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## THE HISTORICAL PROCESS OF PUK AND INTRA-PARTY LEADERSHIP STRUGGLES

SERCAN ALIŐKAN | AYLİN MERCAN | MERVE SEVİM UMMAHAN



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### Center for Middle Eastern Studies

**Address** : Mustafa Kemal Mah. 2128 Sk. No: 3 Çankaya, ANKARA  
**Phone** : +90 850 888 15 20  
**Email** : info@orsam.org.tr  
**Photos** : Anadolu Ajansı (AA)

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## THE HISTORICAL PROCESS OF PUK AND INTRA-PARTY LEADERSHIP STRUGGLES

### About the Author

#### ■ Sercan Çalışkan

Sercan Çalışkan graduated from the Department of History at Istanbul University in 2017. In the same year, he started the International Security and Terrorism Master's Program in the Alparslan Security Sciences Institute at the National Defense University. Mr. Çalışkan completed his master's degree with a thesis entitled "Perception Wars through Social Media: The Case of Operation Olive Branch". He continues his doctoral education in the International Security Program at the Police Academy. While Mr. Çalışkan's general area of interest includes irregular warfare issues within the framework of security studies, he is particularly interested in Iraqi Turkmens and the security problems in Iraq within the scope of regional studies. He also carries out studies on China's Middle East policies. Mr. Çalışkan is currently working as a research assistant at the Iraq Studies Desk at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies (ORSAM). He has a good command of English.

#### ■ Aylin Mercan

Aylin Mercan finished her undergraduate education in 2016, at the Department of International Relations of Eskişehir Osmangazi University. She also finished her Master's Degree at the same university with a Master's Thesis titled "The Dynamics that Affect the Bilateral Relations between Turkey and Qatar". Aylin Mercan is currently working as a scholarship holder at the Iraq Studies Desk at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. She is particularly interested in Iraq and Qatar.

#### ■ Merve Sevim Ummahan

Merve Sevim Ummahan finished her undergraduate education in 2018, at the Department of Political Science and International Relations of Başkent University. She also finished her Master's Degree in the same university with the Master's Thesis titled "An Inquiry from the Securitization Perspective: the Hashd al-Shaabi Structure in Iraq". Merve Sevim Ummahan is currently working as a scholarship holder at the Iraq Studies Desk at the Center for Middle Eastern Studies. She is particularly interested in Iraq and security issues.

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## INTRODUCTION

One of the historical breaking points for the Kurds in Iraq occurred when Ibrahim Ahmed left the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in 1975, which was founded in 1946 by Mullah Mustafa Barzani, his partner in the opposition movement against the Iraqi government, and formed the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) with Jalal Talabani. Over time, the PUK became the driving force of the Iraqi Kurdish political movement together with the KDP, and has witnessed an increasingly intense leadership struggle since October 2017, when Jalal Talabani, who became the leader of the PUK after Ibrahim Ahmed, passed away. The leadership struggle became much more visible after the decision taken at the General Leadership Council on February 11, 2020, that the party would be ruled by a co-chairmanship system instead of a general secretariat system. As a result of the voting in the Leadership Council, Jalal Talabani's son Bafel Talabani and his cousin Lahur

Sheikh Jangi were appointed as co-chairmen of the party, and this struggle turned into a competition in which the opposing sides directly targeted each other. In fact, with the transition to the co-chairmanship system, both figures tried to make appointments that would change the structure of the PUK security units in their favor. The rivalry became more and more intense and reached the point of allegations that Lahur wanted to have Bafel poisoned, transforming into a situation where the two opposing sides wanted to purge the other from the PUK.

At this point, one could argue that the struggle within the PUK has the potential to affect not only itself but also the internal politics of the KRG as well as the position of the Kurds in Iraq and the region. From this point of view, it is important to tackle the process from the establishment of the PUK to the present day in terms of understanding Iraqi Kurdish politics.



## THE HISTORICAL COURSE OF THE PUK



Advance of Iraqi forces in Kirkuk on 16 October 2017.

Before his death on October 3, 2017, Jalal Talabani had become one of the most influential politicians not only in the KRG but also in the Middle East, as he was one of the leading figures in Iraqi and Kurdish politics and was influential in many decisions and processes that shaped regional politics. PUK is a party that Jalal Talabani founded with Ibrahim Ahmed, Fuad Masum, Nawshirwan Mustafa, Adel Murad, Abdul Razzaq Faili, and Omar Shekmous in Damascus, after leaving the KDP in 1975. The PUK operates as a party based in the Iraqi Kurdish Regional Government (IKRG) and Iraq, but the party's headquarters is in the Soran region of Sulaymaniyah. Relations between Baghdad and Kurdish groups further worsened in 1961, and in September of the same year, the Kurds in Iraq started an armed uprising against the Baghdad government. During these upheavals, Jalal Talabani, the KDP's Sulaymaniah chief, assumed command of the Peshmerga, who rose up against the government and gained notoriety.

In 1963, General Abd al-Karim Qasim was removed from the government in a coup,

and negotiations that Talabani carried out with the central government started a period of non-conflict. Jalal Talabani sought to boost his contacts outside of Iraq after the steps he took to secure the rights of the Iraqi Kurds. When he returned to Iraq in 1964, his differences of opinion with Mustafa Barzani turned into conflict. As a matter of fact, when Jalal Talabani left the KDP and founded a new party in his own ideology, it also demonstrated a result of the long-standing Talabani and Barzani conflict. The point that should be underlined at this point is the main differences that separate Massoud Barzani's party, the KDP and Jalal Talabani's party, the PUK. Under the leadership of Talabani, the PUK adopted a secular, revolutionary, Marxist, and democratic understanding close to the socialist and left blocs, away from tribalism, while the KDP, under the leadership of Barzani, stands out as a representative of the traditional, conservative community. The difference between Sulaymaniyah and Erbil stands on the basis of this distinction, since Sulaymaniyah has an urban population while Erbil is populated by

Under the leadership of Talabani, the PUK adopted a secular, revolutionary, Marxist, and democratic understanding close to the socialist and left blocs, away from tribalism, while the KDP, under the leadership of Barzani, stands out as a representative of the traditional, conservative community.

Kurds from surrounding villages. Therefore, one could argue that geography and urbanization are the determining factors in the basic distinction of Kurdish politics in northern Iraq. Thus, Erbil-based Kurdish movements can also be considered more provincial movements compared to Sulaymaniyah.

The 1990s were a period in which the armed conflicts between the KDP and PUK intensified, and the two sides sought victory through armed superiority. The civil war between the KDP and PUK between 1994-1997 in northern Iraq ended with the Washington Agreement between the KDP and PUK in 1998, mediated by the then-US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright. In the 2000s, the criticisms against the PUK intensified, especially with the claim that the party had turned into a family party.

Having adopted a leftist tendency, PUK experienced a shift in the 2000s. Although it stated that it was not a tribal party, the weight of family ties in the party became palpable. One of the main reasons for the intensification of criticism towards the PUK is the departure of important political figures from the party after its defeat in the 2013 KRG parliamentary elections. For example, Nawshirwan Mustafa, who had a prominent position in the party, left the PUK in 2009 and founded a new party called the

Goran (Change) Movement. The New Generation Movement, also based in Sulaymaniyah, was a party founded in 2017 by former PUK politicians as a result of the increasing intra-party schism, especially after the death of Jalal Talabani.

One of the turning points in the period of schism and the subsequent loss of power in the PUK was the death of Jalal Talabani. On December 17, 2012, then President Jalal Talabani suffered a cerebral hemorrhage in the capital of Iraq, Baghdad. He was taken to Berlin for treatment the next day and returned to Sulaymaniyah on July 20, 2014, after his treatment, which lasted for about 18 months, ended. In this process, the PUK lost significant power in the 2013 parliamentary elections held in the KRG, and as Jalal Talabani's influence in the party decreased, election results deteriorated, and many figures left the party. On the other hand, the Barzani front failed to expand its spheres of influence and power base in the KRG in this period. However, the divisions in the politics of Sulaymaniyah caused the weight of the PUK to decrease and new groups, such as the Sulaimani-based Goran Movement, gained strength.

The problem of the terrorist organization ISIS that broke out in Iraq and Syria in 2014, also caused a major disruption in the functioning and progress of the

political parties in the KRG. Although the vote rates of the KDP increased in the 2013 and 2018 parliamentary elections, the KDP and Gorran Movement coalition caused the government to become dysfunctional. As a matter of fact, this dysfunction after the emergence of the Goran Movement as an opposition movement was an opportunity for the PUK to regain its former power. However, during the period of sickness and after the death of Jalal Talabani in 2017, the rivalry and divisions that broke out within the party led to the PUK's disintegration. This created an important obstacle for PUK to regain the power it lost. Especially after Jalal Talabani's death, the problems within the party started to come to the fore.

Although the factions forming the PUK were united under a single banner in 1991, the conflict and rivalry between them continued. It was observed that this situation continued after the death of the founding leader, Jalal Talabani. After Talabani's death, the struggle for leadership started, in addition to the aforementioned conflict and rivalry. Since a party leader was not elected between 2017-2020, Talabani's wife, Hero Talabani, and their sons managed the party affairs while Kosret Resul was the deputy chairman.

In the leadership struggle within the party after 2017, Mullah Bakhtiar, Head of the PUK Political Bureau, First Deputy Secretary General of the PUK Kosrat Resul, Hero Talabani and his sons Qubat and Bafel Talabani, and finally the son of Celal Talabani's older brother Sheikh Jangi, and also the son of PUK Lahur Sheikh Cengi, who was the head of the intelligence agency (Zenyari), became prominent figures. In addition to the struggle of the PUK for leadership within itself, divisions began to occur within the party organization. The independence referendum held by the KRG on September 25, 2017 is an important example of this separation. Before touching upon the

disintegration within the PUK, it would be appropriate to talk about the referendum held in the KRG in 2017; the competition between the PUK and KDP in the KRG; the influence and competition that the PUK created within its own party.

On September 25, 2017, an independence referendum was held under the leadership of then-KRG President Mesut Barzani that covered the administrative borders of the KRG and the disputed regions under the de facto control of the KRG. Despite all the warnings from the Iraqi central government and neighboring countries such as Turkey and Iran, a referendum was held, but no results could be obtained due to the military operations carried out by the Iraqi security forces in the disputed regions, including Kirkuk. The referendum process produced important results for Iraqi politics and the policies of the regional countries towards Iraq. In addition to that, it has brought along extremely important rifts in the internal politics of the KRG. The KDP accused the PUK of withdrawing their Peshmerga in an agreement with Iran, while the PUK accused the KDP of weakening the KRG by taking an untimely and unilateral step. These discussions did not end even today, and they created an important historical memory in the KDP and PUK rivalry.

On the other hand, the differences of opinion inside PUK became clearer after the independence referendum on September 25, 2017. Particularly during the referendum process, the differences between the PUK's Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, and Kirkuk provincial organizations regarding the referendum came to the fore. To be specific, Necmettin Kerim, the PUK-affiliated governor of Kirkuk, supported the referendum, while Aso Mamand, head of the provincial PUK office in Kirkuk, took a stance against the referendum and stated that a unilateral referendum attempt could

lead to violence. Even though Jalal Talabani's wife, Hero Talabani, participated in the referendum campaign in Sulaymaniyah, his son Bafel did not. All these show that the conflict within the PUK is not limited to the struggle for the party leadership, since the differences of opinion inside the PUK regarding different political agendas have clearly emerged.

The deepening conflict between the KDP and the PUK accelerated when the Hashd al-Shaabi units of the Iraqi security forces and the federal police forces seized Kirkuk and the disputed areas on October 16, 2017. The incident resulted in the withdrawal of the PUK-affiliated Peshmerga from Kirkuk, apart from the Peshmerga affiliated with Kosret Rasul. This situation caused the conflict between the two parties to intensify. While the KDP leader, Barzani, accused the PUK of pulling the Peshmerga out of Kirkuk and leaving the KDP alone and betraying them, the PUK criticized the KDP in this regard, emphasizing that Barzani wanted to consolidate power in one hand. This situation caused the disagreements between the two parties to intensify. While the KDP leader Barzani accused the PUK of withdrawing the Peshmerga from Kirkuk and leaving the KDP alone and betraying them, the PUK criticized the KDP, emphasizing that Barzani wanted to consolidate power in one hand.

Another event that escalated tensions between the KDP and PUK after the referendum was the Kirkuk Governorship issue. Necmettin Kerim, of Kurdish origin, who became the governor of Kirkuk after the referendum was held, was dismissed as a result of the vote made by the Baghdad Parliament, but continued to serve unlawfully. Necmettin Kerim had to leave Kirkuk after the Iraqi security forces' operation in Kirkuk, and Rakan Saeed al-Jouburi, the Deputy Governor of Kirkuk of Arab origin, was appointed by the central government by proxy. Regarding the election of

the new governor, the KDP wanted an independent person from among the Kurds as the governor, while the PUK, which won six seats in the Iraqi Parliament elections on May 12, 2018, demanded that the governor be elected from within his own party. After months of debate on the Kirkuk Governorship, the KDP-PUK reached an agreement that Tayyib Jabbar should be the governor of Kirkuk. After the elections held on October 10, 2021, one of the important question marks is whether the alliance decision between the KDP and PUK regarding the Kirkuk Governorship will continue. In this process, the main demand of both parties from the central government in the process of forming a government was the dismissal of Kirkuk Deputy Governor Rakan Saeed al-Jouburi. However, whether the KDP and PUK will join an alliance or draw a roadmap for the new governor after Rakan Saeed will be closely related to the internal operations of the parties. It is also possible to say that the election results will be decisive at this point. Because, according to the uncertain results of the October 10, 2021 general elections (not yet approved by the Iraqi Federal Court), one could argue that the PUK has lost political power in Kirkuk. While the PUK acquired a lower number of deputies than Kirkuk compared to the previous elections; the KDP was able to get two deputies elected, and the New Generation Hereket acquired one deputy. The PUK's decline in Kirkuk, where it was seen as the strongest Kurdish political party in the previous elections, can be interpreted as a reflection of the leadership struggle and divisions within the party after Jalal Talabani's death. On the other hand, the appointment of the Kirkuk governor candidate among Kurdish political parties in the post-election period is no longer the monopoly of the KDP and PUK. In this process, it is possible to expect the New Generation Movement, which had a total of 9 deputies in Iraq and 1 deputy in Kirkuk, to have a say.

## THE FOURTH PARTY CONGRESS AND THE FIRST SIGNS OF THE INTRA-PARTY POWER DISTRIBUTION



The fourth congress of the PUK held in Sulaymaniyah under the motto of 'renewal'.

After the death of Jalal Talabani, the criticism that the PUK has turned into a family party has intensified, and gradually increased with the departure of the politicians who were among the founders of the party. The results of the fourth grand congress of the PUK, which was held with the slogan of "renewal" between 21-24 December 2019 after a nine-year hiatus, are also extremely important in terms of showing the increased influence of the Sheikh Jangi family within the PUK after the death of Jalal Talabani. One of the most striking issues in the congress was the election of Lahur Sheikh Jangi as the chairman of the Central Council meeting, which will be held for the first time, by receiving 91 percent of the votes. The prominence of Lahur Sheikh Jangi in the congress was one of the important signs of the rivalry between the Talabani and Jangi families, which started to become evident at that time and will be further escalated with the co-presidential system.

According to the party bylaws, 81 votes out of 121 members of the General Leader-

ship Council are needed for the election of the Council Secretary-General. However, the discussions on the creation of the bylaws continued for a long time within the party. In fact, no results were obtained in more than fourteen meetings on the party bylaw. Due to the turmoil within the party, the PUK was not able to reach a common decision on who would be the secretary-general of the party or on the structuring of the bylaws. As a matter of fact, it was observed that the Talabani family did not want to reach a consensus on the election of the secretary-general. In addition to the observed power that Lahur Sheikh Jangi gained within the party, it was observed that the influence of the family of Kosret Resul Ali, who hails from Arbil and who served as the deputy of Jalal Talabani for many years in the 8-member Supreme Political Council of the party. Therefore, the congress held in December 2019 was important in terms of showing that there is a dispersion in the main center of power within the party. In this context, the congress in question revealed that the absolute leadership of the Talabani family began

to come to an end and the balance of power in the party was divided into three families (Jalal Talabani, Sheikh Jangi, and Rasul).

Three sons of Sheikh Jangi, brother of Jalal Talabani, Aras, Lahur, and Polat, acquired important positions in the party. At the beginning of 2020, Aras Sheikh Jangi began to be regarded as the shadow president of the PUK; while his brother Lahur Sheikh Jangi contributed to the entry of Hashd al-Shaabi forces into Kirkuk with his elder brother Aras as the head of the PUK's intelligence organization (Zenyari). Polat Jangi, the youngest brother,

strengthened his position in the party by taking advantage of the power of his brothers in the party. Lahur Sheikh Jangi, the nephew of Jalal Talabani, also served as the head of the Counter-Terrorism Force in the KRG. Especially in 2020, the family of Jalal Talabani lost their long-standing strong position against the Sheikh Jangi family due to the power that the Jangi family acquired within the party after the death of Jalal Talabani. This situation is also obvious considering the critical assignments that the three Jangi brothers have undertaken.

## TRANSITION INTO A CO-CHAIRMANSHIP SYSTEM: COMPETITION BETWEEN BAFEL AND LAHUR



According to the voting results of the PUK's General Presidency Council held in Sulaymaniyah on February 11, 2020, it was decided that the party would be governed by the co-chairmanship system instead of the general secretariat system. 93 out of 124 members of the PUK Presidency Council participated in the voting. At the end of the voting, Bafel Talabani and Lahur Sheikh Jangi, two cousins, were elected as co-chairs of the party with 92 votes. In this way, it was thought that the leadership crisis that had been going on for three years and caused conflicts within the party after the death of Jalal Talabani was somewhat resolved with the acceptance of the co-chairmanship system. On the other hand, the co-presidency system enabled the power sharing that was observed at the party congress held in 2019 to be largely dispersed between the families of Jalal Talabani and Sheikh Jangi. Kosret Resul Ali, who was frequently criticized by the Talabani family for his closeness to the KDP and his Arbil identity, was prevented from participating in the

race for co-chairmanship by his appointment as the head of the Supreme Political Council. The exclusion of the Rasul family from the chairman elections also relieved the families of Jalal Talabani and Sheikh Jangi.

Although it is assumed that the leadership crisis, which has been going on for about three years after the death of Jalal Talabani, was resolved with the co-chairmanship system, the crisis between the two cousins showed itself more clearly in the following process. One of the first points of competition within the party was the assignments in the security units. In this context, Waha Hasan, who was appointed by Jalal Talabani and was responsible for the Sulaymaniyah Public Security since 2003, was dismissed by Lahur Sheikh Jangi after the congress. Although Hasan is close to the Talabani family, he was replaced by a name close to Lahur Sheikh Jangi. However, the rivalry demonstrated through appointments remained an innocent development compared to the poisoning incidents and liquidation decisions that would break out in the future.

The results of the fourth grand congress of the PUK, which was held with the slogan of "renewal" between 21-24 December 2019 after a nine-year hiatus, are also extremely important in terms of showing the increased influence of the Sheikh Jangi family within the PUK after the death of Jalal Talabani.

Tensions between PUK Co-Chairs Bafel Talabani and Lahur Sheikh Jangi escalated on July 8, 2021, when Bafel accused Lahur Jangi of plotting to get him poisoned, and dismissed Muhammed Tahsin Talabani, the Director of the PUK-affiliated Intelligence Organization (Zenyari), known for his close proximity to Lahur, and Polat Jangi (brother of Lahur Sheikh Jangi), the Director of the Anti-Terrorism Unit of the PUK. Bafel appointed Eji Emin to Zenyari and Vahap Halabja to the Anti-Terrorism Unit. Lahur did not approve the appointments, and the risk of confrontation emerged between the two sides. Tensions between Lafur and Bafel further increased when Mohammed Talabani, the Director of Zenyari, and one of his aides were detained for one day by the private security forces affiliated with Bafel Talabani. In fact, these developments were regarded as a coup after Bafel's private security units were deployed to implement these decisions. Bafel made a statement that despite those who regarded the developments as a coup, the events on July 8 did not constitute a coup but a "counter move" to abolish a coup attempt<sup>1</sup>. In the statement, Bafel also empha-

sized that Lahur was using the security forces to plot a coup against him. The crisis between the two cousins was not limited to this issue. In the following process, Lahur was also dismissed from the presidency of the Kurdistan Coalition, which was established between the PUK and the Goran (Change) Movement to participate in the Iraqi Parliament elections held on October 10<sup>2</sup>. The crisis between the two sides, which broke out on July 8, continued, and Lahur was dismissed from his position as co-chairman at the PUK Politburo meeting held on July 15. KRG Deputy Prime Minister Qubat Talabani (the other son of Jalal Talabani) was appointed as the head of the Kurdistan Coalition formed with the Goran Movement for the elections<sup>3</sup>. However, after the meeting held by the PUK Politburo on August 24, 2021, it was announced that Lahur would leave the KRG within three days and return after the election results were announced. Lahur, on the other hand, took a stand against this decision and described the events as a conspiracy, saying that he would not "leave his nation" until his last breath.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Bafel Talabani: There was no coup, rather abolition of a coup". Pukmedia. 4 September 2021. (Accessed: 4 November 2021). <https://www.pukmedia.com/EN/Details/69002>

<sup>2</sup> "Lahor Şeyh Cengi KYB-Goran ittifakı başkanlığı görevinden de alındı". Rudaw. 18 July 2021. (Accessed: 5 November 2021). <https://www.rudaw.net/turkish/kurdistan/180720218>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.pukmedia.com/KS/details/?Jimare=174121>, 29 July 2021. (Accessed: 4 November 2021).

<sup>4</sup> Shakir, Loyal. "Lahur Talabany to travel abroad until after elections: PUK politburo". Rudaw. 25 August 2021. (Accessed: 4 November 2021). <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/250820213>

During the rivalry between the co-chairmen, which flared up with the dismissals on July 8, the two sides avoided targeting each other directly, taking into account the early elections in Iraq to be held on October 10, 2021. In particular, the statements from both sides announce the rivalry and separation to the public with words and expressions such as "someone wants to create sedition within the PUK" instead of mentioning mutual names. Both Bafel and Lahur have avoided accusations that would directly target them. For example, after the dismissals and tension at the beginning of July, Bafel and Lahur met on July 12 and held a meeting. In the statement made on Lahur's official social media account after the meeting, it was stated that the PUK is stronger than its rivals and that the PUK will not be allowed to fall.

It is also observed that both Bafel Talabani and Lahur Sheikh Jangi try to benefit greatly from the power mechanisms that they created before the transition to the co-chairman-

ship system. Qubat Talabani and his brother Bafel Talabani dealing with the political and financial affairs of the management before the co-chairmanship arrangements and had an active role in the structuring of the relevant institutions. It is known that Lahur is more active on security files, especially those of the party's intelligence organization, Zenyari, which he headed before the co-chairmanship. What happened in the post-co-presidency period shows that the two sides are trying to use the power they hold in the party in the most correct way in order to eliminate one another in the leadership struggle. As a matter of fact, it is observed that Bafel Talabani was able to get the support of important political figures in the party, and thanks to this support, he was able to make tougher moves against Lahur with the backing of the party's Politburo. On the other hand, Lahur remained politically weaker within the party and tried to resist the decisions made against him by using his current weight in the security units.



## THE PUK'S PERFORMANCE IN THE 2021 IRAQI PARLIAMENT ELECTIONS AND THE COURSE OF THE POWER STRUGGLE



Parliamentary elections were held in Iraq on 10 October 2021.

The PUK participated in the early elections held on October 10, 2021 in an alliance with the Goran (Change) Movement, within the "Kurdistan Coalition", under the chairmanship of KRG Deputy Prime Minister Qubat Talabani. After the elections, Supreme Election Council (YSK) Chairman Adnan Jalil held a press conference in the capital city of Baghdad and stated that the manual counting of votes in over three thousand election centers has ended and is compatible with the electronic process. In the country with a population

of approximately 40 million, approximately 25 million voters were registered in the elections and the turnout was 44 percent. The official results announced by the Iraqi High Election Commission on November 30 stated that the Kurdistan Coalition, which has 44 candidates across the country, won a total of 17 seats in parliament. Accordingly, the Kurdistan Coalition had a total of 17 deputies, one from each of Iraq's Diyala, Duhok, Erbil, and Salahaddin provinces, 3 from Kirkuk, 2 from Mosul, and 8 from Sulaymaniyah.

According to the results of the general elections held on October 10, 2021, the PUK's parliamentary candidates won seats in the Iraqi Parliament.<sup>5</sup>

Nih Armin Ma'ruf Gafur Hammah Emin	Sulaymaniyah
Briar Raşid Şerif Muhammed	Sulaymaniyah
Asu Faridun Ali Emin	Sulaymaniyah
Jaru Hammah Sherif Abdallah Khawwam Read	Sulaymaniyah
Ghurayb Ahmad Mustafa Emin	Sulaymaniyah
Badriyah Husayn Aziz Davud Hasan	Sulaymaniyah
Sarwvh Muhammed Raşid Miran Zankanah	Sulaymaniyah
Karwan Ali Jarvis Hamd Aziz	Süleymaniye
Dylan Gafur Salih Samin Zankanah	Kirkük
Sabah Habib Kadir Vahhab	Kirkük
Kilan Kadir Ali Ömer	Kirkük
Kurdo Ömer Abdullah Salih	Arbil
Ahlam Ramadan Fattah Ismail al-Kakai	Mosul
Ronza Ziyad Sayyidu Rashw Bak	Mosul
Karim Shakur Muhammed Kadir al-Davudi	Salahaddin
Susan Mansur Karam 'Ali Alidlawi	Diyala
Iman Abd-al-Razzaq Muhammed Arif	Duhok

Despite the fact that the PUK and Goran entered the elections in a coalition, the failure of the Kurdistan Coalition is clear since the 17 seats they were able to win are compared with the number of seats won in the past years. In particular, the fact that no Goran Movement candidates under the umbrella of the coalition were elected across Iraq was shocking in terms of the general failure of the coalition. On the other hand, there were 21 PUK deputies in the Iraqi Parliament in the 2014 elections, which decreased to 18 in 2018 and to 17 in 2021. The unsuccessful results of the PUK in the early elections on October 10, 2021 showed that the power struggles within

the party, which they sought to conceal, also affected the voter preference at the ballot box.

Contrary to the Goran Movement's failure in the elections, the New Generation Movement achieved a significant success with its 9 seats in the Iraqi Parliament. At this point, it is widely thought that Goran's votes have largely shifted to the New Generation Movement. In addition, it is also being questioned how long the Sulaymaniyah-based New Generation can extend its electoral success. For this reason, it would not be wrong to say that the New Generation, which will want to perpetuate its power in both the KRG and Iraqi politics, may be making an effort to ensure this perma-

<sup>5</sup> Rudaw Elections, Rudaw, 2021, <https://www.rudawelections.com/english/ancamakan> (Accessed: 15.11.2021).

nence through alliances. On the other hand, while Lahur Sheikh Jangi is known to take steps towards establishing close relations with the New Generation, the anti-KDP stance of the movement, just like Lahur Sheikh Jangi, may be one of the important factors that can lead the two actors to cooperate. At this point, it will be one of the important agenda items of the upcoming period regarding KRG politics whether the mentioned cooperation potential will occur after Lahur Sheikh Jangi's attempt to establish a new party or after he remains in the PUK and turns the balance of power in the party in his favor.

On the other hand, it is possible to say that the election results will have important ramifications for the competition between Bafel and Lahur within the party. The Kurdistan Coalition, which was taken from the leadership of the Kurdistan Coalition before the elections by a party decision, may want to use the failure in the elections to their advantage. Due to the election failure, it is likely that the Talabani family will be weakened in favor of the Jangi family, and since Lahur was replaced in the coalition leadership by Qubat Talabani, it is also likely that the Talabani family will be weakened. On the other hand, Lahur is likely to blame the failure on the Jalal Talabani family, who eliminated him from the election process in order to gain the upper hand in the intra-party competition. Furthermore, it is also possible that Lahur will form a new party and go after the votes of the PUK, which lost power in the elections.

Steps towards the complete elimination of Lahur Sheikh Jangi from the PUK gained momentum immediately after the elections. In this context, the PUK Evaluation and Monitoring Committee, which undertakes the task of monitoring party activities and evaluating intra-party cases, issued a decree on November 2, 2021, announcing that PUK Co-Chair Lahur

was expelled from the party. It is also stated in the decree that the decision to expel Lahur from the PUK was taken as a result of all the evidence provided by the investigation committee, which pointed out that he was working against the party's domestic policy. PUK High Council Members Aras Jangi, Ala Talabani, Shadman Mela Hasan and Jino Muhammed were also expelled from the party in addition to Lahur. The factors that affected this decision are the conflict between the two cousins and the poisoning of Mullah Bakhtiar, one of the important names in the PUK, and some party members, as well as Bafel Talabani. Furthermore, Mullah Bakhtiar was hospitalized in Germany on October 20 after showing signs of poisoning before the decision was taken. Thus, it has become certain that, in addition to Mullah Bakhtiar, former Sulaymaniyah Police Chief Hasan Nuri was also poisoned. Previously, Bafel Talabani claimed that he was poisoned by Lahur and declared that he had documents proving this.

On November 4, Lahur sent a letter to the PUK Presidential Council, stating that he rejected the decision that expelled himself and other party members. In this context, in the first part of the three-part statement about his rejection of the decision, Lahur said, "I reject all these decisions regarding me and my friends because they are unethical and were taken outside the official presidential meeting." In the second part, he stated that he would use his powers again. At a meeting held one day after Lahur's rejection of the decision to expel him from the party, the PUK Politburo terminated Lahur's co-chairmanship with a majority of votes, and approved the decision to dismiss PUK members Shaduman Mala Hasan, Ala Talabani, Aras Sheikh Cengi, and Jino Muhammed from their positions. Thus, the crisis among the cousins that broke out on July 8 escalated after the elections again,

and more drastic steps that expelled Lahur from the party were prioritized by running intra-party counter-mechanisms. As a matter of fact, the KRG media reported that a large amount of gold belonging to Lahur was seized in the raid on a hotel in Sulaymaniyah on November 29, following the expulsion decision, and that the seized gold could be put forward as evidence in the corruption cases to be filed against Lahur. On the other hand, Bafel's statement regarding the expulsion of Lahur and other names from the party, stating that they will never be admitted to the party again, is important in terms of showing how fierce the competition within the party has become. In addition, corruption cases related to the gold allegedly belonging to Lahur or other cases may prevent him from engaging in politics in Sulaymaniyah. The success of such a move by Bafel will be important in terms of politically eliminating the threat of Lahur in the long run. Mela Rehim, a member of the Central Committee of the PUK who shared information with the KRG press, announced that the co-chairmanship system is no longer in the PUK, all powers rest within Bafel Talabani, and they expect Lahur to leave the KRG. Therefore, the Bafel wing is not only removing Lahur from the PUK; but they want to make him unable to engage in politics and even exist in Sulaymaniyah.

It will not be a surprise that the competition will evolve into armed clashes in addition to expulsions and intra-party judicial processes. For example, the death of Colonel Murat Qani, known for his close relations with Lahur, as a result of an armed attack on November 25, 2021, shows the risk of armed clashes. In this context, after the attack, Lahur stated that those who carried out the attack "opened the

gates of hell" and dragged Sulaymaniyah into a dangerous period. However, it is also questioned to what extent Lahur can respond with arms to this threat, which he put forward as a response. Since his party powers were taken away and the PUK Poliburo is largely positioned against him, Lahur may only resort to a short-term armed resistance and seek revenge through possible assassinations.

Bafel Talabani, on the other hand, continues to give strong messages to the public that he has gathered the power in his hands. In this direction, Bafel is trying to bring himself to the forefront as the leader of the PUK in the government formation attempts in Iraq and also presents a more moderate attitude in relations with the KDP. In fact, it is rumored that Bafel, who met with KDP leader Masoud Barzani after the elections, agreed to act with a joint program on the establishment and functioning of the next Iraqi government<sup>6</sup>. Seeking to convey the message that he has undertaken the PUK leadership on his own, Bafel also tried to act as an intermediary between the KRG government and the students in the protests of the university students in Suleymaniye on the grounds of low financial and social opportunities. He also apologized for the violence undertaken by the security forces against the students. Since he must be aware that he must have power in terms of social issues as well as politics after the intra-party competition, Bafel can be expected to be at the forefront of public services and issues that closely concern the financial and social opportunities of the youth. It will be decisive for Bafel's political career if he emerges as a leader on such issues since he is mostly identified with security issues due to his long-standing position in the security bureaucracy. Considering the KRG Parliamentary

<sup>6</sup> "Masoud Barzani, Bafel Talabani discuss united Kurdish front in Baghdad", Rudaw, 2021, <https://www.rudaw.net/english/kurdistan/151120212> [Accessed: 28.11.2021]

elections, which are expected to be held in 2022, it is possible to say that these policies have become more essential. In addition, Bafel Talabani did not take over a very strong PUK alone, since the party's weakness after the death of Jalal Talabani in 2017, was confirmed both in the KRG Parliament elections and in the elections on October 10, 2021. Therefore, the new period in KRG politics is likely to bring new challenges for the political life of Bafel.

In conclusion, the point that should be underlined is that the co-chairmanship system in the party that was adopted in February 2020 has brought about secession and conflicts in about one year rather than balance. Therefore, this process accelerated the weakening of the PUK, which already showed signs of weakness after Jalal Talabani and demonstrated a character that was far from an integrated party structure. This loss of power can be clearly understood from the results of the early elections held on October 10, 2021. In addition, the rapid acceleration of the competition between the co-chairs immediately after the elections shows that the important point for the PUK is not the evaluation of the election results, but the desire to reach the final result of the competition within the party as soon as possible. Likewise, the developments about the poisoning allegations and the dismissal of

Lahur and the other four figures from the PUK have shown that the intra-party rivalry escalated and the Bafel side sought to end the competition with decisive moves. On the other hand, this situation also showed that the parties started to put their last cards on the table in order to eliminate each other from the co-chairmanship.

Also, the PUK Politburo's attitude towards Lahur Sheikh Jangi and his supporters can be interpreted as an important indicator that the party's political wing is mostly positioned on the side of Bafel Talabani. For this reason, although Lahur states that he rejects the expulsion decision and will use his powers, he may come to a crossroads with the PUK in the future. The most concrete result of this situation will undoubtedly be Lahur Sheikh Jangi's positioning as a rival to the PUK in the elections in the KRG, which are planned to be held in 2022, by establishing a new party. The possibility of a new party will raise the question of how the American administration, which has close relations with Lahur, will look at such a step. Likewise, it is widely known that Lahur has very close relations with Brett McGurk, US National Security Council Middle East and North Africa Coordinator, and even so, he is supported by the US administration as the person who coordinates the terrorist organization PKK/PYD in Northern Iraq. Therefore, if Lahur

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abandons the competition with Bafel within the PUK by founding a new party, it does not mean that his external connections will cease to exist. As for the current situation, it will be decisive for the future of KRG politics whether Lahur will use the leverage provided by his current connections and influence in the security units by staying within the PUK or opting for another political party based in Sulaymaniyah. No matter what, Lahur's expulsion from the PUK and decision to establish a new party will also be touted as Bafel's victory within the party, and will cause the current power of Lahur in Sulaymaniyah to be questioned.

It can be said that the prolongation of the leadership crisis within the PUK will further weaken its power in Iraqi politics. PUK will need to play a role in Iraqi politics with a more precise administrative staff and structure for issues such as the nomination of the Iraqi president, government formation, and local issues such as Kirkuk and the disputed regions. Failure to achieve this may bring the KDP, its biggest rival, to a stronger position than the PUK in both the KRG and Iraq's politics. Therefore, how and when the leadership crisis within the PUK is resolved will lead to political and strategic gains for the KDP side.





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