

Democratization and Political Participation as Indicators of Political Development in the KRI: the role of the two ruling political parties

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Abstract

The Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was formed in 1992 following the first elections held in the Kurdish autonomous region geographically situated in northern Iraq, after the Kurdish uprising against the Baath Regime. Since its inception, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) has been ruled by two major political parties, specifically the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). There is a prevailing, but unsubstantiated impression among the general population, that the impact of these two political parties on the political development in KRI is predominantly negative rather than positive. The authors of this article intend to examine that claim by exploring the role of the two main political parties in the political development of the Kurdistan Region. In searching for an answer to this inquiry, the article starts with a conceptualization of political development and two of its indicators, namely democratization and political participation. Subsequently, a concise overview of the political context of the formation and development of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the political procedures in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is provided. The authors conducted a questionnaire among KRI's public university students to determine their perception of the role of two political parties in political development in the KRI. In the final section, the methodology is explained and the results of the survey are analyzed.

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پوخته‌ی توژینه

دیموکراتیزه کردن و به‌شداریکردنی سیاسی وه‌ک نیشاندهری گه‌شه‌سەندنی سیاسی له ههریمی

کوردستان- عیراق: رۆلی ههردوو پارتە سیاسییه ده‌سه‌لاتداره‌که

دوابه‌دوای راپه‌پینی کوردان دژ به رژی می به‌عس، حکومه‌تی ههریمی کوردستانی عیراق له سالی ۱۹۹۲ دروستبوو، دوای به‌ریوه‌چوونی به‌که‌م هه‌لبژاردن له ناوچه‌ی ئۆتۆنۆمی کوردستان که له رووی وجونگرافیه‌وه دکه‌ویته باکورری عیراق. له سه‌ره‌تای دروستبویه‌وه، ههردوو پارتی سه‌ره‌کی (پارتی دیموکراتی کوردستان و یه‌کیتی نیشتمانی کوردستان) حوکمی ههریمی کوردستانیان کردوو. له ناو‌خه‌لکدا، بۆ‌چووێک هه‌یه، هه‌رچه‌نده به به‌لگه‌ی ئە‌کادیمی نه‌سه‌لمی‌تراوه، که رۆلی ههردوو پارتە سه‌ره‌کیه‌که له گه‌شه‌سەندنی سیاسی ههریمی کوردستان، زیاتر رۆلیکی نه‌ری‌نیه، نه‌ک ئە‌ری‌نی. ههردوو نووسه‌ری ئە‌م توژینه‌وه‌یه ده‌یان‌ه‌وێت ئە‌و بۆ‌چوونه‌ کنه‌ بکه‌ن و به‌دوای وه‌لامی ئە‌و پرسه‌دا بگه‌رین که بریتیه له رۆلی ههردوو پارتە سیاسییه ده‌سه‌لاتداره‌که‌ی ههریمی کوردستانی عیراق له گه‌شه‌ی سیاسی ههریمدا. له سه‌ره‌تای توژینه‌وه‌که‌دا، چه‌مکی گه‌شه‌سەندنی سیاسی روونده‌کریته‌وه و پاشان دوان له ئاماژه‌کانی گه‌شه‌سەندنی سیاسی باسه‌دکرین که پرۆسه‌ی به‌ دیموکراسی‌بوون و به‌شداری سیاسی. دواتر، بۆ ئاسان تێگه‌بشتنی خوینەر و هه‌ر په‌یوه‌ست به‌ پرسی توژینه‌وه‌که‌وه، پاشخانیکی کوردتی پرۆسه‌ی دروستبوون گه‌شه‌سەندنی ههریم و پرۆسه‌ی سیاسی‌کانی ده‌کریت. به‌مه‌به‌ستی پێوانه‌کردنی ههردوو ئاماژه‌کانی به‌دیموکراسی‌بوون و به‌شداری سیاسی، توژیه‌ران راپرسیان له ناو خویندکارانی زانکۆ حموکه‌میه‌کانی ههریمدا ئە‌نجامداوه تاوه‌کو بۆ‌چونیان بزائن ده‌رباره‌ی رۆلی ئە‌م دوو پارتە سه‌ره‌کیه له گه‌شه‌سەندنی سیاسی ههریمی کوردستاندا. له کۆتاییدا ئە‌و میتۆده‌ی به‌کارهێنراوه باسکراوه و به‌ره‌نجامه‌کانی راپه‌سه‌که‌ش شیکراوه‌ته‌وه.

ملخص البحث

الديمقراطية والمشاركة السياسية كمؤشرات للتنمية السياسية في إقليم كردستان - العراق: دور

الحزبين السياسيين الحاكمين

تأسست حكومة إقليم كردستان في عام ۱۹۹۲ في أعقاب أول انتخابات أجريت في المنطقة الكردية التي كانت تتمتع بالحكم الذاتي الواقعة جغرافياً في شمال العراق، في أعقاب الانتفاضة الكوردستانية ضد نظام البعث. ومنذ إنشائها، حكم إقليم كردستان حزبان سياسيان رئيسيان، تحديداً الحزب الديمقراطي الكوردستاني والاتحاد الوطني الكوردستاني. وهناك انطباع سائد، ولكن غير مبرهن أكاديمياً، بين عامة السكان بأن تأثير هذين الحزبين السياسيين على التنمية السياسية في إقليم كردستان سلبي على الغالب، وليس إيجابياً. يعترزم مؤلفاً هذا البحث فحص هذا الادعاء من خلال استكشاف دور الحزبين السياسيين الرئيسيين في التنمية السياسية لإقليم كردستان. في البحث عن إجابة لهذه الاشكالية، تبدأ المقالة بدراسة مفهوم التنمية السياسية ومؤشرين من مؤشراتهما، وهما سير العملية الديمقراطية والمشاركة السياسية. وبعد ذلك، يتم تقديم لمحة موجزة عن السياق السياسي لنشأة حكومة إقليم كردستان وتطورها والإجراءات السياسية فيها المتعلقة بالاشكالية البحث. أجرى المؤلفون استبياناً بين طلاب الجامعات الحكومية في إقليم كردستان لتحديد تصورهم لدور الحزبين الرئيسيين في التنمية السياسية في الإقليم. وفي القسم الأخير، تم شرح المنهجية المتبعة وقمنا بتحليل نتائج الاستبيان.

Introduction

Political development became a key focus in political science after World War II and decolonization, driven by the need to address the challenges faced by newly independent nations. Political development is shaped by factors such as institutional strength, stability, and leadership, with political parties playing a central role. They are both a product and catalyst of political development, crucial in representing the populace and fostering democratic principles. Political parties, as key actors, can both contribute to and impede political development broadly, particularly in the consolidation of democratic values and political participation. The existing research, utilizing a mixed-method approach, aims to explore the role of both ruling political parties in the context of political development, particularly focusing on the aspects of democracy and political participation. The central research question is: *What role do the two ruling parties play in democracy and political participation as key dimensions of political development?*

Several studies have explored political development in the Kurdistan Region, focusing on geography, religion, demographics, and history. In 2016, Hiwa Majid Khalil's research identified two main obstacles to political development: internal and external factors. Internally, the centrality of Kurdish political parties in decision-making and the traditional structure of Kurdish society are key challenges, while externally; interference from neighboring countries is a significant impediment.

Aram Naji Mohammed's 2017 study, 'The Role of Parties in the Political Development of Post-Conflict Societies: A Case Study of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq', examines the role of political parties in post-conflict societies. The study uses a mixed-method approach, examining the concepts of political parties, historical contexts, and mechanisms of political development. It concludes that post-conflict societies experience institutional collapse and weakness, accompanied by a lack of trust between parties, which hampers political development. It suggests that political parties can address these crises by reaching compromises, drafting a universally accepted constitution, upholding the rule of law, and fostering national unity.

Gareth Stansfield's 2003 study, 'Iraqi Kurdistan: Political Development and Emergent Democracy', explores the political evolution of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and its progression toward democratic governance. The study assesses the KRI's progress toward democratic governance, addressing issues such as political

pluralism, electoral processes, and governance challenges. It identifies major challenges to democratization in the KRI, including internal political conflicts, regional instability, and economic pressures. Opportunities for advancement include strengthening democratic institutions, improving political accountability, and enhancing regional cooperation.

Hamid Reza Jalapour and Barzan Hassan's article titled 'The Role of Parties in Political Development: The Kurdistan Region of Iraq as an example' examines the role of political parties in political development in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. The study uses a qualitative approach and interviews to evaluate the role of parties in political development. The research concludes that political parties in Kurdistan have made significant progress in political development since 1991, with the establishment of an autonomous government and state institutions.

Barzan Jawhar Sadiq's 2020 study examines the level of political confidence in the Kurdistan Region's political system, finding that public political confidence is weak, with citizens expressing distrust in both official and informal institutions.

What sets our study apart is its specific focus on the role of political parties, particularly the two dominant ones, the PUK and the KDP, in the context of political development. Our research methodology is also distinctive, as it employs a mixed-methods approach combined with a questionnaire. Additionally, our study is differentiated by the unique characteristics of our research sample and the specific period under investigation. The research is significant because it directly pertains to the political rights of citizens in the Kurdistan Region, affecting individuals' daily lives and experiences.

Theoretical background

It is challenging to establish a precise definition of the concept of political development. Scholars have numerous perspectives, each offering a distinct interpretation of the issue. Rustow, for example, describes political development as achieving greater national political cohesion while expanding the scope of political involvement. Riggs asserts that political development pertains to politicization, which involves the augmentation of citizen participation or involvement in state activities, power calculations, and their implications (Huntington, 1965). According to Plano and Riggs, 'political development refers to the process of growth and transformation

within political systems, or the transition from one system to another, typically resulting in an increased ability of the government to effectively handle the demands placed upon it (Riggs, 1981). According to Coleman, political development refers to the ongoing interplay between the processes of structural differentiation, the need for equality, and the ability of a political system to integrate, respond, and adapt (Sandbrook, 1976).

According to Almond (1969), political development is contingent upon the ability of political systems to effectively address the challenges that arise throughout periods of political, social, and economic transformation. According to Cutright (1969), a politically advanced society possesses national political institutions that are more intricate and specialized compared to a less politically advanced nation. He held the belief that the level of political growth could be quantified by the pace at which nations progress in their political institutions. Based on Huntington (1965), political development is the process of establishing and formalizing political organizations and procedures. The strength of any organization relies on the extent of support it receives from various societal strata and its level of institutionalization in terms of adaptability, complexity, autonomy, and coherence. Nevertheless, Huntington's term is ambiguous as institutionalization can be associated with both democratic and non-democratic political systems. Coleman (2015) emphasizes the significance of education and highlights that its function in educating both the general public and political leaders should not be overlooked. He had the belief that a well-informed population would be more engaged in politics, while a knowledgeable political elite could help bridge the divide between the ruling class and the general public.

Nye (1967) correlated political development with the progression toward modernization and the effectiveness of governmental frameworks and procedures in addressing societal transformations. This equation is closely connected to the legitimacy of government since it affects the level of participation of a significant portion of the population in societal processes. According to Joseph Nye, political development or decay refers to the increase or decrease in a society's governing institutions and processes' ability to sustain their legitimacy throughout time. Almond and Powell define political development as how the political system reacts to changes in its societal or international surroundings. This includes how the system

deals with the challenges of establishing a state, building a nation, promoting participation, and distributing resources (Huntington, 1966).

In line with Myron Weiner, political development refers to the ability of a political system to effectively address integration issues. According to him, industrialized states have a higher level of integration compared to emerging states. The lack of adequate response from governing elite groups to social changes and demands is seen as the primary challenge for developing governments, particularly in terms of national and territorial integration (Weiner, 1965). Cammack (1994) posited that the primary focus of political development was the efforts made to engage the general population, particularly in emerging nations. Pye (1965) considered building democracy as a dimension of political development. Furthermore, according to Joseph Lapalombara (2006), the trend of political development must be generally democratic rather than anti-democratic.

The Indicators of Political Development

Political scientists hold divergent views on the indicators of political development. Each researcher employs various terms to describe the indicators in their research, such as characteristics (Huntington, 1965, Weiner and Lapalombara, 1966), features (Packenham, 1964), criteria (Almond and Powell, 1966), or dimensions (Pye, 1965). However, particular indicators are commonly found among them. We endeavor to cite certain indicators identified by scholars. Identifying the specific political development indicators is a challenging endeavor. Lucian Pye (1963) argues that it is not possible to use a single scale to measure the extent of political development. Nye (1967) underscored the challenge associated with quantifying political development. He contends that economic progress may be assessed using states' National Growth per capita, but there are no units or scales available for measuring political development.

In his work, Huntington (1965) aims to provide a comprehensive description of political development and identifies four key aspects, including the rationalization of political processes and institutions. This involves striving for universality rather than being limited to a restricted, local context, and focusing on the distinctiveness of the system in terms of its functioning and accomplishments. Huntington identified national integration as the second aspect of political development, which involves the

establishment of nation-building that is not solely centered on one ethnicity. The third attribute pertains to the process of democratization, which emphasizes political plurality, equality, and rivalry among different political factions. The final aspect to consider is mobilization and involvement, which plays a crucial role in driving social change across all domains and in enhancing political engagement and transitioning from a local-focused political system to a national one.

Pye (1965) posited that political development had three distinct features across several domains. First of all, equality pertains to political culture and the dedication to the system, while also emphasizing the active participation of individuals. The level of civic engagement in the political process should be enhanced. Their role should transition from being ordinary citizens to becoming active participants, particularly concerning universalistic legislation and the promotion of equality among themselves. Moreover, the political system's ability to address popular demands, alleviate serious societal tensions, and improve the economic condition. Capacity, in a more precise sense, refers to the ability to efficiently execute public policy within a logical and non-religious administration. The final common feature in political development is the process of diversification and specialization in the construction of institutions. Differentiation refers to the process of dividing institutions into distinct portions, each with its specialized specialties. Furthermore, differentiation does not imply the fragmentation of various components of the state's agencies. Instead, it refers to the allocation of separate and restricted functions to function as a unified entity. In his paper "Education and Political Development," Coleman (2015) reaffirmed that political development is the interrelation between the processes of difference, equality, and adaptability within the political system. As stated by Bashiriah (2004), political development is attained by the establishment of diverse institutions within the political framework, leading to a fundamentally impersonal and stable political environment, as well as a reduction in political violence. Furthermore, it is essential to maintain a consistent level of political engagement and rivalry, while ensuring that the legal institutions maintain a high degree of legitimacy. In addition, political development refers to the achievement of a contemporary political society that exhibits features such as adherence to the rule of law, logical decision-making, and a strong level of cohesion and coordination within the government framework (Ziba Kalam and Moqtadaie, 2014).

In his study, Sarie Alqalam discusses key indicators of political development. 1- Promote positive individualism. 2- Education is a crucial foundation that must be incorporated into community development. 3- It is important for individuals to acquire knowledge and skills in collaborative work methodologies. 4- Non-governmental groups within the social system should strive to be efficient and proactive. 5- The process of selecting individuals should be determined by their performance in competitive assessments, their skills, and their shown merit (Ziba Kalam and Moqtadaie, 2014). Joseph Lapalombara (2006) argues that political progress should primarily lean towards democracy rather than being opposed to it. Furthermore, he held the belief that there exists a robust correlation between bureaucracy and political progress. An efficient bureaucracy can facilitate the transition from a traditional to a modern economy. Implementing a well-organized administrative structure that rewards individuals based on their abilities can effectively reduce the influence of political organizations and combat corruption. Furthermore, when embarking on the journey of nation-building and political development, every nation must have a pragmatic outlook on the pace at which political and administrative institutions can be established.

Weiner and Joseph Lapalombara (1966) highlighted political engagement as a defining aspect of political development in their study, "The Impact of Parties on Political Development." From their perspective, urbanization, advancements in communications, and improvements in education have heightened the desire for individuals to engage and participate. Nevertheless, the political system's reaction to the public's demand for participation is diverse, encompassing methods such as repression, mobilization, and admission.

Almond and Powell (1966) propose that political development can be assessed based on three criteria: structural differentiation, subsystem autonomy, and cultural secularization. They asserted that political development refers to the political system's ability to adapt to changes in its local and international environment, particularly in areas such as state-building, nation-building, participation, and income distribution within society.

In his paper "The Idea of Political Development: From Dignity to Efficiency," Eckstein presents certain criteria that must be present in a political system to be considered politically mature. According to Eckstein (1982), political development is

linked to the democratic process, the professionalization and formalization of politics, nation-building, the government's ability to handle crises, and the capacity to redistribute wealth. Weiner and Binder (1971) discuss the importance of interaction between three key processes: structural differentiation, the imperatives of equality, and the ability for political development. Binder defines structural differentiation as the division and specificity of functions within a state's institutions, the equal distribution of rights among its residents, and the capacity of the political system to adapt and respond to the demands of the people.

Charles Cnudde (1972) argues that for a state to be considered politically developed, it must possess not only democracy as a component of political development, but also a democratic system, political equality, and stability. Acemoglu and Robinson (2006) regarded democracy as the primary determinant of a politically advanced system. Furthermore, Pye identifies democratic political development as one of the prominent aspects of political development. According to Pye (1965), a state that is more politically evolved tends to have more improvements in democracy, particularly in terms of free institutions, popular sovereignty, and increased liberty for its population.

In conclusion, the aforementioned researchers hold contrasting views on the indicators of political growth. According to Pakenham (1964), Huntington (1965), Pye (1965), Coleman (1965), Weiner and Joseph Lapalombara (1966), Winham (1970), Binder (1971), Cnudde (1972), Eckstein (1982), Cammack (1994), Bashiriah (2004), one important factor in political development is the process of democratization, which includes the concept of political participation. This is considered a crucial indicator, along with other factors such as structural differentiation and national integration. Therefore, this paper only concentrates on quantifying the notions of democratization and political participation.

A brief introduction of the KRG and the two ruling political parties

The KRG was established in 1992 after the first elections were held in May in which, except of the KDP and the PUK, none of the other political parties could surpass the 7% threshold. That election (Kurdistan Parliament-Iraq,1992, Law no. 1) was based on a ruling by the Kurdish Front that was forced to replace the Iraqi government authorities who decided to withdraw the administrative governmental

offices from, approximately, the areas now under the KRG. This administrative vacuum had to be filled by alternative offices that were both legitimate and accountable. The election resulted in the KDP and PUK being dominant in the Kurdistan Parliament, each with fifty seats out of a hundred (in addition to five seats dedicated to the non-Muslim minorities by decision of the Kurdish Front) (Kurdistan Parliament-Iraq,1992, Law no. 1). The Kurdistan Parliament issued fundamental laws including Law no. 3 in 1992 for the formation of the KRG.

Furthermore, a formula was invented known as 50/50 to fill in the governmental positions starting from the prime ministers down to general directors. The KRG was established and all the positions were filled equally.

Civil wars took place in the Kurdistan Region starting from the end of 1993, The most devastating among them was between the KDP and PUK which resulted in the division of government into two, one under the KDP and one under the PUK, the parliament was paralyzed, and the region was partitioned to the two mentioned zones informally, yet influentially. So far, even after the end of the civil war between the two parties in 1998 the establishment of a unified government in 2005, and the KDP-PUK strategic agreement, the two zones practically exist and influence the daily life of people and politics.

Following the downfall of the Ba'ath dictatorship, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), and other Kurdish political parties played a crucial role in the process of rebuilding Iraq. The Kurdistan Region was officially acknowledged as an autonomous region with its own governing body and constitution. In 2004, the PUK and KDP reached an agreement to synchronize their duties. This agreement was further solidified in 2006 through the Strategic Agreement, which assigned important positions to each party and implemented a system of rotating presidency for the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and parliament (Arif, 2022).

The Kurdistan Region is confronted with difficulties arising from the lack of a constitution that precisely establishes the political framework and demarcates the jurisdiction of the primary authorities and institutions. The political system in the Kurdistan Region is characterized by a certain degree of ambiguity. From 2005 to 2018, the government functioned under a semi-presidential system, which included a prime minister, a cabinet, and a president who was chosen directly

(Abdullah and Hama, 2020). Starting from 2018, the Kurdistan Region has been functioning under a parliamentary system. The position of president remains, but the president is now elected by parliament and with restricted authority. The office of the Prime Minister holds the main authority. Although the political system of the Kurdistan territory has been a multi-party system since its establishment, both as a de facto entity and then as an officially recognized territory after 2005, it is mostly controlled by the PUK and the KDP. These two parties are the main and most influential powers in the political environment of the region, with each having influence over their own territory. Throughout this timeframe, both parties have successfully replaced state institutions, exercising authority over all crucial sectors, such as administrative, security, military, and judicial responsibilities.

Methodology

As mentioned earlier, scholars used many indicators, such as democratization, political participation, structural differentiation, and legitimacy, to assess political development in a specific country. In this article, the researchers try to measure the influence of the two ruling parties on the political development of the Kurdistan Region. The primary emphasis of this article is solely on the democratization and political participation indicators.

To examine the primary inquiry of this study, which pertains to the degree to which the governing political parties have influenced the political development of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, a series of questions were posed to students enrolled in different public universities within the Kurdistan Region.

To assess the influence of the two main political parties on the political development in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, it was essential to establish a data collection method that covers the areas controlled by the two ruling political parties, namely the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). These areas are commonly and informally known as the “yellow zone” controlled by the KDP and the “green zone” controlled by the PUK. The yellow zone covers essentially the Duhok and Erbil governorates, while the green zone covers mostly the Halabja and Sulaymaniyah governorates.

In order to conduct our survey, it was necessary to have a population. The demographic makeup of our population comprises university students between the

ages of 18 and 24. One of the reasons for selecting public university students to survey is the representativeness of our samples. Public universities in the Kurdistan Region attract students from various governorates, towns, districts, subdistricts, and villages. Therefore, it is quite probable that they approximately reflect the overall population. Moreover, assuming that a significant proportion of students at public colleges originate from low- or middle-income households, then they constitute the majority of the families residing in the Kurdistan Region.

Out of the twenty public universities in the Kurdistan Region, ten public universities were chosen as samples. The following universities are chosen, yet listed in no particular order: Salahaddin University, University of Sulaimani, University of Duhok, Koya University, Soran University, the University of Zakho, University of Raparin, Halabja University, Garmian University, and Charmo University. The selection of these universities, among others, was done using a non-random sampling method since the researchers aimed to enhance representativeness. To increase the demographic representativeness of our sample. First, the researchers selected five universities in each of the zones. Then, we tried to geographically balance the selection process within each zone. In governorates and independent administrations where there were two or more public universities, only one university was chosen. Finally, the students enrolled at these colleges do not only come from the governorate or independent administration in which they reside, but various parts of the region.

A total of 550 students were surveyed, with 55 students selected from each of the ten public universities. The researchers disseminated 550 questionnaires, of which 35 questionnaires were invalidated due to being either returned in an improperly completed or not returned at all. The selection of students at each university was completely random. The questionnaires were not confined to specific colleges or faculties but rather disseminated in public areas of universities that are accessible to all students, such as cafeterias and recreational gardens. Upon distributing the forms, the researchers ensured the participants' comfort by positioning themselves at a distance from where the questionnaires were being filled. In addition to demographic questions, participants were asked six questions pertaining to freedom of expression, freedom of assembly, and political involvement in order to assess democratization and political participation indicators.

A significant constraint of our study was the development of our research questionnaire. This was a result of two main factors. Initially, there were no available precise questionnaires on the political development that we could conveniently utilize. As a result, we were compelled to develop our own questionnaire. Creating the questionnaire required a significant amount of effort in order to accurately represent the key criteria and conditions for democracy, political participation, and structural differentiation that were discussed by scholars and political scientists in the conceptual chapter.

The second rationale was that the prevailing inquiries and standards for assessing democratic procedures and structural differentiation were commonly tailored for a whole region or nation. They specifically examined the presence of freedom of assembly or demonstration in the country, the independence of the judiciary, and the government's capacity to effectively address the demands of the people.

In order to accurately capture the influence of political parties, particularly the ruling parties, on political development, it was imperative to revise the questions and criteria used in our study. As an illustration, we modified the questions to evaluate the level of freedom citizens have in criticizing the ruling political parties in the Kurdistan Region, the capacity of the opposition to hold demonstrations, and the extent of control exerted by the ruling parties over the judiciary. The process of altering the questions was systematically implemented for all inquiries in the questionnaire.

In designing the questionnaire, we made an effort to include criteria from the Freedom House Index (Freedom House Survey, 2014) and ideas from political scientists who specialize in democracy and political engagement, with a particular focus on Robert Dahl's perspectives (1998).

The results were the questions that are put in the following table.

Presenting the Survey Results

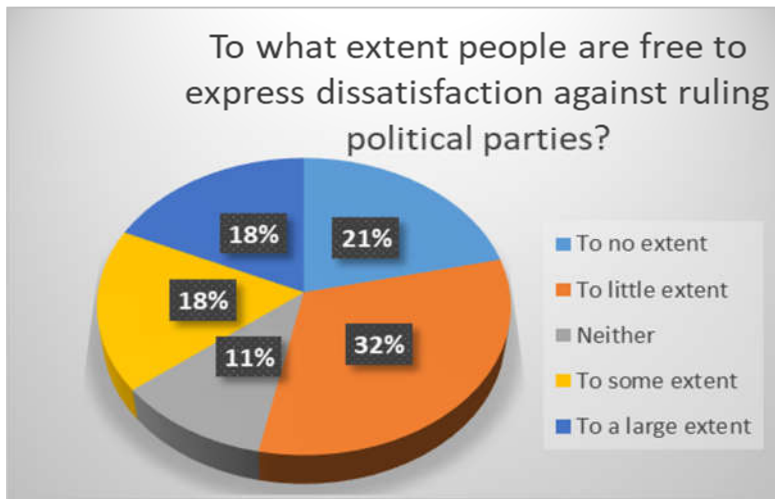
The process of democratization and political participation is the first and foremost common feature of political development mentioned by almost all political thinkers and scientists previously. In this regard, the below topic is dedicated to raising several important issues in the democratic process and linking them to the ruling political parties such as freedom of expression and criticizing, the significance

of individuals' viewpoints, the smooth and orderly transition of authority, right to peaceful assembly, information accessibility, and engagement in the electoral process.

First: Freedom of Expression and Criticizing

Freedom of expression and criticism are essential political rights in countries that have liberal democratic political systems. Freedom of expression grants individuals the ability to voice their opinions, engage in the interchange of ideas, and actively participate in political and civil discussions that benefit society (Trager & Dickerson, 1999, pp.1-4).

According to the majority of participants, citizens in the Kurdistan Region lack the freedom to openly express their opinions and criticize the prevailing political parties. Overall, 53% of the participants hold the belief that individuals do not have the freedom to criticize the ruling political parties, as indicated in the Figure below. According to the same data, 38% of individuals say that there is freedom of criticism. 11% of respondents feel that citizens have an appropriate level of freedom to criticize, neither excessive nor insufficient.



The apprehensions and anxieties that individuals have around the act of criticizing those in power and the governing political parties are justified. On December 17, 2017, Euro-MED Human Rights Monitor reported that five

individuals were killed and 70 were injured while demanding reform and payment of employees' financial entitlements. Additionally, security forces and police arrested nearly 200 citizens in less than two months. The citizens' protests stemmed from the Kurdistan Regional Government's failure to address the issue of unpaid salaries dating back to 2014. Subsequently, the demonstrators' demands evolved into a call for the government's resignation. In addition, according to the aforementioned research, around 70 citizens were detained and incarcerated without undergoing any inquiry in the year 2020 (Euro-Med Human Rights Monitor, 2020, pp.6-14).

The recent international report, compiled by the Human Rights Office (HRO) of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) UNAMI/OHCHR, highlights the detention of numerous civil society activists, journalists, and human rights defenders. These individuals were not only arrested for their involvement in protests but also for their efforts in organizing and supporting such demonstrations. The UNAMI/OHCHR study cites 33 instances of arbitrary incarceration, where the reasons for imprisonment are unknown, and legal representatives were denied access to their clients. Several individuals have been incarcerated for extended periods, ranging from days to even months, without being shown before a judge as required within 24 hours, as stated by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in 2021, p.9).

Human Rights Watch, an international NGO, not only highlights the presence of surveillance and coercion against critics and advocates for freedom but also suggests that the authorities of the Kurdistan Regional Government are utilizing relevant legislation to curtail freedom of speech. An instance of this is the Prevention of Misuse of Communication Devices Act, as reported by (Human Rights Watch in 2020).

As per Article 2 of Law No.6, titled "Prohibiting the Misuse of Communication Devices," individuals who employ telephones, wired or wireless communication devices, or online platforms to engage in activities such as making threats, leveling accusations, issuing insults, disseminating false information, or inciting fear, as well as those who capture and distribute unauthorized photographs and videos, will face penalties of imprisonment ranging from six months to five years, or fines ranging

from one million to five million dinars (Kurdistan National Council-Iraq, 2008).

Curiously, according to Human Rights Watch's report, it is necessary to acquire permission for filming and capturing images and videos. However, the report does not provide details on the specific process or the individuals from whom permission should be sought. As to the report, in 2019, security forces apprehended an individual in Duhok for capturing recordings of protests in Sheladze town against Turkish bombardment and thereafter sharing them on his account. The individual was apprehended for contravening Article 2 of Law No. 6, which prohibits the unauthorized dissemination of videos through communication devices (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

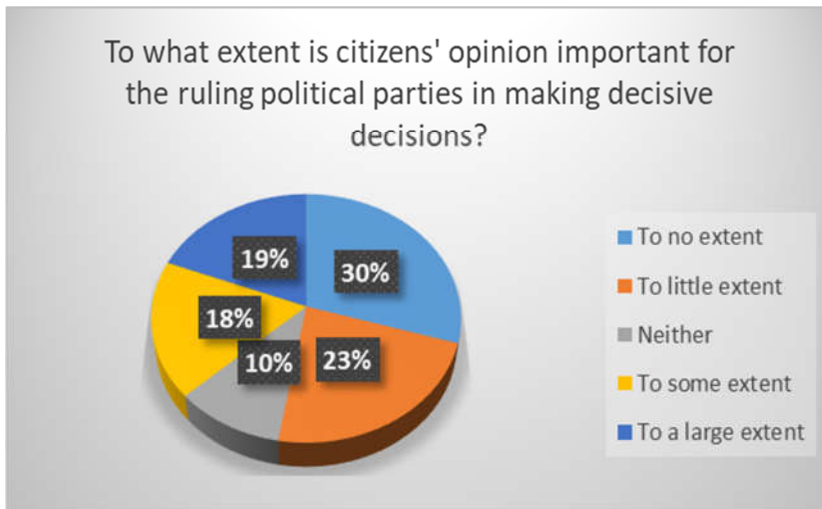
Amnesty International's study emphasizes the efforts to suppress freedom of expression and detain activists and journalists without a valid arrest warrant by the security forces of the ruling parties in Duhok province. The research highlights instances of journalists and civil society activists facing intimidation and harassment while working on corruption cases and expressing criticism towards the authorities in the Kurdistan Region. Furthermore, a total of 47 journalists and activists were apprehended, subjected to intimidation, and slandered while carrying out their duties with a local entity known as Metro Center between the years 2023 and the first quarter of 2024. Additionally, within four years before the release of this report by Amnesty International (2024), numerous journalists were compelled to depart from the Kurdistan Region due to apprehension of reprisals from the authorities.

Second: the significance of individuals' viewpoints

Regarding the degree to which individuals' opinions are significant and taken into account while making crucial choices in the country, According to American political thinker Robert Dahl, citizens should not only be directly involved in creating and making decisions, but they should also have control over government programs and objectives through their representatives. Dahl argues that an essential aspect of democracy is the requirement for government policies to be transparent and inclusive, allowing individuals to participate in making important decisions. According to Dahl, the ultimate authority is with the people, who own sovereignty (Dahl, 1998, pp.83-84).

As depicted in the Figure below, an equal proportion of respondents (53%)

believe that political parties do not deem the opinion of citizens significant when making crucial choices in the country. 10% of the participants provided a neutral response, whilst 37% expressed the belief that the ruling parties consider citizens' opinions significant in crucial decisions inside the country.

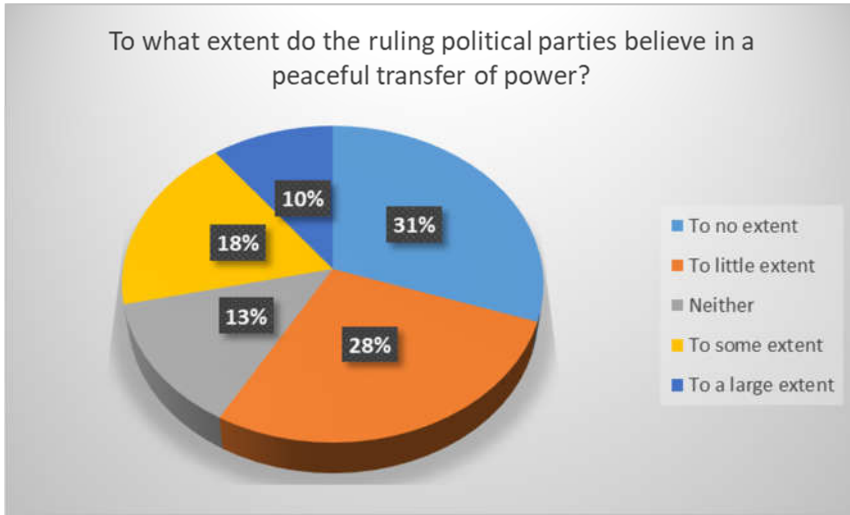


Third: the smooth and orderly transition of authority

Beetham argues that trust in the peaceful transfer of power, in addition to freedom of expression, freedom of association, free and fair elections, and other democratic characteristics, serves as the fundamental basis of democracy. The democratic process cannot be fully established without a nonviolent handover of authority. Upon the occurrence of free and fair elections within the nation, if the ruling party experiences defeat, it acknowledges the election outcomes and relinquishes authority to the victorious party. The crucial aspect of solidifying democracy lies not in the winner seizing power, but rather in the ruling party's acceptance of defeat and willingness to transfer power (Beetham, 1994, pp.160-161).

The incidence of unfavorable responses regarding the ruling political parties' commitment to a peaceful transfer of power in the Kurdistan Region is higher compared to prior inquiries. Approximately 60% of individuals hold the belief that the ruling political parties lack faith in a peaceful transition of power, as depicted in below Figure. Conversely, a mere 28% of participants hold the belief that the ruling

parties will willingly relinquish power to the winners in the event of electoral defeat, while 13% maintain a neutral stance.



One reason why people assume that the PUK and KDP do not support a peaceful transfer of power is due to the equal division of power and cabinets between them. The fifty-fifty division originated from the first Kurdistan elections, when the PUK declined to accept a 51% to 49% outcome. It was subsequently renewed in 2006 as a strategic agreement between the two parties. This separation has not only resulted in the distribution of government positions and authority between the two prevailing political parties, but it has also established a form of cartel where all other parties have been excluded or made submissive to the dominant parties (Rodgers, 2023). According to a statement from a prominent member of the PUK leadership, their influence will persist even if they secure just one seat, as they own guns and will not permit anyone to disarm them (Rudaw, 2018). This could be definitive evidence that these political parties lack faith in a nonviolent transition of authority.

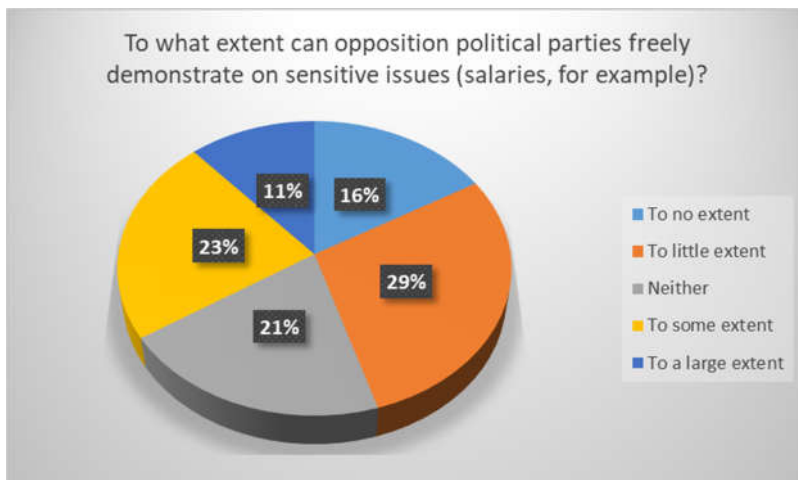
This fosters a sense among the populace that the two prevailing political parties have apportioned power amongst themselves due to a lack of trust and belief in one another. They fear that if either party were to gain more strength, it would seek to dismantle or undermine the other, rather than peacefully transferring authority.

Fourth: Right to Peaceful Assembly

An essential characteristic and fundamental tenet of every contemporary democratic government is the presence and liberty of a potent opposition. Robert Dahl recognizes the significance of political opposition in various aspects, such as facilitating political competition, expanding opportunities for citizen participation in politics, promoting rational decision-making within the country, managing tensions peacefully, and reducing violence (Dahl, 1967, pp.229-230).

Demonstrations in the Kurdistan Region are regulated under Law No. 11 on Organizing Demonstrations, which was enacted in 2010. Demonstrations and mass meetings are regarded by the law as fundamental democratic and civil rights of any political party, organization, or group. In accordance with legislation, demonstrations must receive authorization from either the regional minister or the city-level governor and head of administration. The determination of the location, timing, and objective of the demonstration must be carried out by the demonstration organizing committee and submitted to the appropriate institutions with a minimum notice of 48 hours. If there is a failure to respond to their request within the stipulated term as mentioned in Article 4 of the law, they will be deemed as being granted a license (Kurdistan Region of Iraq, 2010).

According to the below figure, 45% of respondents say that opposition parties are restricted from organizing demonstrations on sensitive matters such as pay. Among the citizens surveyed, 21% expressed neutrality, while 34% said that opposition parties have the freedom to demonstrate on any issue in the country.

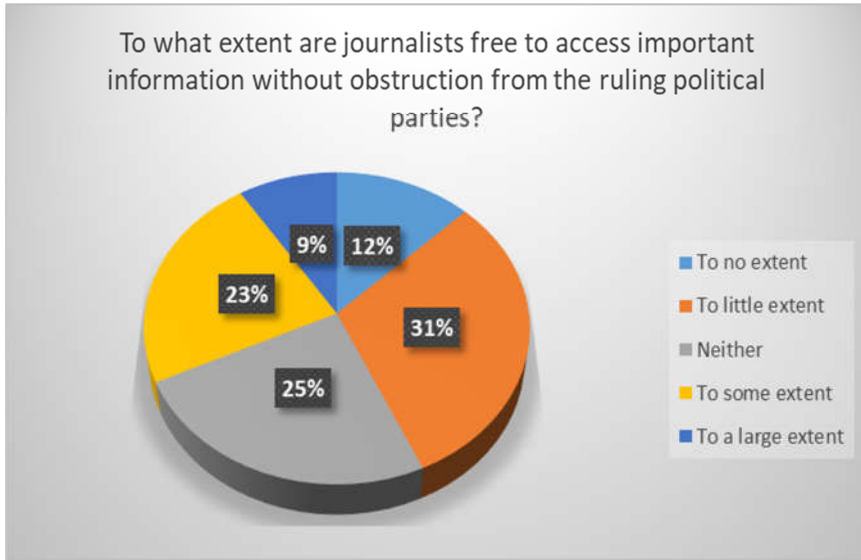


The respondents' less favorable voting can be attributed to a series of demonstrations and gatherings that took place between 2009 and 2023. These events focused on a range of issues such as service improvement, political reform, changing the political system, eradicating corruption, and addressing salary concerns. Since 2016, the demand for better salaries has become a primary concern for employees and teachers. Despite the infrequent authorization of demonstrations by the authorities due to concerns over national security, individuals have nevertheless planned or taken part in protests to different extents. Nevertheless, in every instance of these rallies, the police resorted to employing force to apprehend activists and quell the protest.

Fifth: Information Accessibility

According to Robert Dahl, a crucial aspect of democracy is the citizens' comprehensive comprehension of the government's decisions and policies, particularly those that have a direct impact on their lives and well-being. To achieve this objective, Dahl highlights the democratic necessity of ensuring freedom of access to information. This means that citizens must be able to obtain the required knowledge to have a comprehensive and correct understanding. Therefore, it is crucial that political authorities or any political organization or party in the country do not have control or influence over various sources of information, as this might manipulate the opinions and attitudes of the people and public opinion (Dahl, 1998, p.86).

The pie chart below demonstrates that 43% of respondents feel that journalists lack the freedom to access crucial information, with ruling political parties being identified as the main obstacle preventing them from obtaining information that can shape public opinion and citizens' perspectives in the region. Conversely, 32% of participants hold the belief that the ruling parties do not impede journalists' access to information, while 25% of participants maintained a neutral stance.



Various factors can influence respondents' beliefs that journalists do not have unrestricted access to vital information. Firstly, a significant concern is the monopolization of crucial information by authorities, preventing its disclosure and so influencing people's attitudes and opinions. For instance, for almost 15 years, both the media and members of parliament have remained uninformed about the specificities of oil contracts. The second reason pertains to the disparity in information accessibility between the media outlets affiliated with the governing authority (both ruling parties) and those associated with the opposition and independent media.

The US State Department report substantiates our claim by confirming that media outlets linked with the KDP, such as Rudaw and K24, have unrestricted access to all public institutions and information within their authority. Similarly, media outlets affiliated with the PUK, such as Kurdsat and GK, have the same rights. However, the opposition media does not have the same advantages and is limited in accessing information. Despite the Kurdistan Journalism Law prohibiting the closure of media channels, the Kurdistan Regional Government shut down the offices of Nalia Radio and Television NRT in Erbil and Duhok provinces. This action was taken in response to their coverage of the protests that occurred in those areas in August 2020 (U.S. Department of State, 2020, pp.21-22).

Based on successive reports from the Kurdistan Journalist Syndicate (KJS), an organization that supports journalists and activists in the Kurdistan Region, it has been observed that from 2008 to 2023, there were consistent incidents of arrests, verbal abuse, threats, and restrictions imposed by the authorities in both areas, preventing journalists from carrying out their work.

The KJS reports document numerous infractions committed against journalists, mostly those who are enlisted by the Kurdistan Region's security forces. These violations are particularly targeted towards activists and media organizations that are not affiliated with the governing parties. However, it should be noted that media outlets and journalists that are aligned with the ruling parties have also experienced violations, but to a significantly lesser degree compared to others. According to the Kurdistan Journalist Syndicate, there have been instances where ruling parties have been involved in violations against the media. These violations were allegedly carried out by supporters of opposition parties in response to the violations perpetrated by the ruling forces against opposition media.

The table below illustrates the number of cases and categories of transgressions perpetrated against journalists in the three provinces of the Kurdistan Region. It is noteworthy that there has been a rise in the incidence of assassinations and threats targeting activists and journalists, as well as an increase in the frequency of raids and arson attacks on media centers. Furthermore, the years with the greatest number of violations were 2011, 2017, 2018, and 2020, encompassing acts such as the prohibition of media coverage, physical assault, and aggression toward journalists (Kurdistan Journalist Syndicate, 2008-2023).

Years	Arrest, Detention and Imprisonment	Attacks, insults, and Beating	Prohibition	Terror	Threat	Burning and Closure of offices and channels	Other Violation	Total
2008	29	22	2	2	15	0	3	73
2009	13	13	12	0	4	0	2	44
2010	6	53	22	1	15	0	4	101
2011	20	52	37	0	26	7	2	144
2012	22	8	18	0	12	0	1	61
2013	5	16	15	1	12	0	0	49
2014	5	12	5	0	7	1	2	32
2015	4	6	17	0	2	3	0	32
2016	2	12	23	1	4	1	1	44
2017	20	30	54	0	15	12	3	134
2018	13	43	70	0	0	1	5	132
2019	23	12	24	0	4	2	1	66
2020	42	40	47	0	4	3	2	138
2021	17	26	31	0	2	3	0	79
2022	19	21	20	0	7	3	3	73
2023	14	19	25	0	3	1	0	62

The surge in violence against journalists and activists in recent years can be attributed to the proliferation of protests, condemnations, and strikes by opposition parties and their followers against the political authorities in the Kurdistan Region. By 2011, the Gorran Movement, the main opposition group, had been formed just two years prior, and the opposition front was at its highest point. Similar to other nations in the vicinity, the Kurdistan Region was also impacted by the surge of the Arab Spring, which called for the removal of the governing system. Consequently, the authorities responded more vigorously to activists and journalists. Between 2017 and 2020, the region experienced a succession of protests aimed at improving public services, salaries, and overall well-being. Consequently, the number of incidents involving journalists being obstructed and their rights violated while attempting to report on the situation and events to the public also grew.

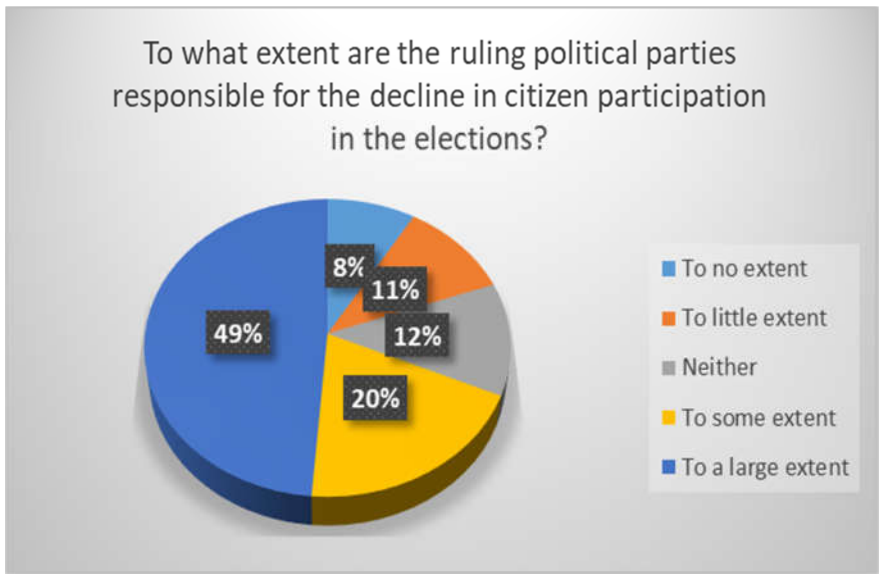
Without a doubt, any transgression, such as intimidation, physical assaults, threats, and restrictions or bias against the media, would inevitably result in citizens being deprived of unbiased information or receiving it in a manner that aligns with a specific agenda. This will undermine the democratic principles outlined by Robert Dahl, which emphasize that citizens should possess a distinct and exclusive comprehension to make informed selections regarding political occurrences.

Sixth: Engagement in the electoral process

Unrestricted, impartial, and regular elections are regarded as a fundamental prerequisite of democracy, enabling voters to exercise their right to choose their representatives without interference. Free refers to the absence of any intimidation or coercion that could potentially influence the voters. Fair means that all participants, including political parties and citizens, are provided with equal and unbiased opportunities to compete. Furthermore, the duration of conducting elections should be established by legal and constitutional provisions, rather than being influenced by political judgments and agendas (Dahl, 1998, p.85).

Without a doubt, all of these variables will impact the voter turnout in the elections. However, our focus here is to determine the degree to which the reigning political parties have contributed to the decline in voter turnout in the Kurdistan Region.

The below figure indicates that 69% of respondents attribute the fall in public participation in the region to the dominant political parties. In contrast, a mere 19% of participants hold the belief that there are alternative factors contributing to the drop, while 12% of individuals maintain a neutral stance on the matter.



Draw Media (2023) reports a substantial decrease in voter turnout in the Kurdistan Region and Iraq. Participation rates for Kurdistan parliamentary elections have declined from 87% in 1992 to 60% in 2018, while Iraqi parliamentary elections in the Kurdistan Region have seen a drop from 95% in 2005 to 36% in 2021. Meanwhile, the rates of boycotts have risen from 13% to 40% and from 5% to 64% correspondingly.

Discussion

Political scientists widely acknowledge that freedom of expression, the right to demonstrate, access to information, political participation (especially in elections), the peaceful transfer of power, and the consideration of citizens' opinions in policy-making are fundamental pillars of democracy. Survey respondents perceive the role of the two main political parties in the region as largely unhelpful in promoting political development, especially in terms of democracy and political participation. Respondents uniformly expressed unfavorable assessments in all questions regarding the influence of these parties.

Over 50% of the participants emphasize that individuals lack the freedom to openly criticize the governing political parties, which is a crucial foundation of any democratic framework. The pervasive influence and authority wielded by both factions over security, administrative, and judicial establishments are likely to foster an atmosphere of apprehension, deterring individuals from expressing their opinions openly. This control grants the parties the ability to utilize both means of suppression and means of employment deprivation. Put simply, criticizing the ruling parties can have serious repercussions for the critic, including being arrested, tortured, and intimidated, as well as facing job loss or obstacles to professional and financial progress. Both parties possess the ability to cause substantial challenges for anyone who express disagreement or oppose them, due to their influence over the state bureaucracy and security forces. The domestic and foreign reports we have referenced about the mistreatment of critics, as well as political and civic activists, provide substantiation of this fact.

Similar to the last inquiry, survey participants hold the view that the two governing parties lack regard for the viewpoints of residents while devising decisions and policies. Instead, these political parties endeavor to manipulate public opinion in

order to conform to their own interests, with the goal of rallying public sentiment to back their party objectives, rather than allowing public opinion to have an impact on party policy. This approach emphasizes a crucial contrast between political parties in authoritarian regimes and those in democratic ones. Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize that the consciousness, development, and comprehension of individuals also have a substantial impact and should not be disregarded. Conscientious individuals and societies oppose exploitation and instead become more actively involved in the formulation of policies and decision-making processes, either through direct participation or indirectly through political parties, the media, and civil society. Nevertheless, the Kurdistan Region suffers from a conspicuous deficiency in individual comprehension and consciousness, compounded by a pronounced split based on party ideological affiliations.

In order to establish and maintain any democratic system, it is imperative for ruling parties to peacefully transfer power and for election results to be accepted, especially considering that free and fair elections are vital for democracy. Within this particular framework, around 66% of participants hold the view that the PUK and KDP would be unwilling to voluntarily surrender control, even in the event of electoral defeat. This conviction is strengthened by the behaviors and declarations of the leadership of these parties. This belief exacerbates the decrease in political engagement among individuals, since many perceive their votes as lacking legitimacy and relevance, resulting in the perception that election outcomes will have little impact on bringing about any change. Consequently, the participation of voters has consistently declined in each subsequent election. Additionally, approximately 50% of the participants share the belief that opposition parties lack the freedom to arrange and conduct protests. Most rallies in the Kurdistan Region have initially been peaceful, but they have been met with forceful reactions from the government, suggesting a lack of tolerance for freedom of speech. The authorities are concerned about the potential for opposition parties to galvanize public sentiment and garner widespread backing. Despite numerous demonstrations being organized from 2011 to 2022, the authorities have regularly employed strong measures in response to perceived threats.

Similarly, the majority of respondents hold the belief that journalists encounter substantial difficulties in obtaining information sources, with both ruling parties

allegedly erecting barriers in this regard. The presence of precise and dependable information naturally has a significant impact on shaping public sentiment, potentially influencing individuals' inclination to support the ruling parties or the opposition. Furthermore, both local and international publications emphasize that journalists have faced countless threats and cases of defamation while trying to report on specific situations. Furthermore, there are evident discrepancies in the accessibility of coverage and information between media sources that support the ruling parties and those affiliated with the opposition.

Authoritarian governments frequently manipulate events and information to conform to their own narratives, rather than accurately representing the truth of the situation. They do this to influence and rally public opinion or deceive the population. Both the PUK and KDP utilize a comparable technique, with the objective of manipulating public opinion to further their own objectives. As a result, any confidential data that contradicts the stances and strategies of these organizations is likely to be hidden, a procedure made easier by their thorough administrative and security oversight. Information regarding oil contracts, extraction, and marketing was predominantly inaccessible to journalists, members of parliament, and government ministers. Only a limited number of high-ranking individuals within the ruling parties had access to this information. Journalists have encountered numerous cases of physical aggression, intimidation, and detentions while seeking to obtain information and cover events. As indicated in the preceding table, instances of infringements against journalists have increased in tandem with the upsurge in political engagements, such as protests and large-scale gatherings. Authorities, in order to mitigate the potential escalation and dissemination of these protests, have implemented stringent procedures to prohibit the publication and reporting of such occurrences.

The majority of respondents, specifically over two-thirds, attribute the overall decrease in political engagement, especially in elections, to the PUK and KDP. When elections are perceived as unjust and tainted by extensive fraud, and when individuals believe that these elections will not result in any change due to the ruling parties' determination to retain power and lack of dedication to reform, public trust in the electoral process diminishes, resulting in widespread boycotts. Consequently, this leads to decreased participation of voters, ultimately raising skepticism regarding

the credibility of individuals in positions of authority. In addition to the factors previously stated, there are other causes for the decrease in citizens' political engagement, including the opposition's failure to successfully rally dissatisfied or indifferent individuals, political indifference, and a widespread lack of trust in the political system and parties. Nonetheless, the ruling parties have the ability to influence these attitudes either directly or indirectly by impeding the establishment of opposition alliances or by cultivating a feeling of despair, causing individuals to perceive that even if the PUK and KDP secure only one seat, they will still maintain their authority.

In general, the participants regarded the influence of both governing parties as harmful to the democratic values examined in the study. Both parties have hindered the establishment of democratic principles and led to a situation of political inertia through their dominance and control inside their own political spheres. Prior studies have emphasized the significant impact of regional powers, particularly Iran and Turkey, in obstructing the progress of political advancement in the Kurdistan Region. Furthermore, the conventional framework of Kurdish society, characterized by a variety of tribes, nobility, and leaders, is still in a traditional phase of social organization, which significantly influences political dynamics. This study focuses on evaluating the impact and efficacy of the two governing parties by directly interacting with the public to gather their ideas and perspectives.

Conclusion

This article addresses the role of the two political parties (the KDP and PUK) in the KRI's political development. For the sake of investigating that question, in addition to the conceptualization of political development, a survey was conducted among ten public university students in the KRI. The survey was to measure two of the indicators of political development, namely democratization and political participation. Alongside the demographic questions, the participants were asked six questions related to the measurements of the mentioned indicators. The results of the questionnaire were discussed and based on analyzing the data using SPSS and descriptive statistical tools, it can be stated that the majority of the participants attributed a negative role to the two ruling political parties in the political development of the KRI.

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