The crisis of representation in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Sardar Aziz
Erwin van Veen

Clingendael report (CRU)

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Summary

Any discussion about democratization starts with a discussion about representation because the latter is a necessary – but insufficient condition – for the former. How and by whom are policy preferences of citizens identified, aggregated and articulated in public debate and public decision-making? Does this happen in part or in full, for all citizens or just some? Assessing the 'state of representation' provides a lens for examining the democratic potential of a particular structure of power. At least four dimensions matter: the level of citizens' political awareness, the diversity of the ecology of social organisations that help identify citizen policy preferences, the depth of existing communal identity and mutual trust, as well as the nature of intermediaries that identify and nurture political talent. This paper applies the concept of representation to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and takes stock of its potential for improvement.

It finds that all four dimensions of representation are in a poor state in the KRI at present. This manifests itself in, for example, low turnout rates, high levels of disenchantment with the ruling elite and growing polarization within and between political parties. The KRI remains a long way from being governed in a representative fashion, let alone in a democratic one. The region's transition from totalitarian control, guerrilla-style rebellion and internal strife to a more stable, modern and representative polity was stymied by the emergence of family parties as key power brokers. Their capture of the Kurdistan Regional Government was largely enabled by the appropriation of unearned rents, especially from hydrocarbon sales, and maintained by armed groups linked to political parties. A process of de-representation has ensued. But the Barzani and Talabani family conglomerates that run the KRI face declining levels of public confidence and growing economic problems today.

If Western countries wish to improve the state of representation in the KRI in this context, they will have to consider conditioning their engagement on improvements in the quality of governance, leveraging the importance of their presence to the high wire act that the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) perform to balance Iran, Turkey and Baghdad. Practically, this can be done by a coordinated diplomatic strategy that: a) engages the KDP and PUK leadership in a strategic conversation that clarifies how the extent of future Western presence, diplomatic attention and trade/investment are linked with the quality of representation; b) provides long-term support for locally-led civil society development; and c) pushes for limited but real Peshmerga reform in exchange for greater support.

1 Introduction

Despite having held elections since 1992 and having received US/European democratisation support since 2003, links between popular preferences, representation and public policies in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) remain incomplete.[1] The repeated occurrence of low electoral turnouts, protests, repression of dissent and emigration over the past few years indicates that such links are increasingly dysfunctional from the perspective of many citizens.

If representation is understood as the ability of citizens to select delegates[2] that represent their viewpoints in decision-making processes that result in laws, policies and the allocation of public funds, to be meaningful it requires an evolved level of political awareness among citizens; the existence of social organisations that enable preference aggregation; a communal identity with a reasonable level of mutual trust between its different constituent groups; and intermediaries that help select political representatives.[3] These four dimensions are necessary ingredients to ensure that 'a majority of citizens can induce the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to do what they want it to do, and avoid doing what they most want it not to do'.[4]Unfortunately, these dimensions are either absent or developed only to a rudimentary extent in the current KRI. The desired nature and dynamics of representation have never been the explicit subject of public or intellectual debate. This perpetuates low levels of political awareness with the result that representational dynamics have mostly evolved in function of pre-2003 power structures from which many citizens were – and are – excluded. Representation has also taken the form of top-down favouritism rather than a bottom-up synthesis of popular preferences. Finally, social organisation in the KRI is permeated by the clientelist practices of its political parties, which make

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1   We would like to thank Hardy Mède (University Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne) and Peter Haasbroek (Clingendael) for their feedback on a previous version of this report. Its contents naturally remain our own responsibility.

2   Justin Fox and Kenneth W. Shotts 2007. *Delegates or Trustees? A Theory of Political Accountability,* July 23, https://leitner.yale.edu/sites/default/files/files/resources/docs/delegates.pdf

3   Intermediaries are not limited to political parties, but also include industrial and farmer associations, labour and student unions, and so forth. Jane Mansbridge, 'Rethinking Representation', *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 4 (Nov, 2003), pp. 515-528.

4   Dahl, R. 1989. *Democracy and its critics*. New Haven, CT: Yale University. See also: Pitkin, Hanna. 1967. *The Concept of Representation.* Berkeley, CA: University of California Press: 209.

it difficult to aggregate policy preferences meaningfully. These shortcomings are largely the result of war (the Kurdish civil war, the US invasion of Iraq and the fight against Islamic State), the duopolisation of rule in the KRI by the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK); foreign influences that have facilitated the maintenance of this duopoly (e.g. the US favouring Erbil over Baghdad for some time, Turkey relying on the KDP for its operations against the PKK, and Iran favouring the PUK); and repression of popular demands for more inclusive governance by the security forces of the KDP and PUK.

Today, the KRI faces a 'crisis of representation'. The gradual decline in the output performance of the KRI's duopolistic arrangement of rule has not caused any observable decline in the wealth or influence of its ruling political families and network. This suggests that the KRG's rulers prioritise the interests of the few over the needs of the many. Kurdish political elites[5] that claim to represent and operate on behalf of the population in fact enact public policies that also – sometimes mostly – support narrow self- and group- interests. For example, the KRI's investment law[6] enables the Supreme Council for Investment (a government body) to transfer plots of land that enable strategic investment in the public interest either free of charge or below market rates. This sounds reasonable on paper but has in practice been used to favour a small group of KDP and PUK-linked businessmen who turned these plots into valuable urban real estate projects and made billions.[7] Similar nepotistic schemes can be found in other industries, such as oil and gas, security and transportation.

This report examines the origins, dynamics and pathways of the KRI's crisis of representation. It pays particular attention to whether representational ties can

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5   By Kurdish political elites, we refer to the networks of individuals that run the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), the Kurdistan Islamic Union, the Kurdistan Justice Group, Gorran and the Communist Party of Kurdistan.

6   The KRG investment Law can be consulted here: https://gov.krd/boi-en/why-kurdistan/investment-law/general-provisions/ (accessed 3 January 2023).

7   دۆسییەکی «گەندەڵی» زەوی و زار لە هەولێرو سلێمانی بە بەهای ملیاران دینار تاشکرا دەکرێت. 2022. Shar Press. https://www.sharpress.net/all-detail.aspx?Jimare=204569 (accessed 3 January 2023).

be restored under authoritarian duopolistic rule in a manner that falls short of revolutionary change and, if so, how this can be accomplished.[8]

Box 1   From representation to democracy

Scholars such as Robert Dahl have argued that democracy is built on institutions composed of long-standing practices. Dahl emphasised six distinct institutions: free and fair elections, frequent elections, freedom of expression, alternative sources of information, associational autonomy, and inclusive citizenship. Charles Tilly, who criticised this approach, instead emphasised the nature of the relationship between ruling elites and the people. In his view, prospects for democracy are influenced by the nature and level of responsiveness that are the product of this relationship. Elites tend to be more responsive when they have stronger social roots and relationships. As a result, representation and democratisation are mutually reinforcing. Greater representation can lead to more democracy and deteriorating representation risks de-democratisation.

Sources: Dahl, Robert. 2005. *What Political Institutions Does Large-Scale Democracy Require?. Political Science Quarterly* 120: 187–197; Charles, Tilly. 2007. *Democracy.* CUP.

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8   The report is based on dozens of semi-structured conversations over seven-years of professional engagement in Erbil by one of the authors, a review of local and social media and a limited review of secondary literature about representation. Due to the absent and/or underdeveloped nature of representation in the KRI, the brief does not discuss different forms of representation (such as descriptive and policy representation). Debates about delegate versus trustee-based mechanisms of representation are excluded for the same reason. Instead, the report considers representation as a relationship between voters, communities and society on the one hand, and ruling families, ruling elites and government on the other hand.

2 Mapping the state of representation in the KRI

The concept of representation overlaps, but is not synonymous with, the concept of democratisation if one keeps in mind that both formal and informal representation can be selective and limited, for example by being based on social class, income, ethnic-religious criteria or even gender. The questions that Edmund Burke posed to the electors of the UK city of Bristol in 1774 remain relevant to today's KRI: *whom* to represent and *how* to represent.[9] His emphasis on the *selectorate* and *manner* of political representation are shorthand references to a range of available representative models, such as descriptive, formal, responsiveness,[10] promissory and surrogate representation.[11] Representation is essentially a bridging mechanism that allows the views of the many to be condensed, articulated and advocated by the few in a manner that is relatively true to the original positions, as well as being subject to some level of review, correction and recall. This brings us back to elements of effective representation outlined in the introduction: a) political awareness among citizens[12], b) social organisation, c) communal identity with a certain level of trust,[13] and d) the existence of intermediaries.[14] It is the state of play of these conditions that influences the possible meanings and forms of representation. Table 1 offers a short summary that is expanded in the following paragraphs.

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9 Hermann Schmitt and Jacques Thomassen. eds. 1999. *Political Representation and Legitimacy in the European Union*. Oxford University Press.

10 Sveinung Arnesen and Yvette Peters. 2018. 'The Legitimacy of Representation: How Descriptive, Formal, and Responsiveness Representation Affect the Acceptability of Political Decisions'. *Comparative Political Studies*. Vol. 51(7) 868–899.

11 Jane Mansbridge. 2003. 'Rethinking Representation'. *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 4 (Nov.), pp. 515-528; Mónica Brito Vieira and David Runciman 2008. *Representation*, Polity; David Ian Lublin. 1997. *The Paradox of Representation: Racial Gerrymandering and Minority Interests in Congress*. Princeton University Press.

12 For instance: Wolak & Gonzalez Juenke, 2021. 'Descriptive representation and political knowledge'. *Politics, Groups, and Identities*. Vol. 9. Issue 1.

13 See: Newton, Kenneth (2001) 'Trust, social capital, civil society, and democracy'. *International Political Science Review*, 22 (2)

14 Eve Stryker Munson and Catherine A. Warren. 1997. *James Carey: A Critical Reader*. University of Minnesota Press.

Table 1   State of play of elements of meaningful representation in the KRI, 2022

Element	State of play	Explanation	Direction of travel
a. Political awareness	Low to medium	Protests calling for political change increase, but there is no meaningful choice of repre-sentatives	Protests increasing Choice decreasing
b. Social organisation	Low	Consumerism prevails, absence of class identification, dominance of public sector employment	Downwards
c. Communal identity and trust	Low to medium	Traditional elements of community continue to exist and are revived whereas more mod-ernist elements are struggling. Nationalism remains strong but has lost salience. Social trust remains low due to civil war legacy, family politics and a lack of transparency in public governance	Traditional upwards Modern downwards
d. Existence of intermediaries	Very low	Intermediaries exist, but they are either traditional or family based. Both are more exclusionary than modern intermediaries	Stable at the bottom

Note: Scores in column B 'state of play' are based on estimations by the authors on a 5-point scale (very low, low, medium, high, very high).

Condition 1: No representation without political awareness among citizens

Political awareness can be defined as 'the extent to which an individual pays attention to politics and understands what he or she has encountered'.[15] The KRI features a paradox with regards to awareness. On the one hand, formal education has been improving, which translates into citizens gradually developing a better understanding of politics and engaging more in political activity. Recently, such engagement has largely taken the form of participation in protests. On the other hand, political awareness in the sense of political identity and civic belonging remains stubbornly weak. Few writings in the Kurdish intellectual domain about political awareness in relation to representation have been published in the last few decades.

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15   Zaller, J. R. 1992. *The nature and origins of mass opinion.* Cambridge University Press.

Limited political awareness manifests itself during both elections and protests. With regards to the former, one of the most common responses to the question 'who did you vote for?' from those who abstain from voting is that 'there is no one to vote for'. While arguably such statements demonstrate awareness of the fact that nearly all political parties and candidates operate on the basis of a similar clientelist and self-interested logic, they have not led to social debate about the nature and limitations of the current system of representation. Nor have they resulted in a push for any alternative. In this sense, awareness remains latent and underdeveloped as it does not give rise to new directions of thinking or action. With regards to protests, it can be noted that many are focused on the immediate needs of those demonstrating. Protestors tend to have been satisfied with quick fixes that rarely create durable change. While this is understandable given the dire conditions of some, it also indicates limited awareness of the broader political system that keeps reproducing the same unsatisfactory results. The combination of passive dissatisfaction with the choice of candidates during elections and recurrent protests that are transactional in their orientation can be construed as contributing to a limited level of political awareness

Condition 2: No representation without social organisation

The KRI has experienced a social rollercoaster in recent decades as Iraqi Kurdish society has become more urban and developed corresponding cultural and lifestyle preferences. Such 'taste' has, as per Bourdieu,[16] political consequences in the sense that it can help or hinder processes of social organisation. In the KRI, 'urban taste' has translated into a largely materialistic culture focused on car ownership, a preference for private education, and gated residences (often with a Western name: German village, Italian village, American village). However, the material and individualistic consumer lifestyles modelled by the few and pursued by the many remain out of reach for most. These differences in income, lifestyle, opportunities and access to the world, represented by having 24/7 electricity, clean water, English language schools and security, are markers of class in terms of income but do not necessarily lead to class politics because organisation on

16   Pierre Bourdieu. 1984. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.* Harvard UP.

the basis of class has not happened.[17] In fact, 'class' remains absent from the KRI's political vocabulary (and with it a powerful driver of political mobilisation) as the cleavages that dominate the Iraqi Kurdish polity remain those of the civil war of the 1990s (i.e. on whose side one, or one's family, stood and fought), urban versus rural, and one's position in relation to extractive resources and rents. What these cleavages have in common is that they are easily manipulated by the dominant political parties based on their respective monopolies over social organisation that is grounded in the rentier economy. By employing a large proportion of the population in the public sector, or in the two major political party organisations, rents are used to secure party political control of the social landscape and to inhibit alternative forms of social organisation. For example, the KDP and PUK do not wish to see a genuine middle class emerge.

Condition 3: No representation without communal identity and trust

Communal identities in the KRI correspond largely with two categories: traditional and modern. It might be argued that tradition and modernity no longer exist in their pure forms and that hybridity is their offspring. The problem with this argument is that it ignores the possibility that elements of traditional, modern, postmodern and neo-traditional communal identities interact without fusing, which arguably has been the situation in the KRI since at least the early 1990s. Of these four elements, traditional communal identities have proven to be both resilient and dominant and include all those who identify with a religious group, sect or sheikh. In addition to traditional communal identities, neo-traditional communal identities are also strong in the KRI. Such identities continue to adhere to traditional values and modes of organisation but use modern tools and technologies to advance their objectives. Neo-traditional identity groups include Islamic Salafi groups, neo-tribal groups and family associations. More modern forms of communal identity exist, such as feminist groups for instance, but they are not represented in the political process. For instance, the KDP – the region's largest political party – elected only one woman to its Politburo during its most recent party conference.[18] In general, men with militaristic

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17 Some scholars base the notion of class not on income but solely on contingent ideological associations. Hanna Batatu refuted this approach rather conclusively in the case of Iraq. See: Hanna Batatu. 1979. 'Class Analysis and Iraqi Society'. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Summer 1979, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Summer), pp. 229-244

18 Sherko, Shad. 2022. *KDP introduces new politburo members*. https://esta.krd/en/205948/

credentials, tribal networks and/or traditional religious affiliations have acted as effective gatekeepers of new communal identities, which they only accept and accommodate when these identities can be brought under their influence. In addition, many forms of new and more diverse identities – based, for example, on gender, sexual preference, secular orientation or climate activism – face hostilities from both elites and the general population. For instance, the Kurdistan parliament recently drafted a bill that prohibits advocacy for LGBT rights. Anyone engaging in such activity faces up to a year in prison and a fine of up to 5 million dinars (US$3,430).[19] According to the parliamentarian who proposed it, the bill is the most popular in the KRI's parliamentary history (76 MPs out of 111 signed it).[20]

The civil war of the 1990s remains one of the most important factors shaping communal identity and limiting the level of social trust. This pertains not only to the active period of violence but to the period following the 1998 cessation of hostilities[21] when social areas, language, institutions, ways of life and territories remained delineated along the factional lines of the civil war. It laid the foundations of structural distrust in politics. Another factor that limits the lack of social and popular trust is the absence of information about and knowledge of public policy. As Russell Hardin puts it, 'trust is cognitive, dependent on knowledge about other people's motivations and competencies'.[22] Yet, expressions such as 'behind closed doors' or 'in dark rooms' are among those commonly used by Iraqi Kurds to describe the nature of the decision-making processes of their elites. A final factor that limits trust is that at election time, the KDP-PUK duopoly does not have to win over their constituencies by making public policy promises catering to their priorities and needs. Instead, they have captured their constituencies by bringing them onto the public payroll and/or creating similar relationships of dependence throughs webs of clientelism that pervade many aspects of life (housing, the ability to start a business, interference by justice and security agents and so forth). This is possible because, between them, the KDP and PUK control KRI revenue, especially oil rents. The KRG

19   Younes, Rasha. *A Push to Silence LGBT Rights in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq*, Human Rights Watch. Sep. 7. 2022.   https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/09/07/push-silence-lgbt-rights-kurdistan-region-iraq

20   Rudaw. 76 پەرلەمانتاری کوردستان داوای قەدەخەکردنی بانگەشەکردن بۆ هاوڕەگەزخوازی دەکەن https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/0509202217

21   Alan Makovsky 1998. *Kurdish Agreement Signals New U.S. Commitment.* https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/kurdish-agreement-signals-new-us-commitment

22   Russell Hardin, 2006. *Polity,* Cambridge University Press.

receives only enough to function at a very basic level. Even the KRG Ministry of Finance and Economy does not know the full extent of the region's 'public' revenue, essentially turning it into an ATM for the distribution of salaries to civil servants. The region has not had a budget law for almost a decade.[23] It is unsurprising that corruption is systemic in the KRI.[24] This state of affairs affects representation negatively in the sense that it enables vote buying through bribes, patronage and kickbacks that make the relationship between representative and represented more commercial than democratic.

Condition 4: No representation without intermediaries

Intermediaries are organisations that bring subgroups of citizens together for a specific social purpose. They also create networks that can overcome barriers to collective action, aggregate public opinion and policy preferences, and identify political talent. Intermediaries come in a variety of shapes and sizes. For example, political parties undertake the job of identifying, selecting and promoting suitable representatives, i.e. candidates for (elected) office. However, 'below' and linked to political parties sits a much broader range of intermediaries. On the one hand, there are modern intermediaries like civil society, interest groups and the media. On the other hand, there are traditional intermediaries such as tribes, clans, religious organisations and families/dynasties. Traditional intermediaries tend to be less accessible and more exclusive, while modern intermediaries are more permeable and, as a result, potentially more inclusive (i.e. they are open to all citizens rather than by adherence only or by blood relation).[25] In the KRI, traditional intermediaries of the blood-ties variety have the upper hand. The result is that political parties consist largely of select individuals who are members of tribes, clans, families or dynasties linked to them. Even though blood ties always played a prominent role in determining eligibility for

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23 Peregraph. 2022. *KRG has not yet presented draft budget to Kurdistan Parliament, likely extending streak since 2013.* https://peregraf.com/en/investigation/4951/KRG-has-not-yet-presented-draft-budget-to-Kurdistan-Parliament-likely-extending-streak-since-2013

24 Abdullah, Yassir. 2019. *Causes and Consequences of Administration Corruption in Kurdistan Regional Government* https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3404875

25 This is somewhat akin to the inclusive and exclusive institutions that Acemoglu and Robinson have discussed in detail. See Acemoglu, D. and Robinson, J. 2012. *Why Nations Fail.* London: Profile Books.

office and rule in the Kurdish areas of Iraq,[26] they have arguably become more and more significant over the past few years. In fact, one can take the view that Kurdish political parties were more 'modern' in the early 1990s than they are today. Back in the day, politburos were in charge of the parties rather than a family or an individual. The KDP and PUK vied with each other to be seen as more secular and both aspired to European-style democracy. Citizens were also looking for a new sense of identity and belonging after Hussein's dictatorship. Theatre, public lectures and discussing political texts were highly popular and contributed to an emergent civic awareness beyond tribe or religion. Bachtyar Ali,[27] the KRI's most prominent novelist and intellectual, is a product of this era. Unfortunately, this period was short lived and did not produce lasting shifts in social attitudes or the emergence of new intermediaries.

Box 2 Traditional and modern intermediaries that identify and nurture representatives

Traditional intermediaries are older forms of organisation and association that have deep roots in the culture and psyche of many Kurds. Their membership is not voluntary, but organised by blood or birth, and their operating methods are not typically geared towards ensuring inclusive and balanced representation of their entire constituency, let alone the wider population. Under traditional leadership, representation often takes the form of complaint, patronage and petition mechanisms. Even though urbanisation tends to slowly erode the authority and power structures of traditional intermediaries, these institutions are making a reappearance in the KRI. They are often supportive, or even part of, public authority structures and elites, and may extend beyond the region's borders. Nahro al-Kasnazan – a Sufi spiritual order – offers a good example. Civil societies and advocacy groups, as well as value- and issue-based organisations, are examples of more modern forms of association. As one activist put it, civil society emerged in Iraqi Kurdistan after the arrival of the Americans in 2003. As part of post-2003 democratisation efforts, Western backed

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26   While the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) gave anti-family and anti-dynasty rhetoric a prominent place in its political discourse until recently, as it has since its foundation, its actual practices hardly correspond with its narrative. For example, the PUK was founded to oppose the KDP family party but was led by Talabani and, since his death, has been headed by his two sons.

27   See for instance: https://literaturfestival.com/en/authors/bachtyar-ali/ (accessed 8 March 2023).

organisations offered generous funds to those who bothered to ask. But this easy flow of cash contributed negatively to the emergence of a locally-grounded civil society. As one activist put it, it helped to create a cottage industry of democratisation-lite projects,[5] many of which lacked clarity on the bigger picture to which they sought to contribute. In this context, the main aim of several activists transpired to be turning civil society into a source of income. In summary, traditional intermediaries remain powerful but have limited representativeness, while more modern intermediaries, other than political parties, remain underdeveloped.

Sources: Bruinessen, M. 1978. *Agha, Shaikh and State: On the Social and Political Organization of Kurdistan;* https://www.abitare.it/it/habitat/urban-design/2010/03/01/geopolitics-of-urbanisation-in-kurdistan/; Acemoglu, Daron and James A Robinson. *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty.* Profile Books. 2012; https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/a-wealthy-iraqi-sheikh-who-urges-a-hard-line-us-approach-to-iran-spent-26-nights-at-trumps-dc-hotel/2019/06/06/3ea74c5e-7bf9-11e9-a66c-d36e482aa873_story.html (accessed 8 March 2023); Shorsh Amin. August 2021. Interview with one of the authors.

3 Historical limits to representation in the KRI

There are at least two historical reasons that help explain the poor state of the four elements of meaningful representation discussed in the previous section. One is the longstanding practice in Iraq of equating what is good for the state with what is good for the party and what is good for the party with what is good for the people. This practice started under the Saddam Hussein regime, which tried to make every member of Iraqi society a member of the party, of course under strict conditions of loyalty, adherence to party discipline and party objectives. Only Ba'ath party members had the right to partake in politics. The Baʿth regime made numerous attempts to complete its 'Baʿthification of society' by absorbing all social forces into its ideological pantheon and enlisting all Iraqis in support of what one might call the 'Baʿthist trinity' (party, nation, leader).[28] Saddam Hussein sought to become the ultimate embodiment of 'what is good for the party is good for the people' by extending this to 'what is good for the leader is good for the party and good for the people'.[29] Slogans such as 'if Saddam uttered, Iraq uttered'[30] manifested this form of totalitarian representation. After the 1991 Kurdish uprising, the imposition of a no-fly zone secured Iraq's Kurds a measure of autonomy. While the PUK and KDP could not hope to achieve a similar level of totalitarian representation as Saddam Hussein, they nevertheless tried. The Ba'ath party, KDP and PUK share the desire to monopolise representation as a way to maintain social control, their measures coming close to personality cults.

Another historical reason that helps explain the present state of the four elements required for meaningful representation is the Kurdish struggle for greater autonomy and independence. The KDP and PUK have used the unifying power of Kurdish nationalism in their quest for dominance. In part, this has been

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28 Faust, Aaron M. 2015. *The Baʿthification of Iraq: Saddam Hussein's Totalitarianism*. University of Texas Press.

29 Sintomer, Yves 2013. *The Meanings of Political Representation: Uses and Misuses of a Notion*. https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-raisons-politiques-2013-2-page-13.htm

30 See: وكالة انباء براثا ! قال صدام قال ذا قال حيدر هشام http://burathanews.com/arabic/articles/77935 (accessed 8 March 2023).

a genuine effort and follows the Kurdish political parties' decades-long fight with the government in Baghdad prior to 1991. The effectiveness and success of their fight depended, among other things, on a clear hierarchy and obedience. Due to sacrifices made, leading guerrilla elites subsequently felt entitled to a reward for their efforts in the form of the 'right to rule'. Elsewhere, this has been dubbed as engaging in 'guerrilla democracy', a fairly common feature of revolutionary liberation movements.[31] Their strong sense of entitlement leads KRI elites to believe that they can and should be powerholders for life.[32] In this view, there is no need for the people to renew their mandate. Moreover, when the logic of representation is geared towards the articulation of a single socio-political view or quasi-ideology – the legacy of liberation and quest for autonomy – rather than highlighting a diversity of views for debate and compromise, the available space for political discourse and decisions narrows considerably.

To make an imperfect situation even less perfect, the KRI is not run as a unified 'guerrilla democracy', but as a fragmented one. The first free elections in Iraqi Kurdistan on 22 May 1992 resulted in a 'draw'. The KDP and PUK subsequently agreed to share power in a process known as 50/50, i.e. each took 50 seats in the new Kurdish legislature. A similar arrangement was applied to the executive and judiciary. However, this power-sharing formula did not prevent civil war between the KDP and PUK later in the 1990s. As the war ended in stalemate, the conundrum persisted, as it still does today. For example, most Peshmerga, Asayish and other coercive organisations are beholden to a specific party rather than the KRG. The recent KDP effort to acquire positions and privileges previously held by the PUK – such as the Iraqi presidency nomination – must also be seen in light of this longstanding power struggle that at least some of its participants consider unfinished business.

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31 Ehindero, Joseph. 'Guerrilla Democracy: An emerging trend of Democracy in Africa'. *International Journal of Advanced Academic Research. Arts, Humanities & Education*. Vol. 2, Issue 9 (September 2016), online: https://www.ijaar.org/articles/Volume2-Number9/Arts-Humanities-Education/ijaar-sms-v2n6-jn16-p1.pdf

32 See also: Roger Owen, *The Rise and Fall of Arab Presidents for Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

One might argue that exclusive and narrow representation was necessary during the tumultuous times of the Kurdish civil war,[33] the subsequent US invasion, the Sunni-Shi'a civil war in Iraq and the fight against IS in order to maintain Kurdish autonomy and pursue Kurdish policy preferences effectively. At the conceptual level, however, one can just as easily argue that with so much at stake for an entire polity, inclusive and broad representation – or at least moves in that direction – would have been equally warranted. At the practical level, the results for Kurdish autonomy produced through the duopolisation of representation seem, at best, mixed. Today, the KRI is a relatively successful autonomous part of Iraq but it has also faced several self-induced setbacks. These include most prominently an unsuccessful independence referendum, the subsequent loss of Kirkuk in 2017, and the building of the KRI on shaky energy, foreign policy and budgetary foundations. Either way, if there was a case for exclusive and narrow representation in the 1990s and early 2000s to protect Kurdish autonomy and nationalism from internal and external threats, it lost purchase after 2005 when the Iraqi Constitution was agreed. Today, Kurdish nationalism is mostly an argument of convenience to maintain party- and family-based rule to the detriment of the wider Kurdish population. Yet, nevertheless, the liberation-cum-autonomy narrative retains some purchase.

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33 In fact, the duopoly was arguably the only way to end the civil war. But its consequences – i.e. the division of Kurdistan into two zones, the maintenance of private security forces, a narrow circle of real powerholders and expansion of top-down party control over economic and trade activities – had negative consequences for representation in the long term. See: Gunter Michael M. 1996. 'The KDP-PUK Conflict in Northern Iraq'. *Middle East Journal*. Vol. 50. No. 2.

4 No Boston tea party in Erbil just yet

Some of the progress made in the early to mid-2000s on upgrading the different components of meaningful representation (see Section 1) started to be undone from the late 2000s onwards. Essentially, the transition from a legacy of totalitarian socio-political control, guerrilla-style rebellion and internal strife to a more stable, modern and representative polity was disrupted by the emergence of family parties as key power brokers[34] and their subsequent capture of the KRG, enabled in large part by their appropriation of unearned rents from hydrocarbon sales. The Barzani and Talabani families established firm dominance over the post-2003 KRI economy; constructed effective mechanisms of clientelism; seized control over media outlets; and maintained loyal security organisations. Gradually, KRI governance entered a state of reversal with regard to the role played by political parties as intermediaries: party politics shifted to family politics and, closely linked to this, modernising elements shifting back to traditional ones. Today, for example, three close Barzani relatives head the KDP party, the KRI presidency and the KRI government.[35] Below the level of rule-by-family-ties, loyalty became the overriding criterion for seniority and promotion, especially in the eyes of rulers who have been unable to step out from the shadow of the 1990s civil war.

The availability of ample party-appropriated rents – customs revenues, oil/gas sales, international aid, real estate brokerage and so on – enabled both extensive clientelism and the commercialisation of political relations. Even though they did so at different speeds, the KDP and PUK transformed from rebel-cum-tribal-cum-socialist representative organisations into family dynasties, as well as

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34 Even the PUK, which used to be more of an umbrella organisation, accelerated its development towards family politics and rule after the death of Jalal Talabani in 2017. See for example: *Why the PUK's co-presidency broke down*: https://amwaj.media/article/is-the-puk-divided-again (accessed 8 March 2023).

35   Winthrop Rodger. 2022. '*The Full Barzani': How the Diplomatic Meetings with the Barzani Family are Shaping Iraqi Kurdish Politics*. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/full-barzani-how-diplomatic-meetings-barzani-family-are-shaping-iraqi-kurdish

turning from political parties into profit-generating companies.[36] Today, they can be seen as family conglomerates – less concerned with the problems of governance and more concerned with running a profitable business. As a result, expectations of commercial gain have replaced expectations of immaterial progress in the KRI's governance project. In the new political marketplace, party members expect income, jobs and shares of unearned rent rather than the opportunity to engage in meaningful representation. Membership is purchased via a private market exchange more than it is sealed by an ideological bond.[37] Logically, members of market-oriented parties remain silent about corruption and other party misdeeds as long as there are profits to be shared.

Broadly speaking, governance in the KRI follows the typical decline associated with the combination of weak institutions, unearned rents and strongmen that has been extensively described in the literature on the resource curse.[38] The result is that power has become centralised and representation more selective and more indirect. A knock-on effect is that the limited representative links that existed between politicians and social organisations, as well as between politicians and citizens, have been largely severed. This decline in representation is one of the main drivers of the decreasing electoral turnout and the growth in the number of new parties, like Gorran, New Generation, Coalition for Democracy and Justice, and others (see Box 3 below). Yet, these new parties often lack a sufficiently large constituency and enough experience to represent a credible alternative to the KDP or PUK. They have not yet built the relationships, talent and organisation necessary for serious political competition. This will remain difficult as long as the full weight of the family-run rentier state and its security forces can be freely used against them. Meanwhile, real power remains concentrated in the hands of small groups and families linked to the KDP and PUK, buoyed by savvy use of social media to maintain the fallacy of democratic rule for the people.[39]

36 Michael L. Ross. 2001. 'Does Oil Hinder Democracy?' *World Politics*, Vol. 53, No. 3.

37 Panebianco, Angelo. 1988. *Political Parties: Organisation and Power*. Cambridge University Press.

38 NRGI. 2015. *The Resource Curse: The Political and Economic Challenges of Natural Resource Wealth*. https://resourcegovernance.org/sites/default/files/nrgi_Resource-Curse.pdf; Menaldo Victor. 2016. *The Institutions Curse: Natural Resources, Politics, and Development*. Cambridge University Press.

39 Simon Tormey, 2015. *The End of Representative politics*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Change efforts: New political parties, parliamentary dynamics and elections

At present, the KRI and its people are stuck somewhere along a trajectory of improving education, some modernisation and greater wealth. Its continuation demands a reduction in corruption, improvements in the rule of law and a more equitable distribution of wealth. In turn, this requires major improvements in representation, which the ruling elite will not initiate as it seeks to retain control over society. To assess what kind of change or reform might be feasible, it is helpful to take a look at past and current change efforts. In turn, we consider a) the rise of new political parties, b) changes in the workings of the KRI parliament, and c) innovation of electoral arrangements.

As to political parties, the KDP and PUK continue to rule by duopoly, even though the centre of gravity is gradually shifting towards the KDP and inter-party tensions are rising.[40] Both parties have a large network of party organisations and significant wealth, and both command semi-private armed groups (the KDP's 1980s Peshmerga unit and the PUK's 1970s Peshmerga unit).[41] Both parties also run a traditional network supporting martyrs' families, which is managed by the Ministry of Martyrs and Anfal Affairs.[42] It provides monthly grants, housing, healthcare and education benefits to beneficiaries, a.k.a. clients.[43] Finally, both parties hold a strong belief in the revolutionary legitimacy of their rule, acquired through their history of guerrilla fighting.[44] The combination of economic power and wealth accumulation, control over the means of violence, a vested constituency and a strong sense of 'righteousness' gives the parties autonomy far beyond the number of votes they receive or the type of representation they permit. None of these dimensions of party strength is easily reformed, as illustrated by the lack of progress in Peshmerga reform, despite appreciable international support and assistance since 2016. KDP and PUK Peshmerga

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40 Kawa, Hassan (2015) *Kurdistan's Politicized Society Confronts a Sultanistic System*; Hassan Abdullah & Hasan Hama (2018) *The political System in the Iraqi Kurdistan: Party Rivalry and Future perspectives*, Asian Affairs, 49:4

41 Aziz, Sardar, Cottey, Andrew 2021 'The Iraqi Kurdish Peshmerga: military reform and nation-building in a divided polity', *Defence Studies*, Volume 21, 2021 – Issue 2.

42 The Anfal campaign was a counterinsurgency operation carried out by the Iraqi army against Iraqi Kurdish rebel groups in 1988. See also the website of the Ministry of Martyrs and Anfal Affairs: https://gov.krd/moma-en/ (accessed 9 March 2023).

43 See: https://gov.krd/english/government/entities/moma/services/ (accessed 9 March 2023).

44 https://www.peyserpress.com/detail/408; https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/kurdistan/070520151

continue to fall outside the control of both the KRG and the Ministry of Defence in Baghdad.[45]

This situation has triggered limited renewal of the KRI's political party scene, with Gorran being founded in 2009 and the New Generation Movement in 2018 (see Box 3). Neither of these parties – nor the more longstanding but more marginal Islamic Union of Kurdistan (Muslim Brotherhood affiliated, 1994) and Kurdistan Justice Group (2001) – fields armed forces. Gorran positively influenced representative dynamics during its first two parliamentary terms by giving local activists, media personalities, intellectuals and university lecturers access to politics and some access to the KRG administration. The movement's main aim was to democratise governance, which it equated with the practice of governing being a duty rather than an entitlement. Gorran did introduce a number of new features into the KRI polity, namely the possibility of setting up a political party *without* militia, winning a significant share of the votes without entering government (i.e. foregoing spoils by acting as opposition and demanding greater institutional transparency). However, after the death of its leader Nawshirwan Mustafa in 2017, it proved unable to institutionalise party leadership (i.e. move beyond dependence on a charismatic figure for whom there was no replacement) and it became too close to KDP and PUK ruling elites for voters to distinguish it as a different – and oppositional – party. In the 2021 Iraqi national election, the party did not win a single seat and so a long decade (2009–2021) of effort for change by a new political party came to an end. The *New Generation Movement* – founded in 2018 – attempted to emulate Gorran by recruiting young local activists but faced greater KDP/PUK repression than Gorran in 2009 and remains overly dependent on its party leader. In other words, its potential remains limited. Overall, despite some recent additions to the KRI political party scene, there has been no disruption to the dominant KDP/PUK duopoly and its clientelist practices due to the fact that their multidimensional power base gives them significant competitive advantages and is hard to replicate.

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45 Cambanis, Esfandiary, et al. 2019. *Hybrid Actors: Armed Groups and State Fragmentation in the Middle East*, The Century Foundation.

Box 3   Political party alternatives in the KRI to the KDP and PUK

Islamic Union of Kurdistan (KIU or 'Yakgirtu', 1994)
Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated, this organisation began as a charitable endeavour before becoming a political party in 1994. The KIU aspires to a revival of Islamic values in the lives of individuals and families.[46] Its main constituencies are in Duhok and Halabja. It has five seats in the KRI parliament at present.

Kurdistan Justice Group (KJG, 2001)
The party broke away from the Islamic Unity Movement in 2001. Since its foundation it has been led by Ali Bapir. It advocates for unarmed moderate Islam as a basis for rule. In order to overcome the fear of those conservatives who might not support Sharia law, it removed the word 'Islamic' from its name in 2021.[47] The party holds seven parliamentary seats in the KRI parliament at present.

Gorran (Change) Movement (2009)
Nawshirwan Mustafa founded the party in 2009 as a breakaway from the PUK. It seeks to mobilise community activists and establish a platform for change and reform. Unlike others, the movement has no external links, neither ideologically nor politically. The movement benefited from Mustafa's charisma during his tenure but suffered greatly after his death. Gorran was unable to successfully transition from a movement to a party and its parliamentary constituency shrank from 25 to 12 seats. Two MPs left the movement as a result of internal struggle. It claims to be apolitical, but it is essentially a liberal movement.

New Generation Movement (NGM, 2018)
The party was founded by NRT[48] television owner and real estate businessman Shaswar Abdulwahid. Its neoliberal discourse targets younger generations and it calls for radical privatisation. The NGM is

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46 See: www.yakgrtw.net/ku/mission (accessed 23 March 2023).
47 Zellme, M. 2021, *Kurdish Islamists in Iraq attempt rebranding to broaden appeal*, https://amwaj.media/article/iq-article-key-islamist-kurdish-rebrands-omitting-islam-from-its-name?fbclid=IwAR0Ox3rbKir17_mNAq1v8e-QMiti5njQiiza2swxPGTp3an9HmW19vgnpd0 (accessed 23 March 2023).
48 See: https://nrttv.com (accessed 23 March 2023).

more populist than any of the other KRG political parties. The movement has eight seats in the KRI parliament but suffered several internal clashes as a result of which five members left the movement.

As to the KRI parliament, it emerged from the 1992 election and was the KRI's first governing institution, reflecting the era's initial optimistic spirit of election-based democratisation.[49] Scholars generally agree that parliaments in democracies perform three functions: representation, lawmaking and oversight.[50] Yet, interestingly, two out of the three functions are not even articulated by the KRI parliament on its official website: 'The Kurdistan Parliament [...]'s primary functions are to review proposed laws, scrutinize government policy and administration, and debate major issues of the day."[51] Neither representation nor budget oversight is listed. This makes sense if one realises that parliamentarians are not in fact representatives – despite the Iraqi-Kurdistan parliamentary law of 1992 indicating that they represent 'the people of Kurdistan'[52] – but mostly middle-ranking KDP and PUK party cadres. No party leader has ever served in the legislature. Rather, representational developments in parliament have taken the form of factionalisation. As middle-ranking party cadres, parliamentarians tend to be supported by factions within their respective parties. Both the KDP and PUK have shown signs of factionalisation over the past few years and in the PUK, especially, parliamentary candidates are distributed among the party's factions to balance influence.[53] Of late, however, the KDP is also moving towards factionalism. For example, the conflict between Kurdistan's President, Nechirvan Barzani, and its current Prime Minister, Masrour Barzani, is well known. Otherwise stated, parliamentarians represent different factions of their party more than different parts of the KRI's population. A final comment on parliamentary representation should note the short tenure of parliamentarians.

49 Staffan I. Lindberg, ed. 2009. *Democratization by Elections: A New Mode of Transition*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

50 Johnson, John K. 2005 *The Role of Parliament in Government*. The World Bank, https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/322091468174864214/text/358660WBI0Role1n0Government1PUBLIC1.txt

51 See: https://www.parliament.krd/english/about-parliament/role-and-procedures/ (accessed 10 March 2023).

52 Iraqi-Kurdistan parliamentary law (1992), the MP is representing the 'Kurdistan people', گەلی کوردستان

53 Hasan Hama, Hawre (2019) 'Factionalism Within the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan', *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. Vol.54, Issue 7. Also: https://16beavergroup.org/articles/2004/05/01/rene-agamben-what-is-a-people/ (accessed 10 March 2023).

It has become customary for the majority to serve only one term and then retire with a lifelong pension if their public service is not less than 15 years and they have reached 45 years of age (being a party cadre counts as public service).[54] An attempt to reform this situation in 2020 had sufficient loopholes to render it meaningless.[55] Such a short period of service and lifetime retirement makes sense if parliament serves as a place to reward or develop party cadres. Otherwise, it prevents the development of meaningful representation.

As to electoral arrangements, the KRI operates as a single constituency in which votes cascade down party lists based on the number of votes required to obtain a parliamentary seat. In other words, the candidate who leads the list gains most of the votes and this brings his fellow politicians (or clients) into parliament. For example, one Gorran candidate – Ali Hama Salih – received over 90,000[56] votes in the 2018 election, which constituted about half of Gorran's total of 186,903[57] votes. This electoral setup is skewed towards urban areas where voters are concentrated, candidates have more name recognition and media coverage is higher. In turn, this makes it difficult for independent candidates to win seats and enables KDP- and PUK-dominated media to play a large role. Recognising the shortcomings and problems associated with treating the KRI as a single constituency, the Kurdistan Institute for Election (KIE), the region's main electoral watchdog, proposed that parliament should modify the system. According to its research, 114 out of 135 towns and boroughs are currently unrepresented due to a lack of candidates, opportunities or organisation.[58] The KIE proposal has gone nowhere, however, since the ruling parties support the current electoral system.[59]

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54   Bas News, *Kurdistan Parliament publishes official English translation of the Reform Law*, 07/07/2020. https://www.basnews.com/en/babat/617039; See also the KRI's 'Unified Retirement Law'.

55   Law No. 2 of 2020 – Law on Reform of Salaries, Allowances, Benefits, Privileges and Pensions in Kurdistan Region – Iraq. https://www.parliament.krd/english/parliament-activities/legislation/2020/

56   Pay Institute: Education and Development. https://payinstitute.org/news/55/63/عەلی-حەمە-سالح.html (accessed 10 March 2023).

57   Pay Institute: Education and Development. https://payinstitute.org/perleman/xulekani_parlaman/x5-perleman/fraksionekan.html (accessed 10 March 2023).

58   KIE (2021) *Letter to the Parliament President: Multi-constituencies System is best for Iraqi Kurdistan*, online: https://kielection.files.wordpress.com/2021/01/db8cd8a7d8afd8a7d8b4d8aa-d8a8db86-d8b3db95d8b1db86daa9d8a7db8cdb95d8aadb8c-d9bedb95d8b1d984db95d985d8a7d986db8c-daa9d988d8b1d8afd8b3d8aad8a7d986-2021.pdf (accessed 23 March 2023).

59   Phone interview with Aram Jamal, 11 December 2022.

On balance, one can say that: the KDP-PUK duopoly is too deeply entrenched in terms of its control over the executive, administration, security forces and economy for new parties to make much of a difference; parliament is a forum for the advancement of party cadres and achieving a balance between party factions; and elections are stacked in favour of the duopoly parties and closely controlled by them. Taken together with the preceding discussion, this generates the following representational features.

- The system of government in the KRI is highly centralised with real political power held by two parties. These parties consider themselves as having a right to rule and they use Kurdish nationalism and extensive clientelistic networks to legitimise their hold on power, even though Kurdish autonomy has suffered several setbacks on their watch, corruption is significant and public policies mediocre.

- Parliamentarians are not fielded by political parties based on a broad input of candidates from social organisations that also include modern forms of representation, but are selected by the dominant parties based on traditional forms of representation and blood ties. Parliamentarians have hardly any direct relationships with their constituents and concern themselves more with party factional manoeuvering.

- Many areas of the KRI – especially those at its periphery – are under-represented due to the urban bias of the current electoral system. Large segments of the population have no voice in deliberations on their future insofar as they concern public policy, rules or resources.

Consequences of this state of affairs include decreasing trust in those elected, declining voter turnout and increasing protests. Without change or reform, this trajectory is likely to follow a downward trend, quite possibly becoming more repressive, more violent or both in the course of time. While such a risk cannot be fully mitigated due to the entrenched nature of power in the KRI, modest governance reforms can still make a difference provided that initially they stay within existing boundaries of rule.

5 Feasible pathways to improve representation

If the subordination of Iraqi Kurdish society to the KDP and PUK as liberation parties *narrowed* representational possibilities, the emergence of a power balance between them in the 1990s *perpetuated* this limited space for representation. Even though the representational bases to build on in the KRI were always modest – both in the conceptual and practical sense due to the region's legacies of totalitarian control and search for autonomy – recent reality has nevertheless been one of further decreases in the little representation that used to be present. The main explanatory factor is the 'family-isation' and 'personalisation' of politics, economics and security after 2005. As the popular legitimacy of limited representation based on leadership of the national struggle became weaker, KRI elites used natural resource money to compensate. But since 2014, the KRI has also suffered from an economic crisis as it requires an oil price of over US$100 per barrel in order to pay salaries on time. More recently, its disputes with Baghdad have reached a point at which its ability to profit unilaterally from its oil wealth has been curtailed to the same effect. Hence, both nationalism and oil-financed clientelism have diminished as legitimizing factors for popular consent to limited forms of representation, even though both parties dispose of sources of revenue in additional to oil, such as customs revenues.[60]

Room for improvement of the current level of representation in the KRI is bound by the status quo (i.e. duopoly entrenchment), domestic pressures (e.g. increasing protests) and external pressures (e.g. relations with Baghdad, Turkey and Iran). The KRI's party duopoly will remain firmly in place for the near future given the substantial control parties have over politics, the loyalty of the security forces and extensive rent-based clientelism. But domestic pressure is increasing in the form of a growing number of protests in the KRI and declining popular consent for the Kurdish elites' perceived 'right to rule'. Their wealth and privilege become plainer to see in a deteriorating socio-economic environment in which both livelihood prospects and service provision are waning. Finally, external

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60 Saleem, Z. and M. Skelton, *Assessing Iraqi Kurdistan's stability: How patronage shapes conflict*, London: LSE, IRIS and CRP, 2020.

pressures are also increasing, especially because the rents from oil/gas exports – a core economic pillar of the KRI's model of rule – have come under serious pressure from several legal challenges, including recent rulings from the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court and the International Chamber of Commerce. Several interventions by the Federal Oil Ministry have further undermined market and investor confidence in the KRG's ability to stand by its contractual commitments. While it is not clear what political compromise between Erbil and Baghdad may be struck, repairing the KRG's finances might necessitate an increase in taxation in the KRI, which offers opportunities to push for better representation.

Taking account of the value of the presence of Western countries in the KRI to the KDP and PUK in their high wire act of balancing Iranian, Turkish and Iraqi (Baghdad) interests, as well as the fiscal pressure points outlined above, a three-pronged strategy for EU countries keen to promote more inclusive and meaningful representation in the KRI could look as follows:

- *Engage in a high-level dialogue* with KDP and PUK powerbrokers about the future, which clarifies how the extent of Western presence, diplomatic attention and trade/investment are linked to the quality of representation. Pursuing such an approach will require a shift in mindset on the part of countries like the UK, Germany, France and the Netherlands - away from business-as-usual diplomacy and towards more strategic consideration of their future profile in the area. Especially the US will struggle given its dependence on the KRI in regional geopolitics (consider e.g. the size and functions of its new embassy), but subtle references in back office conversations to the risks of ill-gotten family holdings and wealth stored abroad might compensate for such positional weakness given the US its track record of selective judicial pursuit of such assets;

- *Support civil society organisations of the modern intermediary variety.* This includes the likes of civic advocacy groups, labour unions and professional associations that aim to realise more diverse and more inclusive political discourse. Apart from providing funds for long-term, locally-led development, this especially requires diplomatic support and protection, thus linking with the previous element.

- *Put greater diplomatic pressure on achieving limited Peshmerga reform* or, at a minimum, insist on greater adherence to human rights standards by Asayish and other party-political forces. Since international support for Peshmerga

reform is a valuable recognition of the autonomy of the KRI to its ruling elites and a useful token of foreign engagement, a coordinated reduction or halt in such commitment, combined with greater diplomatic scrutiny of human rights violations by security forces, could serve as a pressure tool as it could negatively influence the KRI's reputation. Combined with an offer of enhanced support in case of limited reforms that bring selected Peshmerga forces under real control of the Ministry of Peshmerga, including for example an international advisory board, such an approach could open up space for a conversation. The underlying problem to be addressed is that, as long as a political duopoly and a partisan security sector go hand in hand, representational prospects remain dire because the KDP and PUK will inevitably use their forces to repress dissent if they think they can get away with it – as they have already. The fate of hundreds of protestors in Baghdad and southern Iraq in 2019–2020 should serve as a reminder of what might come to pass.

None of these strategic interventions will create meaningful shifts in representation in the short term, but they have the potential to help put some of the building blocks in place on which KRI citizens and intermediaries can build.