
Election Outcomes and the Path to Government Formation

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After multiple delays, the elections have finally taken place, and the competition over vote counts between parties has concluded. Now comes the challenging post-election question: when and how will the new government be formed? Furthermore, what do the results signify, and what insights can they offer regarding the political future of the Kurdistan Region?

Contrary to predictions of a prolonged and arduous process of government formation, the likelihood of a government being established sooner than expected is quite high. However, before delving into that, it is crucial to examine the election results. While some parties have expressed dissatisfaction with the outcome, if we consider the preliminary results announced by the Election Commission, it is clear that the elections have not drastically altered the political landscape of the Kurdistan Region. Instead, they have solidified a powerful triangle of influence between the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and the New Generation (NG), positioning these three entities to have a greater impact on future events in the region than any other party.

Interpreting the Election Results

In the 2021 elections, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) garnered most of its votes from areas surrounding major cities. However, in 2024, the geographical spread of its support has expanded significantly. In the 2021 elections, KDP's primary challenge in Erbil was convincing urban voters, but according to the 2024 results, that concern has been resolved. The KDP not only gained significant votes in both urban and rural areas of the province but also secured around 60,000 more votes than the combined total of its six main rivals in Erbil, solidifying its position in the city. In Duhok, KDP's 2021 support was mainly concentrated in the central and northeastern parts of the province, particularly in the city center of Duhok; Zakho, and Semel districts. In contrast, in areas such as Amedi, Dira Luk, Sheladze, Akre, and Bardarash, other parties like the Islamic Union and PUK posed significant challenges despite the KDP's strong presence. This time, however, KDP managed to win a majority in Duhok, increasing its vote count by over 140,000 and surpassing the total votes of all other parties by 268,327. In Sulaimani and Halabja, the KDP saw an increase of 7,881 votes compared to the 2021 elections. While this is a positive gain, it is not as substantial as the changes observed in Erbil and Duhok.

For the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), these results present both advantages and challenges. On the one hand, the KDP made significant gains, securing 229,963 more votes compared to the 2021 elections, despite most rival parties targeting it directly or indirectly during their campaigns. This political success is likely to strengthen its relationships with Iraqi and Iranian Shiite factions, who may seek closer ties with the KDP. However, on the other hand, the outcome also raises concerns. Following the Iraqi provincial council elections, the political landscape in the provinces bordering the Kurdistan Region along the Diyala-Kirkuk-Mosul line has prompted some domestic and external factions to push for a new political design in the Kurdistan Region. This proposed shift could aim to weaken the KDP's influence, presenting a potential political challenge for the party in the near future.

Following the Iraqi provincial council elections, Turkey's strategy of expanding influence through the Turkmen has yielded limited success. In Kirkuk, a Turkmen was appointed as deputy governor, despite the opposition of the Turkmen Front, which garnered fewer than 2,000 votes across all its candidates in the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)

elections. As a result, Erbil's significance to Turkey in Ankara's Iraqi policy has grown, making it a key focal point. Moreover, Ankara is likely to rely more on the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) as Turkey embarks on a new phase of Kurdish openness. However, this outcome also poses challenges for the KDP. Due to the division of constituencies, the party has lost a notable number of seats, which could weaken its leverage during government formation negotiations.

Second, the election results marked a significant victory for the PUK. The party gained 193,425 more votes compared to 2021, maintaining its lead despite a slight loss of votes in Halabja. In Sulaimani and Erbil, the PUK nearly doubled its vote count. Meanwhile, key splinter groups such as Gorran and the People's Front failed to make substantial gains, allowing the PUK leader to not only revitalize the party but also solidify his position as its undisputed leader.

For the PUK, discontented voters in Erbil were a key target that many other parties were eager to win over. Among the Islamist parties eyeing the same voter base, the Kurdistan Islamic Union made a significant leap, increasing its votes nearly sixfold. In contrast, the Kurdistan Justice Group (Komel) saw little change, with its votes remaining close to previous levels. Despite efforts by the PUK leader to appeal to Islamist voters during the campaign, it seems the PUK's policy and agenda do not fully align with the preferences of the Islamists. The PUK faced its biggest challenge in Erbil from the New Generation, the People's Front, and the Halwest (Stance) Front. Of these, only the New Generation has emerged as a formidable rival, steadily increasing its votes in Erbil over the past three elections. In Duhok, the PUK's presence remained relatively modest, gaining only about 3,400 additional votes compared to 2021. Overall, the election was a significant test for the PUK leader, not only to solidify his role as the party's main authority but also to demonstrate his political acumen in leveraging this power during negotiations with the Kurdistan Democratic Party.

Third, New Generation's performance is noteworthy, as it has steadily increased its vote count in the 2018, 2021, and 2024 elections, despite lacking a strong party structure. It has now positioned itself as the leading voice of political opposition in the region.

Fourth, Islamic movements have gained strength in Erbil and Sulaymaniyah but have lost ground in Duhok. This shift may be linked to the KDP's strategy of leveraging traditional community ties, such as nominating candidates from various tribes, as both the KDP and Islamic movements draw support from a similar voter base. This could explain the significant rise in New Generation's votes in Duhok, where it more than doubled its 2021 vote count. In other words, Duhok voters who are less focused on religious affiliations appear to have turned toward alternatives like New Generation.

Fifth, the results also reveal that, aside from areas like Halabja, where the voter base is smaller, the influence of individual candidates in this election was minimal. The success of the parties, and even more so the party leaders, played a decisive role in mobilizing voters and securing votes, rather than the candidates themselves.

The shared percentage of votes of the three party candidates winning the constituencies				
Constituency	Parties' list number	Total vote	Candidate Number	Percentage
Sulaimani	129	256813	72	1.28
Sulaimani	157	136131	45	1.38
Sulaimani	190	57832	71	1.24
Erbil	190	345822	65	1.76
Erbil	129	110353	63	1.13
Erbil	157	103684	27	2.15
Duhok	190	400603	48	2
Duhok	157	46444	13	6.46
Duhok	148	42447	22	4.28
Halabja	129	12530	6	15.54
Halabja	148	7847	6	15.25
Halabja	190	4940	6	14.87

Source: Independent High Election Commission (IHEC)/Rudaw Research Center

Sixth, the election results revealed that a strong presence on social media and having a large number of followers does not necessarily translate into a significant influence on voter behavior. The limited number of votes garnered by several social media influencers and public figures with substantial followings made this evident.

Reasons for a Potential Early Government Formation

Historically, post-election governments in the Kurdistan Region have taken a considerable amount of time to form. While this process will still be challenging, it may not take as long as previous ones due to several key factors:

First, unlike previous elections with multiple potential scenarios for government formation, there is now one primary scenario: the government cannot be formed without both the PUK and KDP. The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) recognizes this and, throughout the election campaign and even now, has kept the door open for cooperation with the PUK. This mutual recognition of necessity between the two parties could expedite the formation process.

Second, the PUK's decision-making mechanisms are now more streamlined, making it possible for a summit or leadership meeting to resolve key issues more efficiently.

Third, given the current regional instability, external actors influencing the government formation process are likely to push for a quicker resolution. For the Iraqi government, the Shiite factions, and even Iran, prolonged uncertainty in the Kurdistan Region could exacerbate security risks. The ongoing conflict in the region has created a new strategic opportunity for the Kurds, with renewed international attention on the Kurdish issue and the rising importance of their role in both political and security matters.

For the first time in 45 years, Iran has appointed a Sunni Kurd as governor and normalized relations with the Kurdistan Region, signaling a shift in its approach. Meanwhile, Turkey, which is preparing to initiate a new phase in addressing the Kurdish issue, sees the normalization of relations between the PUK and KDP and the swift formation of a government as crucial. Even if the government formation process drags on, Turkey remains highly concerned, as any continued discord between the PUK and KDP would provide the PKK with greater room to maneuver.

Fourth, with another election approaching next year, the two main parties in the Kurdistan Region have limited time to win over voters once again. Prolonged discussions over government formation are not in their best interest, as it would be unwise to waste valuable time in lengthy negotiations.

Finally, personal dynamics between key figures in the PUK and KDP cannot be overlooked, as these may complicate negotiations. However, if both parties focus on the potential benefits and drawbacks of delaying, the formation of a government could be achieved more swiftly than in previous instances.