

Kurdistan's Pivotal Elections: A Defining Moment for the Region's Future

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Disenfranchisement, party fragmentation, and external pressures are pushing Iraqi Kurdistan to a breaking point.

In the mountains of northern Iraq, the Kurdistan Region is preparing for an election that could either secure its democratic future or plunge it further into chaos. The October 20, 2024, parliamentary elections—delayed multiple times since 2022—are more than just another routine vote. They represent a critical moment for the Kurdish people and their elected leaders, who are grappling with unprecedented political, economic, and social challenges.

Iraqi Kurdistan has for years been celebrated as a bastion of stability and institutional progress. As the upcoming elections approach, the cracks in the region's political system, however, are widening. Disenfranchisement, party fragmentation, and external pressures from neighbouring powers are pushing Iraqi Kurdistan to a breaking point.

On October 20th nearly a quarter of the 3.7 million eligible voters will not be able to cast their ballot. The Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) [has reported \(https://manage.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/01102024\)](https://manage.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/01102024) that nearly 800,000 eligible voters in the Kurdistan Region did not register to vote. This has been attributed to a combination of logistical challenges and a lack of voter registration cards. However, it has also been compounded by a lack of awareness or access to registration facilities, as well as possible disillusionment with the political process. This is more than just a bureaucratic hiccup; it is an institutional problem. In a region already reeling from delayed public sector salaries, accusations of corruption, and widening economic inequality, this mass exclusion of voters could fuel public disillusionment with the political process.

Kurdistan's political scene seems as divided as its voter rolls. The rivalry between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) has turned what should have been a democratic exercise into a struggle for dominance. The KDP is campaigning on a message of unity and peace, positioning itself as the stabilizing force the region needs. Running under the slogan "Peace and Prosperity, Unity and Resilience," the KDP counters its opposition with the tagline "They Cannot," symbolizing their contention to provide the only viable path forward. On the other side, the PUK faces its own struggles. Historically a powerful player in Kurdish politics, the PUK is now grappling with [internal divisions \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/puk-and-kdp-new-era-conflict\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/puk-and-kdp-new-era-conflict), and the once-reformist Gorran Movement is on the brink of boycotting the election. Many new voters are young, unemployed, or recent graduates who have growing demands that traditional parties struggle to meet. For international observers, the stakes are clear; they are not just about who will hold power but also about whether Kurdistan's institutions can weather the storm of political fragmentation.

The region's internal struggles are compounded by a complex web of external influence. The KDP and PUK have frequently pursued [divergent strategies. \(https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/uneasy-stalemate-iran-and-turkey-manoeuvre-iraqi-kurdistan\)](https://www.rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/uneasy-stalemate-iran-and-turkey-manoeuvre-iraqi-kurdistan) both with Baghdad and with neighbouring countries, weakening the region's ability to present a united front on the global stage. Disunity has consequences—for Kurdistan's economic prospects and for the region's standing as a linchpin of stability in a volatile Middle East. For international partners, this division raises questions about Kurdistan's long-term viability as a stable and reliable partner in Iraq. The challenge for the Kurdish leaders more broadly is whether they can institutionalize a policy that serves the interests of all Kurds in Iraq, not just their respective parties. How the next government can navigate its relationships with both Baghdad and international powers will be critical to its survival.

Security is a perennial issue in Iraq and in the Kurdistan region, and this election is no different. Special voting for security personnel and Peshmerga takes place two days before the general election. Official data showed that the total number of special voters in the Kurdistan Region is roughly 215,000. While the involvement of security forces is essential to maintaining order, how they conduct themselves during the campaign period and on ballot day is a test of impartiality. Historically, the Kurdish Peshmerga forces have been [closely aligned \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/free-and-fair-setting-expectations-kris-october-elections\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/free-and-fair-setting-expectations-kris-october-elections) with political parties, and international and domestic observers should watch closely for any signs of interference.

Kurdistan's elections will also ripple across Iraq, a country still struggling with its own political divisions. For Baghdad, the stability of the region is critical. Given the economic and security interdependencies between the central government and Erbil, the conduct of the election and the ability to form a stable administration will undoubtedly influence how the federal government manages its often-fraught relationship with Iraqi Kurdistan. If the election leads to a stronger, more united government in Erbil, this could pave the way for better cooperation with Baghdad in key areas like oil revenue sharing, budget allocations, and security coordination. On the other hand, if the elections deepen Kurdistan's internal divisions, Baghdad may find itself facing a more fragmented and less predictable partner. For Kurdish leaders, there is a delicate balance to maintain: demonstrating democratic stability to their Iraqi counterparts while addressing the growing demands for reform and accountability from their own people.

This election is not just another cycle in the region's political life—the future of Iraqi Kurdistan truly hangs in the balance. Its elected leaders must rise to the occasion and not only manage the political dynamics within the region but also maintain trust with the international community and Baghdad. For outside observers, this election also offers a glimpse into the challenges facing not just Kurdistan but the broader Middle East. Can democratic processes

thrive in a region troubled by internal divisions and external pressures? The answer will reverberate far beyond the borders of Iraqi Kurdistan.

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