

The Political System of Kurdistan Region of Iraq: A Comparative Study with Established Parliamentary Democracies



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الكلمات المفتاحية: اقليم كردستان العراق؛ الديمقراطية البرلمانية؛ النظام السياسي المختلط؛
هيمنة الاحزاب السياسية؛ الدستور؛ الاصلاحات الحكومية.

كيفية اقتباس البحث

عبدالملك ، ژیوار عبدالجبار ، ريباز علي سمايل، النظام السياسي في اقليم كردستان العراق:
دراسة مقارنة مع الديمقراطيات البرلمانية العريقة، مجلة مركز بابل للدراسات الانسانية، آيار
٢٠٢٦، المجلد: ١٦، العدد: ٥.

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The Political System of Kurdistan Region of Iraq: A Comparative Study with Established Parliamentary Democracies

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Keywords : Kurdistan Region of Iraq; parliamentary democracy; hybrid political system; party dominance; constitution; governance reform

How To Cite This Article

Abdulmalik ,Zhiwar Abduljabar , Rebaz Ali Smail ,The Political System of Kurdistan Region of Iraq: A Comparative Study with Established Parliamentary Democracies , Journal Of Babylon Center For Humanities Studies, May 2026, Volume:16, Issue: 5.

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ABSTRACT

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), established in 1992 following its first parliamentary elections, represents a distinctive case within the Middle East where political institutions have formally adopted a parliamentary framework but operate in practice as a hybrid system. The concentration of executive authority in the presidency, alongside the dominance of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), has produced a governance structure that diverges significantly from established parliamentary democracies. This study aims to critically examine the nature of the political system in the

KRI, guided by the central research question: *to what extent does party dominance, the absence of a constitution, and external pressures shape the functioning of the Kurdistan Parliament?* The research employs a comparative analytical method, drawing on both primary and secondary literature, to contrast the KRI's political arrangements with those of established parliamentary systems such as Scotland and other democratic models. Findings indicate that while the KRI parliament theoretically possesses extensive legislative powers, in practice its authority is undermined by the executive's concentration of power, regional party divisions, and recurrent crises. The lack of an enacted constitution further blurs the separation of powers, leaving governance dependent on informal mechanisms and political bargains. This study contributes to the literature by demonstrating how hybrid governance structures in semi-autonomous regions can hinder democratic consolidation. It underscores that political consensus among parties in the KRI, while important, is insufficient without formal constitutional reform to clarify institutional roles and strengthen parliamentary oversight. The paper thus provides insights into both the limitations of the KRI's current system and the potential pathways for political reform.

الملخص:

يعتمد إقليم كردستان العراق نظاماً سياسياً مختلطاً، مستوحى من النظامين البرلماني والرئاسي. وبينما صُمم إقليم كردستان العراق رسمياً كنظام برلماني، فإن العمل الفعلي يتشكل من خلال الدور الكبير للرئاسة و قوة الأحزاب السياسية، مع هيمنة الحزب الديمقراطي الكردستاني والاتحاد الوطني الكردستاني. تبحث هذه الدراسة في الطابع الفعلي للنظام السياسي في إقليم كردستان العراق من خلال دراسة آثار سيطرة الأحزاب، وغياب الدستور، والعوامل الخارجية على عمل برلمان كردستان العراق. وتضيف هذه الدراسة، بالمقارنة مع الديمقراطيات البرلمانية الرئيسية، أن العقبات الرئيسية أمام تطبيق نظام برلماني فعال في إقليم كردستان العراق تشمل مشكلة تعثر الوصول إلى السلطة، وعدم القدرة على إقرار دستور، والتناقضات بين الحوكمة النظرية والتطبيقية. وتختتم الدراسة بطرح آفاق الإصلاح السياسي، مؤكدةً على أن التوافق بين الأطراف السياسية الفاعلة لا يكفي، بل يجب أن يُستكمل بصيغة قانونية رسمية قد تكون شكلاً آخر أكثر فعالية للنظام البرلماني.

يمثل إقليم كردستان العراق، الذي تأسس عام ١٩٩٢ عقب أول انتخابات برلمانية فيه، حالةً فريدةً في الشرق الأوسط، حيث تبنت المؤسسات السياسية رسمياً إطاراً برلمانياً، لكنها تعمل في الواقع



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كنظام هجين. وقد أدى تركيز السلطة التنفيذية في يد الرئاسة، إلى جانب هيمنة الحزب الديمقراطي الكردستاني والاتحاد الوطني الكردستاني، إلى هيكل حكم يختلف اختلافاً كبيراً عن الأنظمة الديمقراطية البرلمانية الراسخة. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص طبيعة النظام السياسي في إقليم كردستان العراق فحصاً نقدياً، انطلاقاً من سؤال البحث الرئيسي: إلى أي مدى تؤثر هيمنة الأحزاب، وغياب الدستور، والضغوط الخارجية على أداء برلمان كردستان؟ يستخدم البحث منهجاً تحليلياً مقارناً،

بالاعتماد على المصادر الأولية والثانوية، لمقارنة الترتيبات السياسية في إقليم كردستان العراق بتلك الموجودة في الأنظمة البرلمانية الراسخة، مثل اسكتلندا وغيرها من النماذج الديمقراطية. تشير النتائج إلى أنه على الرغم من امتلاك برلمان إقليم كردستان العراق نظرياً صلاحيات تشريعية واسعة، إلا أن سلطته عملياً تُفوّض بسبب تركيز السلطة التنفيذية، والانقسامات الحزبية الإقليمية، والأزمات المتكررة.

ويزيد غياب دستور مُفعّل من ضبابية فصل السلطات، مما يجعل الحكم معتمداً على آليات غير رسمية ومساومات سياسية. تُسهم هذه الدراسة في الأدبيات من خلال توضيح كيف يمكن لهياكل الحكم الهجينة في المناطق شبه المستقلة أن تُعيق ترسيخ الديمقراطية. وتؤكد الدراسة أن التوافق السياسي بين الأحزاب في إقليم كردستان العراق، على الرغم من أهميته، غير كافٍ دون إصلاح دستوري رسمي لتوضيح الأدوار المؤسسية وتعزيز الرقابة البرلمانية. وبذلك، تُقدم هذه الورقة رؤى ثاقبة حول كلٍّ من قيود النظام الحالي في إقليم كردستان العراق والمسارات المحتملة للإصلاح السياسي.

INTRODUCTION

The political system of the KRI represents a peculiar case in the wider context of governance in the Middle East. While on paper the KRI's political system is a parliamentary system, the fact is far from that. The presidency is incredibly powerful, and political parties-essentially the KDP and PUK-exert a very strong grip on decision-making. With power so firmly entrenched, critical questions arise as to what the nature is of the political system within the KRI and how different it is from more established parliamentary democracies.

In 1994 a new political party named the Kurdistan Islamic Union was founded by Salahaddin Bahaadin. In 2001 another Islamic political movement established by Ali Bapir it was named Islamic Group of Kurdistan. After 2003 and the invasion of Iraq by the United States of America (USA) and its allies, Islamic political parties such as these two



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mentioned parties participated in Kurdistan Parliament elections in 2005, 2009, 2013, and 2018. Furthermore, in 2009 a new political movement (Change Movement) under the leadership of ex-PUK leader Nawshirwan Mustafa participated in Kurdistan Parliament elections and won 25 out of 111 Kurdistan Parliament seats. (ديليزى، گهردى، عهبدولكهريم، ٢٠٢٢).

While the KRI enjoys a wide degree of autonomy within Iraq's federal framework, it has so far failed to adopt a properly functioning constitution; as such, much about the specifics of its governance remains vague. The lack of a proper legal framework, along with historical and foreign influences, makes the definition of and efforts toward the implementation of a true parliamentary system rather difficult. These problems are further exacerbated by the continued tension between the formal and informal structures of power typical of the political dynamic in KRI (امين، ٢٠١٩).

The article now attempts to do just that-an in-depth analysis of the political system in the KRI through the role of political parties, limitations of parliament, and the challenges of governance in an area of instability. The article intends to identify the salient features of differences and potential reform that may be gained by comparing the KRI system with established parliamentary democracies and offer insight into how the KRI can move closer to a more transparent and politically effective system.

Table 1: Major Political Parties in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

Party Name	Year Founded	Key (Recent/Founders)	Leadership	Main Ideological Orientation
Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP)	1946	Founded by Mustafa Barzani; currently led by Masoud Barzani	Mustafa Barzani	Kurdish nationalism, conservatism, tribal leadership
Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK)	1975	Founded by Jalal Talabani; currently co-led by Bafel Talabani and Lahur Sheikh Jangi (until 2021 split)	Jalal Talabani	Social democracy, Kurdish nationalism





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Kurdistan Islamic Union (KIU)	1994	Founded by Salahaddin Bahaaddin; current leader Ali Bapir (since 2023 reorganization)	Moderate Islamism, reformist
Kurdistan Islamic Group (Komal)	2001	Founded by Ali Bapir	Sunni Islamism, political Islam
Change Movement (Gorran)	2009	Founded by Nawshirwan Mustafa; later led by Omar Said Ali	Reformist, anti-corruption, pro-democracy
New Generation Movement	2018	Founded and led by Shaswar Abdulwahid	Populism, youth-driven reform, anti-establishment

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The political regime in the KRI is an unusual hybrid system, incorporating elements of both parliamentary and presidential regimes. This unusual structure makes the KRI unlike other, more traditional, parliamentary democracies, making any attempt to find a proper categorization and assessment of its governance framework cumbersome.

The formal classification of the KRI's system as parliamentary obscures the reality of a highly centralized executive power, wherein the presidency exerts significant influence over political processes. This phenomenon from 1992 to 2003 was shaped by the pervasive role of two major political parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), which hold substantial sway over institutional decision-making (Bengio, 2012).

While nominally adhering to parliamentary principles, the practical operation of the political system in KRI has departures from these norms because of the entrenchment of the informal power structures. These are usually a creation of the historical context of the region, which includes its semi-autonomous status within Iraq's federal system, the unpassed draft of the constitution of KRI and other external factors that have shaped the region, like conflict and economic instability (Gunter, 2011). These challenges raise critical questions about the real character of governance in the KRI, especially with regard to power-sharing, the functioning of the parliament, and the adherence to democratic norms.



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The Kurdistan Parliament established after the first KRI Parliament elections in 1992. In the results of these elections, KDP won about 45% of parliament seats and PUK won about 43%. KDP and PUK agreed to form the government together and govern KRI fifty-fifty, but in 1994 the internal war started between them until it was ended by an agreement in 1998 (نامیدی، ۲۰۱۱).

The political system of the KRI, in comparison to more established parliamentary democracies, therefore provides a valuable insight into such dynamics. In more traditional models of parliamentary democracy, for example, the checks and balances between executive and legislature are more clearly demarcated, and party influence, while present, does not typically subvert formal democratic processes. (Lijphart, 1999). On the contrary, these relations are complicated because such a powerful executive, the domination of political parties in governance, and the lack of a written constitution that clearly separates powers turn the system in the KRI rather distinct.

Methodology

The paper, attempts an in-depth analysis of the political system of KRI in view of four aspects: the classification of the political system, influence of political parties, limitations within parliamentary functionality, and challenges for the implementation of a true parliamentary system. In this respect, the present article tries to use comparative methods to investigate how the KRI system is different from the standard form of parliamentary democracies, and accordingly what features are peculiar to it and its capacity for further reforms.

Nature of the Political System in the Kurdistan Region

One of the peculiarities that characterizes the political system of KRI is its being classified as a hybrid system. While structurally it follows the pattern of a parliamentary system, in practice, the distribution of power still witnesses a hue of presidential color. It retains an extremely powerful presidency. This power centralization reflected in the grant of a president the right to veto parliamentary decisions while he takes the top slot in the power structure and is often regarded as a "quasi-presidential system" (Stansfield, 2003). This system ended in 2018, and after that, the Prime Minister became the main source of power in KRI, which therefore subordinated the role of the parliament and thus impedes the latter from playing the role of an independent legislature (Aziz, Veen, 2023).





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Without a constitution, the ambiguity regarding the political classification of the KRI is further exacerbated. Contrary to the majority of consolidated parliaments, where powers distribution and various forms of governance are clearly specified in the constitutional framework, a KRI just have a written draft of constitution. In such a way, the legal ambiguity endorses parliamentary and presidential elements and enables political system development, which has already been described as the "hybrid political system" (Watts, 2008). Concentration of power in the presidency directly undermines the parliamentary system's principles; as such, it contributes to weakening checks and balances—which is the basic foundation of democratic governance (Elazar, 1987).

Influence of the Political Parties

Another defining feature of the KRI's political system is the overwhelming influence of political parties, particularly the KDP and the PUK. These two dominant parties continue to exert significant control over major government institutions, often bypassing formal parliamentary procedures to advance partisan agendas. In many cases, this influence overrides democratic processes, resulting in decision-making that reflects party interests rather than the will of the electorate (McDowall, 2004). The regional division of power further complicates this picture: the KDP maintains dominance in Duhok and Erbil, while the PUK retains strongholds in Sulaymaniyah, creating a fragmented political geography that undermines the parliament's ability to operate as a unified legislative body (Bengio, 2012).

However, to portray the KRI exclusively as a two-party system risks overlooking important changes in the last decade and a half. Since the 2005 elections, Islamic parties and movements have expanded their base, while the 2009 entry of the Change Movement (Gorran) marked the first significant challenge to KDP–PUK hegemony, securing more than 20% of the vote. Although Gorran later experienced decline, its emergence demonstrated the possibility of electoral disruption. More recently, the New Generation Movement has gained traction, particularly among youth and urban voters, positioning itself as a populist, anti-establishment force. In the 2024 parliamentary elections, New Generation secured 15 seats, confirming that voter preferences are shifting even as the two historical parties remain dominant.

At the same time, intra-party ruptures—such as the PUK split between Bafel Talabani and Lahur Sheikh Jangi—have weakened internal

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cohesion and reshaped political competition in Sulaymaniyah. These developments show that the KRI's political scene is no longer a simple duopoly but a fragmented, pluralized arena in which multiple actors compete. Still, despite this pluralization, the structure of governance remains heavily centralized. The control of security forces, financial institutions, and administrative resources by the KDP and PUK limits the transformative capacity of newer parties.

Thus, while some scholars continue to view the KRI as a two-party cartel, others argue that growing pluralism and voter disillusionment signal a gradual rebalancing of power. A critical assessment suggests that both perspectives hold truth: the party system has diversified, but institutional mechanisms remain captured by the historical duopoly. This dynamic can be described as *fragmentation without alternation* a context where more parties gain seats and public support, yet real decision-making power continues to circulate within the established networks of KDP and PUK.

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The political system of the KRI represents a hybrid arrangement that combines elements of both parliamentary and presidential models. While formally categorized as parliamentary, the system in practice demonstrates strong executive dominance and party entrenchment, making it distinct from more consolidated democracies. Scholars such as Özpek (2014) and Natali (2010) characterize this as a “hybrid political system,” where informal networks and party structures weaken the institutionalization of parliamentary norms. Recent analyses (Hussien, 2024; Wahab, 2023) suggest that this hybridity is not merely transitional but has become an embedded feature of governance.

A critical comparison with established parliamentary democracies highlights the depth of these divergences. In Scotland, for example, the Scottish Parliament operates within a clear constitutional framework that delineates competencies between the devolved government and Westminster. This clarity creates predictability and ensures that parliamentary oversight is legally enforceable. By contrast, the KRI still lacks a ratified constitution, leaving separation of powers vague and allowing political elites to interpret or bypass rules at will. Theoretically, the Kurdistan Parliament enjoys wider powers than the Scottish





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Parliament, including decisions over military deployment, as demonstrated in the dispatch of Peshmerga forces in 2014. However, in practice, such powers are curtailed by party dominance and executive centralization, rendering them less effective than their Scottish counterpart.

The persistence of informal power structures further undermines parliamentary practice in the KRI. Historically, the dual hegemony of the KDP and PUK has entrenched regionalized governance “yellow” (Erbil/Duhok) and “green” (Sulaymaniyah) which institutionalizes division rather than unity. Although the rise of Gorran in 2009 and New Generation in 2018 introduced electoral pluralism, these shifts have not translated into systemic reform. The dominance of partisan security forces, media ownership, and patronage networks ensures that executive authority remains insulated from parliamentary checks. This dynamic stands in sharp contrast with the model of **consensus democracy** outlined by Lijphart (1999), where multiparty participation strengthens legislative oversight and limits executive overreach.

External pressures have also shaped this hybrid governance model. During the war against ISIS (2014–2017), executive powers expanded under the pretext of emergency, sidelining parliamentary deliberations. Similarly, economic crises and disputes with Baghdad over oil revenues reinforced executive bargaining at the expense of legislative independence (Anderson & Stansfield, 2009; Connelly & Fleet, 2020). In comparative perspective, established parliamentary democracies also face crises, but their institutional safeguards prevent such moments from permanently eroding parliamentary prerogatives. In the KRI, by contrast, crises exacerbate fragility and deepen reliance on informal elite bargains.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the KRI exhibits what might be called **fragmented parliamentarism** a system that formally resembles a parliamentary model but operates through presidential-style centralization and party cartels. The key difference with established parliamentary democracies such as Scotland lies not in the scope of formal authority but in the effectiveness of parliamentary oversight and the presence (or absence) of constitutional clarity. Without institutional reforms, particularly the adoption of a binding constitution and the depoliticization of security and financial institutions, the KRI’s parliament will remain a weak actor in a system dominated by executive power and entrenched party interests.



The Challenges to Parliamentary Functionality

The KRI parliament faces structural and contextual limitations that undermine its legislative and oversight functions. While the formal legal framework prescribes parliamentary authority, the consolidation of power within the executive branch curtails the parliament's ability to exercise meaningful oversight over the president and the regional government. The presidential authority, including the power to veto parliamentary decisions, significantly weakens legislative influence, often reducing parliamentary debates to procedural exercises rather than substantive governance mechanisms (Natali, 2010).

This limitation is further exacerbated by the political culture in the KRI, which privileges party loyalty and executive dominance over institutional accountability. The parliament often operates under the shadow of dominant political parties, resulting in compromises that prioritize political expediency rather than public accountability. Such dynamics resonate with the concept of "executive dominance" in semi-parliamentary systems, where the legislature exists in form but lacks de facto power (Lijphart, 1999).

The parliament's effectiveness has also fluctuated in response to crises. For instance, during the ISIS insurgency, emergency security measures justified the expansion of executive powers at the expense of legislative functions. Later, economic downturns and budgetary crises further constrained parliamentary autonomy, highlighting the fragility of the region's political institutions and the susceptibility of its governance system to external shocks. These episodes demonstrate a key point: in the absence of strong institutional safeguards, crises act as catalysts for executive encroachment, undermining democratic accountability (Elazar, 1987).

Nature of the Political System in the Kurdistan Region

The political system in the KRI can best be described as a hybrid model, combining elements of parliamentary and presidential systems. Constitutionally, the KRI is parliamentary, with the president intended as a nominal head of the executive. However, in practice, the president exerts considerable influence over both executive and legislative processes, effectively rendering the system presidential in operation.



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Scholars have highlighted that such hybridization often emerges in contexts of weak institutionalization, where legal frameworks exist but political practices favor strong individual or party leadership (Natali, 2010; Elazar, 1987).

A significant factor contributing to this hybrid system is the absence of a formal constitution, which creates ambiguity in the separation of powers. Established parliamentary democracies rely on a codified constitution to clearly delineate the responsibilities of legislative and executive branches, preventing power concentration and enabling institutional checks (Lijphart, 1999). In contrast, the KRI operates in a legal vacuum where authority is informally negotiated among political elites, leaving the parliament with minimal leverage to assert its legislative role independently. This situation aligns with theories on institutional fragility in emerging political systems, which emphasize how the absence of legal codification can entrench power hierarchies and weaken accountability mechanisms (Helms, 2014).

Despite these challenges, opportunities for reform exist. Consensus-driven initiatives by dominant political parties, coupled with the eventual adoption of a formal constitution, could redefine power dynamics, strengthen parliamentary authority, and institutionalize mechanisms for democratic oversight.

Comparative Analysis with Established Parliamentary Democracies

In established parliamentary democracies, the separation of powers is clearly defined. Executives are accountable to legislatures, and institutional mechanisms such as parliamentary inquiries, votes of no confidence, and judicial oversight ensure balanced governance (Lijphart, 1999). In contrast, the KRI demonstrates concentration of power in the presidency and a dominant party system that undermines parliamentary authority.

The hybrid nature of the KRI's system parliamentary in form but presidential in practice—reflects a broader phenomenon observed in transitional or semi-autonomous regions, where political institutions are underdeveloped and political elites dominate governance processes (Elazar, 1987). This comparison highlights the structural deficiencies in the KRI's legislative framework and underscores the importance of legal formalization and institutional strengthening. Without codified rules and



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effective checks, legislative processes remain dependent on political negotiation and crisis intervention rather than institutionalized governance.

Influence of External Factors upon the Political System

The political system of the KRI is not only shaped by internal institutional weaknesses but also by external pressures. Relations with Baghdad are often contentious, particularly regarding revenue sharing, territorial disputes, and autonomy. These interactions constrain the policy space for the KRI parliament, as executive actions frequently dominate negotiations with the central government.

International actors have also shaped the KRI's political trajectory. During the fight against ISIS, military and financial support from the United States and the European Union strengthened executive capacities but simultaneously introduced external pressures that may complicate institutional development. The literature on external state-building suggests that such interventions, while stabilizing in the short term, can inadvertently entrench executive authority at the expense of parliamentary empowerment (Paris, 2004; Richmond, 2011).

Thus, the KRI's hybrid political system emerges as a product of both internal institutional fragility and external pressures, creating a governance environment where the parliament remains constrained, and democratic accountability is limited. Future reforms, including the adoption of a formal constitution and clearer separation of powers, could counterbalance these pressures, providing the parliament with the tools to operate effectively within a robust and stable political framework.

Conclusion

The political system of the KRI presents a hybrid configuration, combining features of both parliamentary and presidential systems. This hybridity is not accidental but rather the outcome of historical legacies, the dominance of political parties, and most significantly, the absence of a formal constitution. The analysis has shown that this structural gap has allowed the executive to consolidate power at the expense of parliamentary authority, leaving the legislature with limited capacity to exercise meaningful oversight.





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A key finding is that the **absence of a constitution is the single most significant factor** behind the current imbalance of power. Without codified rules to delineate the functions of the parliament and the executive, political authority remains concentrated in the presidency and in dominant parties such as the KDP and PUK. This concentration weakens parliamentary independence, making it susceptible to party-based bargaining and external pressures. As highlighted during the sixth parliamentary term, attempts to pass a constitutional draft have repeatedly stalled, reflecting the lack of consensus among political actors. A successful passage of the constitution would clarify the separation of powers and strengthen institutional accountability.

The study also demonstrates that **external crises have reinforced executive dominance**. During the ISIS conflict, for example, emergency governance relied heavily on executive actions, and parliamentary sessions were suspended or sidelined in favor of rapid decision-making. Similarly, economic downturns caused by budget disputes with Baghdad and fluctuations in oil revenues forced political compromises that further marginalized parliament. These cases highlight a broader pattern: in the absence of strong legal frameworks, crises serve as turning points that reinforce authoritarian tendencies rather than democratic consolidation.

Comparatively, when measured against established parliamentary democracies, the KRI lacks the institutional safeguards that ensure executive accountability. According to Lijphart's typology of parliamentary systems, effective legislatures typically rely on mechanisms such as votes of no confidence, parliamentary inquiries, or judicial checks all of which remain either absent or ineffective in the KRI context. This confirms that while the KRI resembles parliamentary democracies in form, it diverges sharply in practice due to weak institutionalization and party dominance.

In terms of data, parliamentary attendance rates and session frequency reveal a troubling trend. For instance, during 2015–2017, the parliament was suspended for nearly two years following political disputes between the KDP and Gorran, leaving legislative processes completely stalled. Such interruptions undermine public trust and contribute to declining perceptions of parliamentary legitimacy. Surveys conducted by the Kurdistan Institute for Strategic Studies (2019) indicate that **only 27% of respondents viewed parliament as an effective institution**, compared



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to over 60% who expressed greater trust in the presidency. These figures reinforce the structural imbalance documented in this study.

In conclusion, the KRI's political system reflects both the opportunities and vulnerabilities of hybrid regimes. While it possesses the institutional architecture of a parliamentary democracy, executive dominance, party pre-eminence, and the absence of a constitution undermine its democratic potential. Reform, therefore, cannot be limited to procedural adjustments but requires both the **adoption of a formal constitution** and the **political will of dominant parties** to institutionalize checks and balances. Only through such reforms can the Kurdistan Parliament transform from a symbolic body into a genuinely effective institution capable of ensuring accountability, transparency, and democratic governance.

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