

CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT

FOR INTERNATIONAL PEACE

WASHINGTON DC * MOSCOW * BEIJING * BEIRUT * BRUSSELS

The Kurdish Parties

Iraq's major Kurdish parties have shown no desire to join non-sectarian alliances in the 2010 parliamentary elections. Unlike every other electoral grouping, the Kurds are not trying to erect a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional façade. There are three major Kurdish parties: the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and Gorran (Movement for Change).

The KDP and the PUK are well-established, historical parties advocating Kurdish rights—the KDP since 1946, and the PUK since 1975. Together, they form the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan and are represented in the Iraqi parliament. They also control the Kurdistan Regional Government and the Kurdistan Regional Assembly and are expected to remain united for the 2010 elections. Gorran, a splinter group of the PUK, was formed only in the run-up to the August 2009 elections for the Kurdistan regional parliament. Gorran is not expected to align itself with the KDP or PUK before the elections, but observers assume that it will cooperate with them later in order to maintain a strong Kurdish voice in national politics.

Party	Representation	Leader(s)
Kurdish Democratic Party	Iraqi Kurdistan, stronghold in Erbil	Massoud Barzani
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan	Iraqi Kurdistan, previously powerful in Suleimaniyah	Jalal Talabani Dr. Barham Salih
Gorran—Movement for Change	Iraqi Kurdistan, particularly former PUK stronghold, Suleimaniyah	Nusherwan Mustafa
Islamic Union of Kurdistan	Kurdish Islamist, influence in Iraqi Kurdistan; mostly in Dohuk	Salaheddin Bahaeddin

Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)



Leader Massoud Barzani (President of the Kurdistan Region)

Date of Founding Founded in 1946 by Mullah Mustafa al-Barzani, Massoud's father.

Number of Seats in National Parliament 53/275 as part of the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan (with PUK)

Number of Seats in Kurdistan parliament 59/111 as part of the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan

Notes The Kurdish Democratic Party is currently considered the most powerful and influential political entity in Iraqi Kurdistan. For years, the KDP was pitted against the PUK in a protracted power struggle, a struggle characterized by occasional violence and the expulsion of PUK members from Erbil and KDP members from Suleimaniyah, their respective strongholds. A cease-fire was reached in 1997, and the Kurdish region was effectively divided into PUK-controlled and KDP-controlled areas, with the PUK holding control mostly around Suleimaniyah and near the Iranian border.

By 2003, the two factions had reconciled sufficiently to cooperate in governing the Kurdistan region, which had enjoyed de facto autonomy since 1991. (The first elections for the Kurdistan Parliament took place in 1992.)

After 2003, the KDP and the PUK managed to share power in the Kurdistan region and present a united front in the elections in Iraq. Massoud Barzani became President of the Kurdistan region, and his nephew Nechirvan Barzani became its prime minister. Jalal Talabani, one of the PUK's founders, became the president of Iraq. In October 2009, Nechirvan Barzani stepped down as prime minister of Kurdistan and was replaced by Barham Salih of the PUK. The KDP and PUK contested the 2005 Iraqi parliamentary elections jointly as part of the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan.

The KDP's rivals charge that it is tribal and corrupt, having ruled the autonomous region of Kurdistan for decades. The controversy surrounding the KDP is amplified by the fact that—like the PUK—it controls a militia, the *peshmerga*. In periods of fighting between the KDP and the PUK, rival *peshmerga* factions battled each other. Now the *peshmerga* appears internally united but in an extremely ambiguous position vis-à-vis the national army: under the 2005 constitution, which gives duly constituted regions the right to maintain their own militias, the *peshmerga* is a legal force. It is supposed to coordinate and operate with the Iraqi national army, which it does at times, but not when it comes to tensions on the contested border between Iraq and Kurdistan. Finally, the unity of the *peshmerga* depends on continuing cooperation between the KDP and the PUK.

The balance of power established between the KDP and the PUK began shifting in 2006, when one of the founders and leaders of the PUK, Nusherwan Mustafa, broke off from the PUK. Mustafa eventually launched his own party, Gorran, before the 2009 Kurdistan regional parliament elections, in which it performed strongly, winning 25 seats, mostly in previous PUK strongholds. The KDP did not capitalize on the new weakness of the PUK. Rather, it saw Gorran's rise as a threat to both established Kurdish parties, and tried to prop up the PUK—most visibly by ceding it the post of regional prime minister. Had the KDP pressed the PUK to give up some power, more members might have switched over from the PUK to Gorran, seeing the PUK as a dying organization.

Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)



Leaders Jalal Talabani (President of Iraq), Dr. Barham Salih (prime minister of the Kurdish Regional Government since October 28, 2009)

Date of Founding Founded in 1975 by Jalal Talabani and Nusherwan Mustafa

Number of Seats in National Parliament 53/275 as part of Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan (with KDP)

Number of Seats in Kurdistan parliament 59/111 as part of Kurdistan Alliance

Notes The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan is one of the two ruling parties in the Kurdistan Regional Government, an ally of the KDP, its former rival. The history of the relations between KDP and PUK is discussed above in the section on the KDP.

In 2005, the KDP and PUK reached a power-sharing agreement under which they agreed to rule the Kurdistan region and act as an influential political bloc within Iraq as a whole. Over the long term, their dominance may be threatened by the rise of Gorran, a new party that splintered off from the PUK, weakening it substantially. Running together as the Democratic Patriotic Alliance of Kurdistan, the KDP and PUK won a majority of seats in the August 2009 Kurdish Regional Government elections, though the PUK lost significant influence to Gorran owing to cronyism, corruption, and heavy-handed tactics to pressure voters in the run-up to the elections.

Indeed, in the 2009 regional elections, the party lost its historical stronghold of Suleimaniyah to Gorran. The

weakening of the PUK has given rise to speculation that its leader, Jalal Talabani, may lose his post as president of Iraq, and that the PUK will over time lose influence in both the Kurdish region and Iraq as a whole. Yet in an effort to bolster the PUK, the KDP helped Barham Salih become prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government. This puts two of the most influential posts among Kurds (nationally and regionally) in the hands of the PUK, with Salih as prime minister of the KRG, and Jalal Talabani as president of Iraq.

Gorran—Movement for Change



Leader Nusherwan Mustafa (previous PUK leader)

Date of Founding Began in 2006 as a media company called Wusha. Officially became a political party in February 2009 in order to compete in the August 2009 elections for the Kurdish regional parliament

Number of Seats in National Parliament None; party formed in 2009

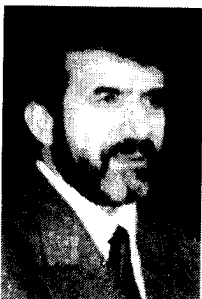
Number of Seats in Kurdistan parliament 25/111

Notes In 2006, Nusherwan Mustafa, one of the founders of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, left the party—alleging that it had become incorrigibly corrupt—to start his own media company, Wusha. The company has a newspaper, a television station, and a website, all of which claim to speak for the causes of freedom and democracy.

In early 2009, in the absence of reform within the PUK, Mustafa formed Gorran, or the Movement for Change, to challenge the two ruling parties. It won 25 of 111 seats, a remarkable achievement for a party that had only been in existence for a few months, and created space—for the first time—for a viable opposition within the KRG.

While Gorran is expected to run alone in the upcoming parliamentary elections, it is expected to pool its gains with those of the Kurdistan alliance afterwards, in an effort to unite Kurds on the national stage. Nevertheless, Gorran wants to be viewed as an independent force, opposed to corruption and the continuing tribal stranglehold on Kurdish politics. For that reason, it has chosen to remain in the opposition rather than joining the KRG government.

Islamic Union of Kurdistan



Leader Salaheddin Bahaeddin

Date of Founding & Notable Moments 1994

Number of Seats in National Parliament 5/275

Number of Seats in Kurdistan parliament 13/111 as part of a coalition of smaller parties which has now dissolved

Notes The Islamic Union of Kurdistan defines itself as an “Islamic Reference” party and has ties to the Muslim Brotherhood.

In the run-up to the December 2005 elections, the IUK joined the Democratic Patriotic Alliance, then broke off and ran independently, winning five seats. It thus became the only Kurdish opposition party to be represented in the parliament. The party has announced that it will compete independently in the January 2010 elections.

Carnegie Endowment for International Peace