruling doubly in power or even “make a fundamental question on the current set up of the system” [56](said commentator). These constraints are forced due to the fact that the political landscape in KRI has become a main obstacle for opposition parties to be invested in. Thus, the voters, who have always had a grievance with PUK and PDK in power for a long time, are left without any choice and have little to gain but much to lose by supporting opposition parties. In the previous election of 2018, many people declined to participate in the general election, according to official figures, less than 50% voted.

Despite these weaknesses of the opposition parties, it could be considered a fundamental factor for reinforcing democracy as one scholar believed that democracy, is an ideology of opposition as much as it is one of government. An observer argued that still opposition parties in the region have become an important factor for democratization. One interview described Kurdistan as “an incomplete democracy”[57]. So even if opposition parties are weak, they are necessary for the democratization. Another commentator argued that “opposition could be strong in parliament if not fragmented like today”[58]. In such a political context, opposition parties participated in successive elections, but had little chance to win. Therefore, opposition parties might realize that unless they create a coalition, it will be very hard to oust the incumbent from power. Further, opposition parties could be strong if they could change their attitude from “anti-incumbent to have more long-term vision”[59]. One of the most interesting suggestions that was offered by one commentator is that the opposition parties should limit themselves with one or two important public issues that they can do something to address in the long-term, that is, anti-incumbent policy[60].

Altogether, the opposition parties have faced three main challenges: first, the PUK and PDK in power since 1991, gave them great opportunities to build a strong client and patronage network and have their own security forces to give them a decisive advantage over opposition parties. Second, the opposition parties in the KRI are fragmented, and they would not be able to be a block coalition to stand against the PUK and PDK. Third, lack of vision could be a weak point for reform of the system of governance does not inspire a trust with wider KRI voters. Finally, the fieldwork information shows that opposition parties have been easily tempted to collude in the distribution of patronage rewards rather than criticize incumbent parties.

There are other possible explanations: perhaps the most distinct point for the opposition parties is personalistic parties rather than programmatic one, or perhaps voters think that opposition leaders place their own interests and careers ahead of the public good. Once the election is over, voters may expect to gain little and much to lose by supporting opposition parties. Given lower-level trust in opposition parties and “widespread doubt on their incompetence” [61], thus, it's not entirely surprising that after the failure of Gorran for over four years (2013-2018) in government, voters seldom regarded opposition parties as a viable alternative or as being in the level to pose a threat to the PUK and PDK in power.

Finally, one of the crucial problems in the Kurdistan region seems that both PUK and PDK parties are unwilling to be opposition parties due to their grasp on power and overdependence on public benefits available to the ruling parties. But the most fundamental question is whether the incumbent parties are willing to hand over power if they are defeated in elections. Many observers argue that it is necessary for the opposition parties to be ready for dialogue over how to move beyond the duopoly dominant in the region. This is also dependent on whether the opposition parties are able to form an opposition coalition.

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