

Turkmen Split on Upcoming Iraqi Court Decision for KRG Parliament Turkmen Quotas

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Brief Analysis

Turkmen in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) are very apprehensive about the Federal Supreme Court decision, to be handed down on December 27, on the question of abolishing the eleven seats reserved for minorities in the 111-member parliament of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which currently includes five seats set aside for Turkmen.

On February 25 next year, the KRG is expected to hold regional parliamentary elections, which have been postponed twice due to disagreements between the ruling parties—the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)—on the election law and quota seats. The PUK and several other Kurdish parties **[demanded \(https://amwaj.media/article/iraq-kurdistan-elections-erbil\)](https://amwaj.media/article/iraq-kurdistan-elections-erbil)** changes to the current electoral system but were unable to reach an agreement with the KDP, despite the efforts of the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) and KRI president Nechirvan Barzani. The PUK, which has long accused the KDP of taking advantage of the electoral system and more specifically, the quotas, then took the issue to the Federal Court.

Meanwhile, Turkmen in the KRI are caught in the dispute between the two dominant Kurdish parties. A court decision to abolish quota seats would likely further undermine their already weak political representation in the KRG. This would also undoubtedly have an impact on Turkey's influence in the KRG, as it plays the role of protector of Turkmen in Iraq.

How Effective Is the Quota System for Turkmen?

There is a political division among the **[Turkmen community \(https://amwaj.media/article/divided-internally-iraqi-turkmen-front-struggles-for-direction\)](https://amwaj.media/article/divided-internally-iraqi-turkmen-front-struggles-for-direction)** in Iraq—based on individuals' proximity to regional powers Turkey and Iran, and based on whether they are Sunni or Shia. The majority of Turkmen in the KRI live in Erbil, under KDP rule; all Turkmen quota deputies, including those supported by Turkey, have close relations with the KDP.

According to Turkmen politicians, approximately 100,000 to 400,000 Turkmen live in the KRI. Yet in the last parliamentary elections in 2018, the five Turkmen quota deputies together received fewer than 9,000 votes. One possible reason for this surprisingly low number is that some Turkmen voters opt for Kurdish political parties at the ballot box; another explanation from some politicians is that Turkmen voters rely on quotas to elect deputies instead of participating in elections directly. However, it must also be considered that the low turnout signals that Turkmen politicians and the current quota system have failed to win the trust of the Turkmen community.

In fact, although [quotas \(https://research.sharqforum.org/2022/03/18/political-representation-of-iraq/\)](https://research.sharqforum.org/2022/03/18/political-representation-of-iraq/) are meant to ensure minority representation, the dominant parties in the Baghdad and Erbil parliaments alike likely regard these positions as “bonus seats” rather than separate political entities. These larger parties can mobilize their supporters to vote for minority candidates affiliated with the party in return for the candidates’ loyalty. This system is especially effective due to the small amount of votes needed; quotas mean that Turkmen candidates are elected to parliament through far fewer votes than a regular candidate would need. A Turkmen quota seat candidate can be elected with under a thousand votes, whereas a regular candidate needs thousands of votes. Conversely, without the quota system Turkmen candidates would have great difficulty winning even a single seat. Quotas undoubtedly help give the Turkmen a political voice, although the PUK accuses these politicians of supporting the KDP’s political agenda.

Knowing how poor their chances of election would be without quotas, the Turkmen quota deputies defend the current electoral system. They oppose any reduction in quota seat numbers. Moreover, they challenge the independence of the court, asserting that previous recent court decisions—such as the controversial ruling that independent KRI oil sales are illegal—were politically motivated to tilt power back towards the ruling coalition in Baghdad.

But rival political forces also have opinions about the quota system. The PUK [suggests \(https://amwaj.media/article/iraq-kurdistan-elections-erbil\)](https://amwaj.media/article/iraq-kurdistan-elections-erbil) distributing quotas among multiple constituencies—including Sulaymaniyah, its zone of influence. Kurdish opposition parties in the KRI—such as Gorran and the New Generation Movement—have also expressed [skepticism \(https://thecitadel.co/2023/05/05/kdp-puk-quota-seat-disputes-risk-kurdistan-election-delay/\)](https://thecitadel.co/2023/05/05/kdp-puk-quota-seat-disputes-risk-kurdistan-election-delay/) about whether quotas, including the Turkmen quotas, genuinely provide representation for minorities. However, Turkmen journalist Mehmet Ferit Erbiloglu, editor-in-chief of the Turkmen Press Agency (TEBA), told the author that the PUK also hopes to benefit from the quotas like the KDP does by supporting a restructuring of the system. If this does not occur, then he believes that the PUK is likely to abolish them completely.

Quotas: A Divisive Issue among Turkmen

Despite the close ties between Turkey and the KDP, Turkmen politicians in the KDP-dominated KRG have different levels of closeness to Turkey, as revealed in moments of crisis between Ankara and Erbil, such as the ill-fated KDP-led Kurdish independence referendum in 2017. While Ankara strongly opposed the referendum because it would harm Iraq’s integrity, it also worried that the referendum would trigger separatist thoughts among Turkey’s own Kurdish population. This situation created distrust in Ankara-KDP relations and brought these ties to the breaking point.

As part of the fallout, Turkmen politician Muna Kahveci—deputy president of the Turkmen Reform Party and secretary of the KRG parliament before its dissolution—was temporarily [banned \(https://www.rudaw.net/turkish/kurdistan/230520195\)](https://www.rudaw.net/turkish/kurdistan/230520195) from entering Turkey because of her support for the referendum. However, Kahveci and the politicians from the Erbil cadre of the Turkey-backed Iraqi Turkmen Front (ITF) are on the same page regarding preservation of quota seats.

Moreover, not all Turkmen political figures agree that the quota system should be preserved. Sanan Ahmet Ağa, who led the ITF from 2000 to 2003, wrote in a [statement \(https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=3602104896744200&id=100008341745296&mibextid=WC7FNe\)](https://www.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=3602104896744200&id=100008341745296&mibextid=WC7FNe) on Facebook that the quota system is a narrow and closed circle that “paralyzes both the citizenship rights in general and the national rights of the entity it represents.” Ağa argues that maintaining the quota system means gradually dissolving separate minority political entities into the larger political forces in the KRI.

In contrast, Erbilöglü makes a claim that has often been raised before—that some Turkmen candidates were elected with votes from the KDP’s Peshmerga and Asayesh Forces, and as such are not elected or representative of Turkmen votes. According to Erbilöglü, the Turkmen popular majority are not satisfied with the quota system, as demonstrated by the fact that they “have not gone to elections for years, thinking that the candidates will be elected anyway due to the quota system.” Erbilöglü agrees that abolishing the quota system would have a detrimental effect on Turkmen, stating that if it happens, “all Turkmen parties have very little chance of receiving votes from the public and they may be excluded from the parliament.”

Looming Crises in the Turkmen Political Sphere

Members of the Turkmen community cast fewer than nine thousand votes for Turkmen parties in the previous elections; if the Turkmen quota is abolished, Turkmen voters are unlikely to give these parties tens of thousands of votes. If the previous voting numbers are repeated—and in the absence of quotas—Turkmen representation will fade away, weakening the Turkmen faith in current Turkmen politicians and in the political system. In addition, it will be difficult for Turkmen to receive the ministerial position and parliamentary secretary position they currently hold. Nor are they likely to be given additional positions.

Turkey does not focus on the Turkmen community in the KRG proper as much as Turkmen in the disputed territory of Kirkuk (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/ethnic-tension-kirkuk-signals-fractures-ankara-erbil-relations>), but it is obvious that decreasing or ending Turkmen political representation in the KRG will damage Turkey’s claim that Turkmen are the second most significant ethnic group in the KRG after its Kurdish population, and as such should be afforded the appropriate political weight. This would weaken Turkey’s hand in discussions about the Turkmen with Ankara’s Kurdish interlocutors.

However, such a change in Turkmen representation would be unlikely to affect the strong political, military, and economic ties between Ankara and Erbil or Turkey’s operations against the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in the region. If the Turkmen cannot send representatives to the parliament, Ankara can be expected to use its close relations with the KDP to pressure the new cabinet to include Turkmen from outside the parliament. However, this will undoubtedly engender a reaction from the opposition Kurdish parties and cast a shadow on the legitimacy of the candidates proposed.

On the other hand, an interesting option may arise if the quotas are distributed to the electoral districts, where some of the Turkmen quotas will be supported by the PUK. This might drag the Turkmen, who themselves have divided preferences for the political forces that operate throughout Iraq, into the center of new disputes such as the KDP-PUK [conflict \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-kurds-face-legitimacy-issues-amid-election-deadlock-and-internal-division\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iraqi-kurds-face-legitimacy-issues-amid-election-deadlock-and-internal-division) and Ankara-Sulaymaniyah [tensions \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/roots-rift-between-turkey-and-iraqi-kurdistan-puk\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/roots-rift-between-turkey-and-iraqi-kurdistan-puk)

. In fact, both Kurdish parties can use affiliated Turkmen quotas as a tool in the parliament in their power competition. Moreover, considering that Turkey accuses the PUK of supporting the PKK, it is possible that the Turkmen quotas that will support the PUK will be caught in the middle in the Ankara-Sulaymaniyah conflict.

Considering Ankara’s poor relations with the PUK, it may not be happy with this possibility, but the PUK will want to

use it as a bargaining chip against both Erbil and Ankara. Erbiloglu stressed that “in such a scenario, Turkmen will be divided into two: green Turkmen and yellow Turkmen”—a reference to the Kurdistan Region’s administrative, political, and military divides, which are split between the KDP’s yellow zone and the PUK’s green zone.

If the quotas are abolished, Turkmen parties may have to compete more among themselves and develop more public-oriented policies to attract their community. In the long run, this situation may even lead some existing political parties to adopt a nationalist political line, or new parties may emerge that defend this discourse. However, in this apparently very unlikely situation, Turkmen in the KRI, known for their moderate political stance and uncritical attitude toward Kurdish authorities, may face new challenges within the established system.

Despite all this potential for change, it is also possible that the court will rule that the quota system can continue as it is. Erbiloglu believes that “if the quota continues, there will be alliances in the same way. Parliamentarians will be Turkmen, but nothing will be done for the people.”

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