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Environmental problems are sidelined: issues raised during the KRI 2024 general election

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Abstract. The Kurdistan Region of Iraq's (KRI) 2024 general election focused primarily on political, social, and administrative issues, with little emphasis on the environment. KRI is facing serious environmental problems, yet these did not emerge as major concerns during the election campaign. This paper reviews the key issues raised during the KRI 2024 election by the major parties and establishes that the environment was sidelined. It highlights some environmental problems with a focus on pollution. It argues that the prioritisation of the issues was incorrect, and suggests that raising environmental awareness among the public is important for environmental problems to be tackled in the future.

Keywords. Kurdistan Region of Iraq; Election campaign; Key issues; Environmental problems

1. Introduction

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq held its long-delayed elections in 2024 with the participation of all political parties and a few new electoral lists. A number of independent individuals became candidates too. Voting began and ended on October 20th and the entire process was administered and supervised by Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission. The election was for the 6th parliament and government of KRI.

The election campaign was intense due to factors such as the antagonistic rhetoric of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) criticising the main ruling party, the formation of new electoral lists, the emergence of new issues such as the need to establish a closer relationship with Baghdad, addressing the consequences of the KRI's failed 'economic independence' announced some years ago, along with the public's belief that this time the election would be free and fair. Each party or list tried its best and utilised all the possible tools at its disposal to win votes; they criticised government policies, raised new issues, and made promises for reform and improvements in the government.

However, despite the fact that KRI faces many environmental challenges such as a shortage of surface water and groundwater, land contamination, excessive air pollution in the cities, water pollution, grass fires, and bush fires, the election campaign was largely void of any serious discussion of environmental problems or future plans to address them. The opposition largely focused on the poor performance of the government, the failure of the economy and

corruption especially in the oil sector and in collecting national revenues. The main ruling party, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), accused all others of being unable to implement reforms and manage the country's affairs. It presented itself as the only party that could maintain the relative autonomy of KRI and its political system and not yield to the 'enemy'.

This paper reviews the main themes of the 2024 KRI general election, and demonstrates that environmental issues received the least mention by the political parties; therefore, there is little hope for these issues being confronted by the post-election government. The paper argues that this is due to the public's lack of environmental awareness, which results in a lack of interest in the subject by the parties and electoral lists. The paper attempts to answer the following research question: To what extent were environmental problems addressed during the 2024 Kurdistan general election? It will conclude with the research findings and several recommendations.

To achieve this goal, the author utilises primary and secondary data. Primary data consists of speeches by leaders of the political parties and electoral lists, and secondary data comprises media reports and research articles.

2. KRI 2024 General Election

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq held its sixth parliamentary election on 20th of October 2024. The election was initially set for 2022 but was postponed numerous times because of disagreements among parties over various election-related issues [1].

The final arbitrator was the Iraqi Federal Supreme Court, which issued its judgment on the 'unconstitutionality of some articles of the Iraqi Kurdistan Parliament Election Law'. The court dismantled 11 seats of the Kurdistan Region's parliament, which were allocated for minority groups, and reduced it to 100 seats. In a later ruling, the Court allocated five seats within the 100 to the minority groups. It put Iraq's Independent High Electoral Commission in charge of supervising and managing the parliamentary election. It divided the Kurdistan Region into four electoral districts and allocated seats to each of them in proportion to its population. It also allocated 30 per cent of the seats for women and decided that the 'political entity in Iraqi Kurdistan may submit its own list that includes the names of its candidates containing at least 30 percent of women' [2,3]. These amendments were binding on all authorities, and they were seen as significant improvements in the election and management. These changes galvanised the election campaign to a high level of competitiveness and made the public believe that this time the election would be freer and fairer than the elections before.

There were 3.6 million eligible voters in the Kurdistan Region for the 2024 parliamentary election [4], out of which 2,899,578 registered to vote. A total of 1,091 candidates of 15 parties, electoral lists and independent individuals competed for 100 seats [5]. A significant number of observers, 3,750 international and 1,928 domestic monitors, were set to oversee the polling stations [6]. The election took place on the 20th of October; it went well without any major incidents. The turnout was over 70 per cent across all districts. The two major parties, which have ruled the region since 1992, emerged victorious; KDP received the most votes and PUK came in second [7]. Both parties are expected to establish a new government, with or without the participation of other political parties and independent lists.

Election campaigns usually reveal what the parties criticise and what they want to do if elected to power. In other words, they show what issues are of interest to the political parties and the public. The 2024 election campaign was hardly about environmental issues or their solutions. This is at a time when the region endures the impacts of many environmental problems such as water, air, and soil pollution, shortage of clean water, dust storms, grass fires,

and an increase in dryland. The absence of environmental issues can also be related to the public awareness of environmental problems and their priority of what they need most.

It should be mentioned that no political parties in the KRI, independent electoral lists, or independent individuals have produced an election manifesto in print. They do not see it as necessary, and the public does not demand it. Instead, the political parties and others rely on holding public gatherings and delivering public speeches to communicate their messages to the voters and inform them of their stance on various issues. Hence, the leaders' public speeches are the most significant aspect of any election campaign in the KRI.

2.1 The Kurdistan Democratic Party

The Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) is the main political party in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. It has been in power since the region's creation in 1992, after the defeat of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party and the establishment of the No-Fly-Zone by the Allies to protect the region from Iraqi airpower [8]. The KDP has been in full control of half of KRI, militarily and economically, and has dominated the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), which administers the affairs of the KRI. Its main rival is the PUK, which is in full control of the other half of the KRI and has been the second dominating force in the KRG since the early 2000s.

The three main figures of the KDP – the party's president, Masoud Barzani; his son, who is the Prime Minister of KRI, Masrour Barzani; and his nephew, Nechirvan Barzani, who is the President of KRI – actively participated in the election campaign and highlighted their party's policy on various issues.

Masoud Barzani, aged 78, participated in several occasions that his party organised as part of their election campaign. His most highlighted appearance was at the Erbil International Stadium gathering on the 15th of October, where he delivered a speech to a large crowd of KDP supporters.

Masoud Barzani started by referring to his party's long struggle for the autonomy of Kurdistan and said that they can take credit for a lot of political achievements for the Kurds. He said that the wish of people, what people want, would become the agenda of the next government cabinet; and there would be more public services, more security, and prosperity. He stated that the election would be the end of the current chaos in Kurdistan; there would be a united KRI with one government and one parliament, and one army (Barzani was referring to the division of KRI into two zones, with KDP controlling the northwest part and PUK controlling the southeast part). But he warned the candidates on the KDP list not to make promises that they could not fulfil in the future (both KDP and PUK have their own military, security, and intelligent forces). Barzani also mentioned that the election would be the end of alliance with mafia and the production of illegal drugs (he was referring to his party's main rival, PUK, and meant that the present alliance with PUK would end soon since PUK, according to him, is associated with the mafia, and engaged in illegal drugs activities) [9,10].

Barzani delved into his party's motto and said that it conveys a sense of historical responsibility toward people and the country; it is about togetherness and resistance. And he criticised other parties' mottos and said that they were about intolerance, elimination, and exclusion. He pointed to the work of successive government cabinets since 1992, in all of which KDP has been the dominant force, and said that they have all been serving the people of Kurdistan [10].

A large part of Barzani's speech was allocated to Peshmerga (Kurdish paramilitary force) and its role in protecting Kurdistan. He attacked what he described as Arab chauvinists

who opposed arming Peshmerga and said that Peshmerga is no threat to anyone except that they defend Kurdistan. He said that the force has a deep root in the Kurdish history and is the pride of the nation; it will forever continue to protect Kurdistan [9].

Masoud Barzani is a Peshmerga veteran. He still sees himself as an active Peshmerga and associates himself with the force since he believes that this would give him strength and legitimacy in the eyes of the public, so it was no surprise to see that his speeches during the election rallies was mainly overshadowed by the past and the role of Peshmerga in liberating Kurdistan.

Nechirvan Barzani's most highlighted appearance was his public speech in Sulaymaniyah, which is the stronghold of PUK, to a crowd of KDP supporters on the 14th of October. He spoke in general terms and said that his party would work for the people in the area and would not let them become the victims of political conflicts. He said that the Sulaymaniyah region has an important role in the development of Kurdish culture and literature and that it deserves the best service, the best security and stability and the best development. 'This is what the new generation wants', he said. He reaffirmed that his party behaves very responsibly and keeps its promises, and asked the people of Sulaymaniyah to test KDP by voting for it and see what it would accomplish for them in the future [11].

The third most influential public figure in the KDP is the Prime Minister of the KRG and the second deputy president of the KDP, Masrour Barzani. More than the KDP president and the KRI president, Masrour Barzani, as the current Prime Minister and most likely future Prime Minister, was expected to talk about post-election plans touching all the urgent and most pressing issues.

In a speech to university lecturers in the city of Duhok, Masrour Barzani said that the election was to decide the future of KRI for the next four years, so everyone should behave very responsibly. He said that many changes are happening all around us and it is not clear where we are heading, therefore we have to act wisely and know whom we can trust with running our country [12].

In a lengthy interview with his own personal media, Masrour Barzani recalled his past achievements as the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government. He said that he had worked to carry out reforms, fight corruption in all sectors and areas, diversify Kurdistan's economy, protect the political entity of Kurdistan, and prioritise national interests over personal or party interests. He mentioned that if his party succeeds in Sulaymaniyah Governorate (which is under the political and administrative control of the PUK), there would be no larceny, embezzlement, terror, or fear, and Sulaymaniyah will become peaceful like other cities. He accused his party's rival, the PUK, of smuggling illegal materials into and out of the country, collecting national revenues in Sulaymaniyah Governorate and using them for their own benefits instead of using them for the benefit of the people [13].

Barzani talked about his government's relationship with the Central Government of Iraq and mentioned that it is improving, but more time is needed for all issues to be settled. He accused his rivals of trying to weaken his government and Kurdistan by attempting to involve the Iraqi government in the internal affairs of Kurdistan, which he said has failed. He referred to unresolved issues like the disputed territories between KRI and Iraq, and compensation for Anfal Genocide victims [13].

Barzani delved into some long and unresolved problems in KRI. He first talked about electricity and improvements in the sector in terms of the sources and the supply to households, industries, etc. He hoped (hope without plans) to be able to diversify the sources of electricity in the future; not solely relying on gas and diesel, but producing it from solar power, wind, and

water. He stated that within the next two years, all households will have uninterrupted electricity. Concerning water, he mentioned several projects are underway to increase and improve water supply to households in Erbil and some other cities. In terms of developing water resources, he said that they have and will continue to build dams (to collect rainwater) to provide water for agriculture. Agriculture, he stated, is and will be his top priority. 'KRI has fertile land, but it has not been fully utilised to secure food for the region', he stated. He said that he has plans to develop the agricultural sector further and improve food security, together with water security [13].

Some other points related to Masrour Barzani's past performance and his post-election plan were: the digitalisation of government institutions, including the banking system, and paying government employees not by cash but through their personal bank accounts; creating more jobs by improving the private sector and supporting small and big businesses; developing the health and education sectors to meet international standards; building more roads and bridges for a better infrastructure; further developing KRG's international relations; ensuring the protection of Kurdistan from foreign threats; and maintaining neutrality regarding ongoing conflicts in the Middle East [13].

2.2 The Patriotic Union of Kurdistan

The second major political party in KRI is PUK, which, similar to KDP, has its own military forces and intelligence agency. It controls almost half of KRI and has always been part of KRG. During the election campaign, PUK behaves like an opposition force that has never been in power. PUK's most prominent public face was its leader, Bafel Talabani. Bafel committed himself to making his party strong again and to have a bigger say in the post-election government. He therefore launched an aggressive campaign attacking their rival in his public speeches. Like the other parties, PUK had no election manifesto and no written plans for post-election.

In his very first speech at the start of the election campaign, Talabani hailed recent reforms in his party. He stated that his party is now united, has overcome division and polarisation, and mocked his main rival, KDP, for being divided and split over leadership. He referred to 'one significant achievement' of his party - changing the KRI election law to prevent rigging and cheating. He blamed the KDP for all the corruption and mismanagement in KRI, stating that the KRG was under total control of the KDP. Therefore, his party, although part of the government, was blameless [14]. On another occasion, he accused his rival of stealing the national wealth, restricting freedom, arresting, and imprisoning civil society activists, etc. He also said that his party would protect the traditions and social values of the Kurdish people [15,16].

In his last public speech in the city of Erbil, Talabani accused the government under KDP of turning KRI into a police state and vowed that he would not let that continue. He also accused the government of larceny, stealing from the public purse, and not paying its employees their due salaries. He stated that his party would revive true Kurdish nationalism, end corruption, provide public services equally to all the KRI cities, towns, and villages, and ensure a better life for everyone if it is elected to power [16,17]. The environmental problems in Iraq, which are rapidly rising and pose significant health risks, were largely absent from the post-election political agendas of both the KDP and PUK.

3. Environmental problems in KRI

There are numerous environmental problems in KRI that we cannot possibly review all of them here. However, we can highlight some problems which are extremely serious and need to be prioritised in terms of solution and getting on top of the government's agenda: the soil, water, and air pollutions, and the problem of overexploitation of water resources in KRI. The problems are worsening day by day, threatening the well-being of people and the sustainability of the environment. Threats like these constitute security issues since they are directly related to the survival or well-being of people; therefore, they need to be prioritised and treated with utmost efforts [18].

Starting with soil pollution, the problem is very rampant, which comes from three main sources. The first source is industrial activities in general, and the oil industry in particular [19]. Heavy metals (e.g., arsenic, copper, chromium, cadmium, cobalt, iron, manganese, molybdenum, nickel, lead, and zinc) have been found in large quantities in the soil around industrial areas and in certain areas in urban centres [20]. The extraction, refining, and transportation of oil have created immense pollution [21]. There are many oil refineries, licensed and unlicensed, in KRI discharging their effluents into the environment, causing soil contamination and destroying agricultural lands on a large scale [22]. Another source of soil pollution is the transport by tanker trucks of crude oil and petroleum derivatives to and from neighbouring countries. There are around 5,000 oil tanker trucks on KRI roads every day, and accidents often happen due to bad roads, faulty trucks, or dangerous driving [23]. Some of these accidents result in the spillage of huge volumes of oil and the contamination of the land.

The second source of soil pollution is municipal solid waste mainly from urban centres [24]. Urbanisation and changes in lifestyle for many people have led to an increase in consumption of all sorts of goods and, consequently, an increase in waste materials. Almost all solid wastes end up in open dumpsites or landfills [25], and some of those sites are not very far from residential areas. In some dumping lands, solid wastes are burned haphazardly, causing further problems such as the spread of a rotten odour [26]. There are also unauthorised dumpsites in many areas. More land is being used for municipal solid waste.

The third source of soil pollution is wastewater from urban centres and other residential areas. Untreated wastewater (there is no system in place to separate wastewater into grey and black; it is all mixed), released by sewerage pipe or tunnel, mixes with the rivers and creeks and pollutes surface and subsurface soils [27]. The wastewater of Sulaymaniyah city, which pours into the Tanjaro River, is an example in that regard [28]. Other areas that do not have sewerage systems, including all the villages, rely on cesspits for the disposal of their wastewater. The cesspit allows the wastewater to spread through and pollute the soil as well as the groundwater.

Water is increasingly polluted in KRI. The sources of surface water pollution are wastewater and industrial discharges, including discharges from oil refineries and agricultural farmlands. Untreated wastewater, from these sources, mixes with rivers and lakes [29]. The Dukan Reservoir, the largest lake in KRI and the main source of drinking water for Sulaymaniyah Governorate, including Sulaymaniyah city, is contaminated with heavy metals from agricultural runoffs, wastewater, and waste matters to an alarming level [30] – heavy metals are non-biodegradable and cause various and serious diseases when accumulated in living tissues [31]. The quality of Sulaymaniyah's water has been declining over the past years, and it is expected to decline further owing to insufficient preventive measures by the local authorities [32]. The Tanjaro River, Qlyasan Stream, and Darbandikhan Reservoir in Sulaymaniyah Governorate are some other examples of contamination of surface water with heavy metals. Tanjaro and Qlyasan receive untreated domestic and industrial wastewaters

before they join the Darbandikhan Reservoir, which is the second largest lake in KRI and the source of drinking water for tens of thousands of people. The water of the reservoir is unsuitable for human consumption [33-36].

The drinking water of Duhok Governorate is another example; it is contaminated and not suitable for drinking. It includes the city of Duhok, the largest urban centre in the governorate and the third-largest city in KRI. The city's drinking water comes from the Duhok Dam, which is polluted by socio-economic activities, including agriculture. The water receives some treatment before it is pumped to consumers, but traces of faecal bacteria can still be found in it [37-39]. After usage, the water is released into the Duhok Valley without any treatment, where it is used for irrigation of fruits and vegetables and watering animals before it arrives at the Mosul Dam in a 24-kilometre-long journey [40].

Groundwater is another main source of both drinking water and irrigation. It is the only source of water in many areas in KRI. This resource can become polluted by agricultural, urban, and industrial wastes that leak to underlying aquifers [41]. KRI's groundwater is polluted in some areas by these sources. Sulaymaniyah groundwater, for example, its well-waters and karez-waters (subterranean water), is not safe for drinking because of leakage from sewage and other contaminants. The situation is worse for groundwater in those areas that are adjacent to the polluted rivers, streams, or sewage outlets [42]. The groundwater is also badly polluted in the areas that are adjacent to the oil refineries [43].

Another example of groundwater pollution is the groundwater of the Makhmur Plain, which is the largest cropland area in Erbil Governorate and has a sizable population. The water is not suitable for human consumption, according to one study [44].

Air is increasingly polluted in KRI [45]. Highly toxic gases and toxic metal elements are being released into the air from industrial activities in general and oil activities in particular [19]. Toxic gas with heavy metals in the air is also attributed to heavy traffic density in the urban centres and on the main roads [46]. Heavy traffic density has been found to be responsible for soil pollution in the urban centres [47]. KRI has no trams, trains or tube trains. It has a bus service, but it is small and operates only in limited areas and often without a timetable. Many people rely on their own cars for transportation.

Almost all existing vehicles in KRI run on gasoline or diesel. This contributes to the growing air pollution. Car emissions contain high levels of lead, a heavy metal. Tetra Ethyl Lead is added to gasoline in KRI 'to improve its qualities and increase its octane number,' but with significant consequences for human health and the environment [48].

Another main source of air pollution is private electric generators. In KRI, electricity consumers, houses, shops, etc., are connected to two sources of electricity; national and private. The national electricity comes from state-owned power plants and the private one comes from electric generators operating in the residential areas. This is because the national electricity is not available 24-hours; it often cuts out especially on very cold and very hot days when demand for electricity is high. The gap is filled by private generators run on diesel fuel. They supply power sometimes up to 12 hours a day, and they release huge amounts of CO₂, NO_x, SO₂, CO, solid particulates, and CB into the air [49]. The generators are a big source of air pollution which, combined with the gases emitted by cars, oil tanker trucks and factories, often create a layer of black clouds over the cities [50].

Another serious environmental problem is overexploitation and overconsumption of natural resources, mainly water. The surface water, which comes from precipitation and international rivers, is not adequately harvested; only a small portion is collected in a few lakes, and much is wasted when supplied to households or farms [51-53].

Groundwater is being seriously overexploited and degraded in KRI. Groundwater is heavily used for drinking and irrigation in most areas in KRI. Digging tools and drilling machines have made it easy for many people to get a tube or artesian well in their farms and even in their house yards. It is easy to obtain a government license for digging a well. People still dig wells even if they do not have licences; generally, there are no legal consequences for such actions. Moreover, the government itself has a direct hand in degrading the groundwater; it is an easy target and a quick solution so the government uses it to supply household water. Consequently, tens of thousands of wells were constructed all over the region. The excessive withdrawal of their water has dangerously lowered the groundwater table [54]. For example, a water well in Erbil Governorate in 1996 was about 200 m deep; now in 2021, it has to be more than 600 m deep to reach the water [55,56]. This shows that withdrawal has been much more than recovery and that water has been used in an unsustainable manner [51].

Unsustainable usage of water resources is a serious environmental problem in KRI. There are also other factors that contribute to the deterioration of water, namely the climate change factor and controlling the flow of the transboundary rivers by upstream Iran and Türkiye. These factors add to the water shortage in KRI [57-59].

4. Conclusions

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq faces many environmental problems that require urgent action and prioritisation on the government's agenda. The election campaign is generally a time in which competing parties and political lists highlight and discuss important issues, declaring their post-election plans usually in a manifesto. The 2024 KRI parliamentary election was, once again, a disappointment for the environment. The election campaign was intense, and the parties made every effort to convey to the public their beliefs and future plans if elected. However, their messages lacked any reference to the pressing and significant environmental problems in KRI or potential solutions for the future.

The paper reviewed the messages and public speeches of the two main political parties, KDP and PUK. They have both been ruling the KRI since 1992 and will have every chance to continue to do so. The paper looked for references to environmental problems in those parties' election messages, and highlighted several environmental issues in the KRI to show the seriousness of the matter. It concluded that the main parties' election messages were mainly about defending and protecting Kurdistan, working for social cohesion, and protecting social values. The parties criticised each other for administrative mismanagement, financial corruption, suppressing freedom, and prosecuting activists. They devoted much time to demonising one another and attempting to portray each other as outlawed entities involved in illegal activities. An exception was when the KRG Prime Minister from the KDP briefly mentioned cleaner energy in the future and the increased collection of rainwater. However, the parties, as well as the electoral lists and independent individuals, failed to address any significant environmental issues, including various forms of pollution and the overexploitation of water.

A slight mention of future plans for the environment falls miserably short of addressing environmental problems in KRI. The absence of a coherent post-election agenda reflects the prevailing culture of politics in the region. However, the lack of acknowledgment of environmental issues reveals a more serious concern: the public lacks environmental awareness, potentially prioritising political and economic issues over environmental ones. This is another finding of the paper, leading to a suggestion: public awareness of the environmental threats to the region's development and the well-being of its people must increase, and future election

campaigns and government policies must give adequate attention to the region's environmental problems.

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