

Breaking Point? How the Barzani Family Power Struggle Could Unfold After Kurdistan's Election

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 Brief Analysis

The KDP leadership's power-sharing status quo may be in jeopardy.

Since the inaugural election in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in 1992, politics has largely remained in the hands of the same ruling forces, with elections doing little to shake up the status quo. But this October could prove to be a pivotal moment—not because of any new challengers from outside, but because of the power struggle brewing within the Barzani family itself. The once-cohesive leadership may be splintering as two powerful figures, Masrour Barzani and Nechirvan Barzani, vie for dominance. As both seek to tighten their grip on the family's legacy, the party's future, and the fate of the Kurdistan Region, the cracks within may become impossible to ignore.

Power struggles within ruling families are not unique to the Barzanis; they are a common feature of dynastic leaderships across the world. The rivalry within the Barzani family dates back to the era of the late Mullah Mustafa Barzani, the iconic leader of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Kurdish nationalist movement for decades. According to [accounts \(https://www.kcdme.com/Third%2520book%2520part%2520two.pdf\)](https://www.kcdme.com/Third%2520book%2520part%2520two.pdf) by Ayoub Barzani, a Kurdish writer and critic and a dissident member of the family, as Mullah Mustafa grew older, his two eldest sons, Masoud (Masrour's father) and Edris (Nechirvan's father)—each from a different mother—became the central figures in a quiet battle over their father's legacy. Though Edris, the older of the two, was widely regarded as more diplomatic and skilled, Mullah Mustafa had a preference for Masoud. At the age of twenty, Masoud was appointed head of Parastin, the KDP's powerful intelligence agency, giving him a significant upper hand. When Edris died suddenly and mysteriously in 1987 at the age of forty-three, the path to leadership of the KDP was effectively cleared for Masoud, a position he has held ever since.

The battle for the legacy of Masoud Barzani, now seventy-eight, has been quietly unfolding for years and has intensified in recent times. Behind the scenes, the same power struggle that once determined his own rise to leadership is now playing out between his son Masrour and his nephew Nechirvan, both of whom seek to shape the future of the Barzani political dynasty. This simmering conflict has become increasingly pronounced as the prospect of a post-Masoud era looms.

For nearly two decades, a delicate balance of power was maintained between Nechirvan and Masrour Barzani, with Nechirvan serving as prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and Masrour leading the intelligence agency. However, this equilibrium shifted in Masrour's favor the moment he assumed the role of prime minister in 2018. With this position, he [consolidated \(https://drawmedia.net/page_detail?smart-id=4436\)](https://drawmedia.net/page_detail?smart-id=4436) control over the party and the government, dramatically altering the internal power dynamics within the Barzani family and the region.

In return, Nechirvan was appointed president of the KRI, succeeding Masoud Barzani. However, his presidency came with a new law significantly reducing the powers of the office, rendering the position largely symbolic and devoid of executive authority. Moreover, the influential intelligence agency, officially known as the Security Council, has [remained \(https://peregraf.com/ku/report/1861\)](https://peregraf.com/ku/report/1861) firmly under Masrour's control, despite legal provisions [stating \(https://www.yasaii.info/2a/item/769-ooo18.html\)](https://www.yasaii.info/2a/item/769-ooo18.html) it should fall under the president's authority. Although the identity of Masrour's successor at the Security Council has not been officially disclosed, it is widely [believed \(https://kurdistantimes.org/2020/02/20/%2525D9%252586%2525DB%252595%2525D8%2525B2%2525D9%252587%2525DB%252595%2525D8%2525AA-%2525D8%2525AD%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525DB%25258C%2525D8%25258C-%2525D8%2525B3%2525D9%252586%2525D8%2525AF%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252582%2525DB%252595-%2525D8%2525B1%2525DB%252595%2525D8%2525B4%2525DB%252595%2525DA%2525A9%2525DB%252595%2525DB%25258C-%2525D9%2525BE%2525D8%2525A7/\)](https://kurdistantimes.org/2020/02/20/%2525D9%252586%2525DB%252595%2525D8%2525B2%2525D9%252587%2525DB%252595%2525D8%2525AA-%2525D8%2525AD%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525DB%25258C%2525D8%25258C-%2525D8%2525B3%2525D9%252586%2525D8%2525AF%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252582%2525DB%252595-%2525D8%2525B1%2525DB%252595%2525D8%2525B4%2525DB%252595%2525DA%2525A9%2525DB%252595%2525DB%25258C-%2525D9%2525BE%2525D8%2525A7/) he appointed one of his brothers to the role, ensuring it remains under his direct supervision. Adding to this, Masoud Barzani established the Barzani Headquarters, an office parallel to the KRG presidency, where he continues to exercise much of the authority he once held as president, further [undermining \(https://www.sharpress.net/all-detail.aspx?Jimare=153275\)](https://www.sharpress.net/all-detail.aspx?Jimare=153275) Nechirvan Barzani's position and influence.

After the upcoming Kurdistan parliamentary elections, maintaining the faint balance between the two key figures within the Barzani family may prove challenging, especially given the new political landscape likely to emerge.

At present, the KDP controls both the prime ministership and the presidency of the KRG, though it lacks a parliamentary majority to justify holding two of the region's three most significant positions. This arrangement was possible in the past due to the weakness of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the other main ruling party of the region, and an agreement that allowed the PUK to retain the Iraqi presidency in return for leaving the other two positions for the KDP in the KRG. However, both of these factors have shifted.

In the last two election cycles, the KDP has unsuccessfully vied with the PUK for the Iraqi presidency, rendering the old understanding ineffective. Additionally, the current PUK, under the ambitious leadership of Bafel Talabani, is no longer willing to accept a KDP monopoly on both key positions, which leaves the PUK with only the parliamentary speakership. This situation is poised to change after the election, and that is where Barzani family tensions could come to the fore.

The KDP has repeatedly [announced \(https://www.kurdistan24.net/ckb/story/264583-%2525D9%252587%2525DB%25258E%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252586-%2525D9%252587%2525DB%252595%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525B1%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252585%2525DB%25258C-%2525D9%252585%2525DB%252595%2525D8%2525B3%2525D8%2525B1%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525B1-%2525D8%2525A8%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525B1%2525D8%2525B2%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252586%2525DB%25258C-%2525D8%2525B3%2525DB%252595%2525D8%2525B1%2525DB%252586%2525DA%2525A9%2525D8%2525A7%2525DB%25258C%2525DB%252595%2525D8%2525AA%2525DB%2525DA%2525A9%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525A8%2525DB%25258C%2525D9%252586%2525DB%252595%2525DB%25258C-%2525D8%2525AF%2525DB%252595%2525DB%25258C%2525DB%252595%2525D9%252585-%2525D8%2525AF%2525DB%252595%2525DA%2525A9%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AA\)](https://www.kurdistan24.net/ckb/story/264583-%2525D9%252587%2525DB%25258E%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252586-%2525D9%252587%2525DB%252595%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525B1%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252585%2525DB%25258C-%2525D9%252585%2525DB%252595%2525D8%2525B3%2525D8%2525B1%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525B1-%2525D8%2525A8%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525B1%2525D8%2525B2%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252586%2525DB%25258C-%2525D8%2525B3%2525DB%252595%2525D8%2525B1%2525DB%252586%2525DA%2525A9%2525D8%2525A7%2525DB%25258C%2525DB%252595%2525D8%2525AA%2525DB%2525DA%2525A9%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525A8%2525DB%25258C%2525D9%252586%2525DB%252595%2525DB%25258C-%2525D8%2525AF%2525DB%252595%2525DB%25258C%2525DB%252595%2525D9%252585-%2525D8%2525AF%2525DB%252595%2525DA%2525A9%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AA) that Masrour Barzani will lead the next KRG government, which would require Nechirvan to relinquish his presidential position. If this happens, his options appear limited. One potential solution could be to offer him the presidency of Iraq—a role that may seem enticing. The position carries prestige, and Nechirvan could, like the late Jalal Talabani, elevate its importance. However, a move from Erbil to Baghdad would likely mark the end of Nechirvan's political future in Kurdistan, effectively severing his ties to the region and uprooting his loyalists entirely, a process that has been **ongoing**

https://drawmedia.net/page_detail?smart-id=4436) since his cousin became prime minister six years ago.

Nechirvan Barzani is widely regarded as a skilled diplomat and, unlike some other members of the family, a pragmatic politician. He is known for his willingness to make concessions and move past old grievances. After the fallout from the 2017 independence referendum, it was Nechirvan who orchestrated the end of the political embargo on the KRG. Similarly, following the recent deterioration of relations between the KDP and Iran—which led to multiple missile strikes on Erbil—it was Nechirvan who [traveled \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/breaking-ice-erbil-tehran-relations-after-barzanis-visit\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/breaking-ice-erbil-tehran-relations-after-barzanis-visit) to Tehran and successfully de-escalated tensions. The Barzani family needs Nechirvan as much as he needs the family. His ability to navigate delicate political landscapes makes him an indispensable figure within the party and the family.

As long as Masoud Barzani remains politically active, he serves as the linchpin holding the family together, capable of maintaining the status quo and mediating between his son and his nephew. While it is clear that Masoud favors his son, Nechirvan has little room to openly challenge his uncle's authority. This dynamic likely explains why Masrour is eager to solidify his own position, ensuring that the balance of power tilts in his favor, and by extension, his children's. Without Masoud's stabilizing influence, the internal rivalry could escalate into a more dramatic conflict, potentially even more destabilizing than the PUK's [power struggle \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/family-affair-rifts-talabani-family-highlight-kurdistan-region-iraqs-political\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/family-affair-rifts-talabani-family-highlight-kurdistan-region-iraqs-political) in July 2022, when Bafel Talabani ousted his cousin and co-president Lahur Shekh Jangi from the party in a dramatic series of events. ❖

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