# All Change on Iraqi Kurdish Political Scene

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Third force now in second place, upsetting long tradition of power being contested or shared between two big parties.

For decades, just two parties have dominated the Iraqi Kurdish political scene – the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP). That division of power suffered an abrupt upset in September, when the election to Iraqi Kurdistan's regional parliament was won by the KDP, but second place was taken not by the PUK but by a relative newcomer, the Movement for Change.

The movement was established in 2009 by defectors from the PUK who were led by that party's previous number two, Nawshirwan Mustafa. They split from the PUK over political differences.

In the September election, the Movement for Change took 24 of the 111 seats in the Iraqi Kurdish parliament, more than the PUK's 18 and only 14 behind the KDP.

It was not that the movement made great gains; in fact it ended up with one seat less than it got after the last election, held in 2009. The difference was that the PUK and KDP ran as a coalition last time, and when they competed separately this year, the PUK lost 11 of the 29 seats it previously held, relegating it to third place.

The Movement for Change owes much of its success to the fact it is new, and hence untainted by the failures that inevitably come with wielding power over many years. In the last parliament, it operated as the opposition to the KDP-PUK alliance.

As its leader in parliament, Yousif Mohammed, put it, "Our popularity is growing because we have not had a hand in the government's mistakes."

Now it is in a position to bargain for more power, since the KDP does not have a simple majority in the regional parliament.

"The formation of a new government hasn't started yet, and we have not yet lobbied to get one of the top three posts," Mohammad said.

Professor Jotyar Adil, a lecturer in political science lecturer at Salahuddin University in Erbil province, sees the success of the Movement for Change as a natural consequence of declining confidence in the PUK among voters who believe the latter party has failed to deliver on past electoral pledges. That has driven many of the PUK's former supporters to defect.

Professor Adil underlines, however, that the context of the Movement for Change's emergence as a PUK offshoot means it cannot grow far beyond its present size and win support in non-Kurdish parts of Iraq.

"I don't think that the party will expand greatly widely within the next few years, as Iraqi people don't have a mature political culture that would prompt them to vote as citizens rather than as party members," he Adil said.

Leading PUK politician Adnan al-Mufti, a former speaker of the Iraqi Kurdistan parliament, defended his party's performance in government, and said it was all very well for opposition forces to sit and criticise when they did not carry any responsibility. The real test, he said, would come if the Movement for Change became part of a ruling coalition and had to start fulfilling promises to the electorate.

Mufti acknowledged that the PUK had been weakened, strengthening its new rival. One problem was the prolonged absence of its leader Jalal Talabani, who is Iraqi president and hence spends his time in Baghdad. The KDP's Massoud Barzani is president of Iraqi Kurdistan, and thus very visible in the region.

Professor Adil says the September election, in which new rules required the KDP and PUK to run separately rather than as a bloc, showed the real popularity of the main parties

"The half-open list [where candidates are nominated by individual parties], which was applied for the first time in a Kurdistan election, motivated people to participate widely, and we can say it helped show the true size of each of the three main political parties," he said.

**Laith Hammoudi is IWPR's editor in Iraq.**

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