

A year after failed independence bid, Iraq's Kurds vote for parliament

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A year after a failed bid for independence, Iraq's Kurds will be voting again on Sunday, this time in a parliamentary election that could disrupt the delicate balance of power in their semi-autonomous region.

With opposition parties weak, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) are likely to extend their almost three decades of sharing power.

But splits within the PUK present the possibility that Masoud Barzani's KDP will take a dominant position in Kurdish politics, both in the regional capital Erbil and in the difficult formation of a federal government in Baghdad.

The contentious referendum on independence in 2017, led by Barzani, promised to set Iraq's Kurds on a path to a homeland.

Instead, a swift backlash from Baghdad dashed those prospects and diminished the

region's autonomy.

Speaking on the vote's first anniversary, Barzani, who stepped down as Kurdish president in the aftermath, told thousands of flag-waving men in Erbil: "We will never give up our dignity or honour."

But Barzani - still the KDP's leader and main vote-getter - also added that "even 1,000 years of war won't solve the problem".

Even though relations with Baghdad have improved, the Kurdish region has lost territory and economic autonomy, and voter frustration is rising.

"This is the first time that I'm not voting," said Ahmed Abdullah, a 68-year-old retiree. "The two parties in power steal and lie, and that's how they stay in power. I've stopped believing anything will change."

"NOTHING EVER CHANGES"

Abdullah had been a supporter of the PUK, the second largest party, led by the Talabani family and based around Sulaimaniya.

The PUK and the Erbil-based Barzani clan's KDP together form a dynastic duopoly predicated on patronage in the regions they respectively control. But years of stagnant politics, unpaid salaries and corruption have undermined faith in politics and shrunk the turnout in recent elections.

The situation was not helped by the suspension of parliament between 2015 and 2017 due to in-fighting.

"What's the point of voting? Nothing ever changes, whether we vote or not. Things just get worse," said 38-year-old teacher Alan Baram.

Senior KDP leader Hoshyar Zebari acknowledged that allegations of Kurdish fraud in May's federal election had undermined public confidence, and said Sunday's vote was "critical to restoring the legitimacy of our institutions".

But most major parties say they do not expect more than about 40 percent of the 3.85 million registered voters to go to the polls - below even the record low of 44.5 percent who voted in the federal election.

A low turnout could benefit the KDP and PUK, whose voters tend to be more committed, respecting their role in establishing autonomy after the Gulf War of 1991.

The KDP also commands some respect for ushering in the referendum, despite the negative consequences for the region, while the PUK has yet to heal the internal rifts

that opened when its founder Jalal Talabani died in 2017.

ALLEGATIONS OF FRAUD

Those PUK divisions have not been helped by the decision of Barham Salih to quit the opposition Coalition for Democracy and Justice, which he founded, in order to rejoin the PUK and seek the Iraqi presidency.

Salih's former party has all but collapsed and, further clearing the field for the KDP, the main opposition party, Gorran, is still rebuilding after the death of its charismatic leader in 2017.

All opposition parties were further weakened by dismal showings in May's federal election, amid multiple allegations - not confirmed in the subsequent recount - of fraud by the two main parties. [nL4N1UU27G]

"If there's widespread fraud again, all opposition parties will be diminished," said Attah Mohammed of the Kurdistan Islamic Group, a sentiment echoed by other opposition leaders.

The election will cast a shadow in Baghdad, where the KDP and PUK are competing for the post of federal president, reserved for Kurds ever since a U.S.-led coalition toppled Saddam Hussein in 2003.

Though historically the position has been filled by the PUK, the KDP have fielded their own candidate.

Kamal Chomani, a non-resident fellow at the Washington-based Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy, said that, despite no longer being president of Kurdistan, Barzani hoped to be seen as the pre-eminent Kurdish leader:

"He wants all the players to come and see him in Erbil any time they need to deal with the Kurds."

Whether that kind of power politics will inspire many to vote appears doubtful.

"I only ever voted in the referendum because that was for Kurdistan," said 20-year-old fruit-seller Mostafa Ali in Erbil. "These elections are for the parties, not for Kurdistan."