

Free and Fair? Setting Expectations for the KRI's October Elections

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Brief Analysis

Elections in which Kurdish voters can authentically choose their leaders are not only what Kurdish citizens deserve; they increase the likelihood that the KRG will address the myriad concerns about its governance.

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) will hold long-delayed legislative elections on October 20, more than six years after voters last went to the polls. Amid serious political, economic, and geopolitical challenges, the KRI's direction, unity, and institutions are at stake. With the campaign set to start in mid-September, both process and context matter for assessing whether the elections will meet the basic democratic requirements of being “free and fair.”

Already, [Kurdish officials \(https://x.com/NiyazSBarzani/status/1830599914423742893\)](https://x.com/NiyazSBarzani/status/1830599914423742893) and [diplomats \(https://x.com/USCGERBIL/status/1825268583997243616\)](https://x.com/USCGERBIL/status/1825268583997243616) are expressing their hope that the KRI will clear this bar, but a functional electoral system does not necessarily guarantee democratic outcomes, as internal and external factors can stand in the way. It is important to acknowledge these deficiencies before, during, and after the elections. Otherwise, there is a risk of legitimizing a “good enough” outcome that only reinforces the [anti-democratic shortcomings \(https://www.ft.com/content/cd943209-b26b-45b2-a34a-e0d432b2e3f1\)](https://www.ft.com/content/cd943209-b26b-45b2-a34a-e0d432b2e3f1) already present.

The internal factors affecting the electoral process are uniformly concerning. First, the two ruling parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—exert an outsized influence over the [media \(https://www.mei.edu/publications/partisan-press-dominance-party-backed-media-iraqs-kurdistan-region\)](https://www.mei.edu/publications/partisan-press-dominance-party-backed-media-iraqs-kurdistan-region), the [security forces \(https://www.mei.edu/publications/war-home-need-internal-security-sector-reform-iraqi-kurdistan\)](https://www.mei.edu/publications/war-home-need-internal-security-sector-reform-iraqi-kurdistan), and the KRI's finances. Second, public servants and ordinary citizens are pressured and incentivized to vote for the ruling duopoly, with high costs imposed on dissenters. Third, the [public's engagement \(https://drawmedia.net/en/page_detail?smart-id=14239\)](https://drawmedia.net/en/page_detail?smart-id=14239) with the electoral process is in decline due to a pervasive belief that change is impossible at the ballot box. Combined, these factors create an uneven playing field

and limit the possibility of any real change. These are highly predictable and have been observed across several electoral cycles.

External factors are more of a mixed bag: A new role for Iraq's federal government in electoral procedures and shifts in the geopolitical landscape introduce uncertainty. The federal Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) will **run the elections** (<https://amwaj.media/media-monitor/iraqi-federal-court-rulings-undermine-kurdish-autonomy-critics-say>) for the first time since the KRI achieved self-governance in the early 1990s. Conversely, the **involvement of the UN** (<https://www.newarab.com/analysis/why-iraq-wants-uns-political-mission-wind-down>) and international actors is not as robust as in past cycles.

These internal and external factors raise concerns about the degree to which the October 20 elections will be free and fair. The KRI's partners have already expended significant political capital to pressure the KDP and the PUK into holding elections at all, and there is little time to address the above issues before voters go to the polls. Having elections—whatever their quality—will seem like an accomplishment to frustrated interlocutors. Frankly, that is not good enough.

Free and Fair?

Elections for the Kurdistan parliament should have taken place two years ago. Indeed, October 20 is the **fifth declared date** (<https://x.com/wroders2/status/1830591674982240452>) for the elections. The source of these delays was undeniably the persistent disagreements between the KDP and the PUK. At one time or another, both parties felt that their partisan interests would not be served by going to the people and therefore ground the process to a halt through a variety of excuses and justifications. Matters got so bad that procedural disagreements **escalated to violence** (<https://nlka.net/eng/brawling-over-power-sharing-in-the-kr/>) on the floor of the Kurdistan parliament. Ultimately, responsibility for running the process was taken out of their hands by the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court, with the federal IHEC taking over technical management of the elections.

In June, KRI president Nechirvan Barzani set the current date. The KRI's partners breathed a public sigh of relief. Canadian Ambassador to Iraq Kathy Bunka **told** (<https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/270620241>) a KDP-affiliated media outlet on June 27 that her government was “delighted,” adding that “we have full confidence that the authorities have the democratic spirit and all the experience required to pull off free and fair elections.” Given the misadventures that brought the KRI to this point, Bunka's statement may come off as boosterish and naive to local observers. Nevertheless, “free and fair” is clearly the standard that many countries expect of the October 20 elections, as indicated by other meetings between **Kurdish** (<https://x.com/NiyazSBarzani/status/1830599914423742893>) and **foreign** (<https://x.com/USCGERBIL/status/1824068443571630437>) officials (<https://x.com/zoomnewskrd/status/1807812964290076830>).

It is worth pausing here to explain what this standard means. In a strictly legal sense, free and fair elections require an **official framework** (<https://www.ipu.org/impact/democracy-and-strong-parliaments/ipu-standards/declaration-criteria-free-and-fair-elections>) where all adult citizens are able to cast ballots and express their political opinions without coercion or retaliation, candidates are able to participate on an equal basis, and the state actively protects these rights and prevents interference into the process.

On paper, the KRI has (or is close to having) this kind of legal framework, but in practice this framework is subject to numerous informalities, traditions, and contextual factors that create power imbalances between parties and influence voter behavior. Indeed, its democratic deficiencies emerge largely from extra-legal sources. This should not be shocking; it is a readily recognizable and common dynamic around the world. Anyone who knows much of anything about the KRI's **historical development** (<https://www.rusi.org/explore-our->

research/publications/commentary/equal-no-more-breakdown-power-sharing-iraqi-kurdistan) or politics would find this obvious. When Kurdish officials and foreign governments find succor in the former while discounting the latter, it may be justifiable realpolitik, but it is also a delusion that comes at the expense of building democratic norms and practices.

Internal Factors

The most important factor creating a coercive and unfair electoral playing field in the KRI is the outsize influence of the KDP and the PUK on government institutions, the security forces, and the media. The ruling parties have **dominated local politics (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/family-rule-iraq-and-challenge-state-and-democracy>)** since at least 1991, and arguably before. They have every motivation to maintain that position and have many ways of doing so.

Although their power is **divided (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2024/03/29/lethal-puk-kdp-divisions-facilitate-the-demise-of-kurdish-autonomy-in-iraq/>)** into two exclusive geographic zones, collectively the KDP and PUK hold the **top offices (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/puk-and-kdp-new-era-conflict>)** in the cabinet of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the Kurdistan parliament, distribute jobs and patronage in the ministries and local government departments, and **influence the appointment (<https://timep.org/2019/01/11/judiciary-in-kurdistan-region-in-peril/>)** of judges. Around two-thirds of Peshmerga soldiers serve in **units funded by the parties (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/peshmerga-reform-hangs-balance-iraqs-kurdistan-region>)** and commanded by partisan officers. The internal security forces are entirely beholden to the two parties. They have access to state resources, **control (<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/00219096221146747>)** over the oil and gas industry, and strong ties to the business community. All in all, this provides the KDP and the PUK with immense **power and resources (<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2019/08/28/the-kurdish-duopoly-the-political-economy-of-two-party-rule/>)** and gives them a massive institutional advantage over **opposition parties (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/no-real-alternative-failure-opposition-parties-iraqs-kurdistan-region>)**, which are weak and divided.

Both parties spend considerable resources ensuring that their bases turn out and support them on election day. Ordinarily, there is nothing underhanded about this, but in the KRI that extends to the massive patronage networks that the KDP and PUK run through control of the KRG and other state institutions, the Peshmerga, the internal security forces, and private enterprises. Public servants and others know they owe their employment to the parties and are expected to vote accordingly. Pressure not to deviate from this often comes in non-public, non-visible ways, making it difficult to counter. Indeed, the KDP and PUK strenuously deny this is the case.

Nevertheless, this electoral dynamic is well understood. USAID, in its “Electoral Assessment Framework,” **plainly states (<https://www.usaid.gov/democracy/supporting-free-and-fair-elections>)** that “despite their stated objectives, many actors are not committed to promoting transparent, inclusive, competitive, and accountable elections. In fact, those in power (or those aspiring to gain power) often dedicate significant resources to undermining, not promoting, democratic elections.” This clearly applies in the KRI with regard to its ruling duopoly.

The information landscape facing voters is similarly tilted. Most **media outlets (<https://www.mei.edu/publications/partisan-press-dominance-party-backed-media-iraqs-kurdistan-region>)** in the KRI are affiliated with political parties, and the KDP and PUK manage some of the biggest outlets. Whether it is Rudaw, Kurdistan24, or the Kurdistan Chronicle for the KDP or Kurdsat and Channel 8 for the PUK, the parties use their platforms to frame events. This will only intensify during the campaign. Beyond mainstream outlets, the parties also fund an extensive “**shadow media (<https://inkstickmedia.com/ahead-of-elections-iraqi-kurdistans-shadow-media-ramps-up/>)**” that specializes in disinformation and attacking rivals.

Many voters find themselves intensely **disillusioned** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-kurds-face-legitimacy-issues-amid-election-deadlock-and-internal-division>) by these dynamics and understandably question whether change is possible through electoral politics in the face of this stacked deck. Participation in elections in the KRI has **steadily fallen** (<https://x.com/KurdistanWatch/status/1768987399760077279>) from 1992 (87 percent) to 2018 (60 percent). The last elections to the Iraqi parliament in Baghdad had a 36 percent turnout in the KRI. Instead of voting for either of the ruling parties or the underwhelming opposition, those who feel that they can safely do so stay home. They are not apathetic about politics, just profoundly disengaged from a system that offers poor governance, restricts freedom of expression and assembly, and provides limited opportunities for grassroots-driven reform.

External Factors

One major change from the last elections to the Kurdistan parliament is that this time, Iraq's federal government will run the process. Between 2005 and 2018, a regional electoral commission was in charge, which was consistent with the self-governing status of Kurdish political institutions. The regional commission itself was controversial because the majority of its members were appointed by the KDP or the PUK. Opposition parties also accused it of looking the other way while the ruling parties perpetrated fraud. However, its mandate expired during the last term of the Kurdistan parliament and the KDP and PUK could not agree on terms to renew its authority.

As a result, IHEC had to step in to run the process. Theoretically, this will provide some measure of independence from the influence of the KDP and PUK and make for a relatively neutral arbiter, at least compared with the regional commission. Additionally, IHEC has worked extensively with the international community to put anti-fraud procedures and technology in place.

There will be no **external electoral monitoring mission** (https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eom-iraq-2021/eu-election-observation-mission-iraq-presents-final-report-recommendations_en?s=4372) to observe the October 20 elections, unlike those in 2021. There will be some limited observation of the process from diplomats, journalists, and others, but their impact and ability to catch out any malfeasance will be limited. Iraq's request that the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) cease its work next year is a strong indication that the international community will have reduced involvement in Iraqi and Kurdish elections in coming cycles. Indeed, that future may have already arrived, with the October 20 elections the first test case.

Statements like the one by Ambassador Bunka suggest that some are ready to legitimize the October 20 electoral process and the context around it as "free and fair" before all the facts are known. This is a deeply troubling attitude, but hardly unprecedented. Sacrificing local democracy for realpolitik is not new in the KRI. Nevertheless, it is shortsighted.

Elections in which Kurdish voters can authentically choose their leaders are not only what Kurdish citizens deserve; they increase the likelihood that the KRG will address the myriad concerns about its governance. If that feels like a remote prospect, it is because the ruling parties have successfully created coercive and unfair conditions that reduce free choice and fair competition in their own self-interest.

This should be unacceptable to the KRI's partners who care about democracy. There is not much they can do to force the KDP and the PUK to change their behavior before the elections, but they can choose not to legitimize it. The U.S. consulate and the so-called "like-minded" foreign missions should understand the implications of a reflexive congratulations on a job well done, and reflect on an approach to the aftermath in a way that preserves leverage and influence over subsequent developments. ❖

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