

# POLITICAL REPRESENTATION OF IRAQ'S MINORITIES: TOOL FOR DOMINANT PARTIES?

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**Abstract:** Ethnic and religious minorities are given official quotas both in Iraqi and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) parliaments. While the given quotas are limited to certain numbers, some of the minorities do not have any quotas. Although the quota system in theory is meant to secure minority representation, in practice the minority quotas are considered as bonus seats used by the dominant parties both in Erbil and Baghdad parliaments. This brief discusses the shortcomings of the existing quota system and then showcases how it affects minorities negatively. Taking advantage of the loophole in the quota system, dominant parties can mobilize their masses to vote an affiliated minority candidate for political allegiance. However, the instrumentalization of the minority quotas only help the dominant parties reach higher seats in the parliament, while this process clearly undermines the minority representation, leading to further fragmentation within the minority communities and eroding the already weakened faith in the democratic elections.

## **Introduction**

Having a deep-rooted Mesopotamian heritage, Iraq historically has been the home of many ethnicities and religions. However, the security crises of Iraq have impeded its historical identity and destroyed its ethnic and religious mosaic. Although the minorities had suffered under the Ba'ath regime, the change in regime following the American invasion in 2003 has not helped them but rather marginalized them causing the country to become a hostage of sectarianism.

With a population of over 40-million, Iraq consists of three major demographic groups: Shi'a Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and Kurds (most of whom follow Sunni Islam). The Yazidis, Christians, and Turkmens are the most prominent entities outside of the major groups in the country, and some of the religious-ethnic minorities are represented in both the Iraqi parliaments and Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) parliaments. The parliamentary system established in Iraq in the 2005 Constitution was designed within a federal framework where the relationship between the federal government and the regional government is based on the sharing of authority.

Minorities have been the most vulnerable as violence has become widespread since 2003. Thousands of minorities were displaced during the Sunni-Shiite civil war in 2006. In 2008, violence against Christians in Mosul forced thousands to flee to the KRI. The emergence of ISIS in 2014 led to the most severe wave of displacement and violence against minorities. Since 2014, more than 3 million people have become Internally Displaced People (IDP). Half of the IDP was placed in the KRI and around a quarter million Iraqis fled the country.<sup>1</sup> While the minorities have been among the most affected groups from terrorism, conflicts, and instability within the country, the solutions to their problems are also directly connected to how much their voices are heard in the decision-making bodies through their political representation.

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Even though minority groups have certain representation quotas, several powerful political parties dominate these quotas in the two parliaments. This expert brief refers to a dozen ethnic and religious groups excluded from the atypically divided new order in post-2003 Iraq, centred on Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds. Focusing on the political representation of minorities in Iraq and KRI, this study provides an overview of how dominant parties instrumentalize minorities for their political goals and to what extent this affects the lives of minorities. Being at the primary mechanism for political representation of minorities, the minority quotas given both in Erbil and Baghdad parliaments are questioned in this study. We first discuss the shortcomings of the existing quota system and then argue how it affects minorities negatively in many ways such as failing to provide real representation of minority interests causing fragmentation within the community itself due to the interferences of dominant parties. The quota MPs supported by the dominant parties have to meet the parties' expectations rather than the demands of the minority communities. Therefore, these MPs could only defend the rights and demands of their communities to the extent allowed by the dominant parties. In other words, finding a solution to minorities' problems and meeting their demands usually lie at the mercy of sovereign powers. As a result, minorities are losing faith in the quota system and democracy altogether.

### **The political representation of minorities**

The preamble of the 2005 Iraqi Constitution emphasizes that all demographic "components" in the country will be protected without discrimination. In the constitution, the term "component" is used instead of "minority." The term "minority" is mentioned only once in the constitution. The constitution states that nationalities such as Turkmens, Chaldeans, Assyrians and all other components' administrative, political, cultural, and educational rights are guaranteed.<sup>2</sup>

Minority communities make up an estimated 10% of Iraq's population, including religious minorities such as Armenian, Syriac, and Chaldo-Assyrian Christians; Baha'is, Jews, Mandaean and Yazidis as well as ethnic minorities such as Faily Kurds, Shabaks and

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Turkmen.<sup>3</sup> Although there are provisions in the constitution that refer to various minorities, not all components are emphasized. The constitution is subject to criticism on the grounds that it excludes some minorities. On the other hand, the absence of a law regulating the rights of minorities in Iraq makes them even more vulnerable. Contrary to Iraq, after systematic attacks against minorities, laws that guarantee the administrative, political, cultural, and educational rights of minorities were passed in 2015 in the KRI Parliament.<sup>4</sup>

Although they are not as visible in the political arena as the main components of Iraq specified in the constitution, some minority groups were given a quota of political representation in the post-2003 system. Only nine of the 329 seats in the Iraqi Parliament are allocated to minorities. The Parliamentary Electoral Laws allocate five seats to Christians<sup>5</sup> and the remaining four to Faili Kurds, Yazidis, Shabaks, and Mandaean.<sup>6</sup>

After the 1992 elections in Iraqi Kurdistan, five seats were reserved for Christians and in 2005 the minority quota was increased to 11, adding five for Turkmen and one for Armenians in the 111-seat parliament. However, seats were not reserved in parliament for Arabs, Yazidis, Kakais nor to other small minority groups such as Zoroastrians, Mandaean and Baha'is.<sup>7</sup>

Turkmen, the most populous group after the three main groups of the country, were not given a quota in the Iraqi Parliament, except for the five-seat allocation in the KRI parliament. Faili Kurds,<sup>8</sup> whose population is estimated at 1.5 million, were allocated a parliamentary seat in Wasit province for the first time in the 2018 federal elections. They were enraged that their quota seat was not allocated in Baghdad, where the majority of them live, but rather in Wasit.<sup>9</sup> Shabaks,<sup>10</sup> with a population of about 350 thousand people, have one seat. Neither group has representation in the KRI Parliament.<sup>11</sup> The Kaakis, which spread to Nineveh, Kirkuk, Halabja, Erbil, Khanaqin, and Diyala and whose population is estimated to be approximately 100 thousand, have been unsuccessful in securing a seat under the quota system in the Iraqi Parliament. Since then, three groups have not had any seats in the KRI Parliament. Shabaks and Faili Kurds' population are not concentrated in the KRI as they also live in the disputed areas between Erbil and Baghdad. Since the KRI also has claim for the disputed areas, it may take the population of these territories into account on

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minority quotas. The fact that each group is provided with one seat despite the differences in populations indicates the unfairness of the quota system. In addition to that, allocating quotas in the absence of an up-to-date official census that has not been held for many years in the country is problematic.

The Yazidis<sup>12</sup>, an ethno-religious group who primarily live in Nineveh, were over half a million before 2014; currently, thousands of them are refugees in the KRI.<sup>13</sup> While Yazidis have been allocated only one seat in the Iraqi Parliament, their demand for representation in the KRI Parliament has not been addressed.<sup>14</sup> The late Yazidi parliamentarian Sheikh Shamo gave a quota proposal for the Yazidis to the KRI Parliament in 2018 but the group has not yet achieved a result.<sup>15</sup>

Around 15 thousand Mandaean remain across the country, mainly in the south of Iraq alongside the KRI and Baghdad.<sup>16</sup> The Mandaean community has been allocated a seat as part of the Baghdad province delegation in the Iraqi Parliament. Furthermore, Armenians currently have one seat in the KRI Parliament and one in the Dohuk provincial council. However, they are not represented in the Iraqi Parliament.

Accordingly, there is no consistent criterion for minority representation in both Baghdad and Erbil parliaments. For example, while the Yazidis are one of the largest minority groups, no quota is allocated in the KRI Parliament and only one quota is reserved in Baghdad. The representation right is given to groups that are much smaller than the Yazidis in terms of population.

**Dominant parties instrumentalize the minority quotas**

Iraq's ethno-sectarian-based system provides some minorities with a constitutional quota right to elect their representations both in Iraqi and KRI parliaments. Although the current quota system is thought to have been installed in order to protect representation rights for the minorities, the dominant parties both in Iraq and the KRI, such as KDP or Fateh Alliance, have been exploiting these quota seats.

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minority party or not, can vote for the quota seat. Because of this legal gap in the election system, many powerful parties consider the minority quotas as bonus seats and intervene in elections of minority representations in an effort to increase their numbers in parliaments, pass certain laws, and make the given communities politically ineffective.

Therefore, many quota seats belonging to ethnic and religious groups are exposed to dominant parties' exploitations in which they simply mobilize their non-minority voters to support a party-affiliated candidate. However, since benefiting from this loophole is neither illegal nor been questioned properly, the quota seats continue to serve dominant party politics. On the other hand, the fact that minority members have the right to opt for voting for mainstream parties and the minority candidates of dominant parties makes it difficult to properly analyse the quota representation process.

Minority groups have secured nine quota seats out of 329 in the Iraqi Parliament with around 100 thousand votes cast in the 10 October early elections—a low turnout record as only 41 per cent of the 24 million eligible voters cast ballot.<sup>17</sup> Having approximately 50 thousand votes, Christian candidates guaranteed five seats in Baghdad, Ninewa, Kirkuk, Erbil and Duhok. Yet still, the elections once again have led to the allegations that minority quotas have been exploited, after Babylon Movement—a political party affiliated with an Iran-backed Babylon Brigade which is a part of Iraq's official recognition of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) and also known as Hashd al-Shaabi—won the four seats out of five Christian quotas. Apart from Iran-backed candidates, independent Christian candidate, Faruq Hanna Atto, secured the fifth seat of the Christian quota in Erbil.

Known to be an ally of the Iran-backed Fateh Alliance, Babylon Movement's success in doubling its seats compared to the 2018 elections have caused the Christian community to become skeptical that the candidates of the group might have been voted by the militia mass.<sup>18</sup> Ryan Al-Kildani, the Christian leader of both the movement and the affiliated militia group, was sanctioned in 2019 by the US government.<sup>19</sup> Some accounts believe that the group was voted by the PMU and will serve as a bonus seat for the Fateh Alliance in the Iraqi parliament.<sup>20</sup> Many Christian intellectuals agree. Thus, in September 2021 Nasim Sadiq, a Christian writer, referring to the Babylon Movement said, "They take away that right, they steal the right from us."<sup>21</sup>

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Having experienced a tragic genocidal massacre by ISIS, the Yazidi quota and their representation have also witnessed rivalry, particularly in Sinjar district of Mosul city between the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), as the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) backed candidates in Iraq's general elections held on 10 October 2021. KDP accused the PKK-affiliated groups of preventing the KDP candidates from entering Sinjar. Following the dangerous pre-election tensions in the district, KDP succeeded in sending all its three candidates to the parliament. However, afterwards the PKK-backed groups urged to cancel the results.<sup>22</sup> Politically divided into different sides and forced to live in camps as IDPs, Yazidis' demands for political, economic, and infrastructural normalization of the Sinjar district appears to not have been positively affected with the election results, though the KDP seems to have gained the upper hand in the representation of Yazidis.

Apart from the 5 seats reserved for Christians, one seat is allotted each for the Yazidis, Mandeans, Shabaks, and Faili Kurds in the Iraqi parliament in the last elections. Mandaean independent candidate, Osama Karim Khalaf, secured the quota-seat with 4,301 votes. Also, another independent candidate, Hussein Ali Mardan, a Faili Kurd, has won 20,832 votes in Wasit. Shabak candidate, Wa'ad Mahmood Ahmed, earned the quota seat with 20,827 votes in Nineveh. In addition to KDP's 3 seats in Sinjar, Nayif Khalaf Saydo, nominated by the Yazidi Progressive Party, held the only quota-seat in the Iraqi parliament with 3,988 votes.<sup>23</sup> Despite a population of almost half a million and a reserved seat in Iraqi parliament, Yazidis are not given quotas in KRI parliament. Not offering quotas to Yazidis, KRI's ruling party KDP may plan to only nominate Yazidi candidates within the party, in order to fully dominate the district and perhaps consider them under more of the "Kurdishness" umbrella as well.

Having no quota seats in the Iraqi Parliament, two Kakai female candidates—Najwa Hamid, from the KDP list in Kirkuk, and Ahlam Ramadan, the candidate of the PUK in Nineveh governorate—succeeded in securing seats in the parliament in the last elections.<sup>24</sup> While the quota was not allotted to the Kakais in the KRI Parliament, it is seen that the two big Kurdish parties instrumentalized this minority group. In this context, Sardar Arjuman, a

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Kakai community leader, who said that the two Kurdish parties protect the Kakais but always use them for their own interests, added, [KDP PUK] “have only dealt with the Kakais for their own interests and used them for their election rivalries.”<sup>25</sup>

Iraqi Turkmen are known to be divided between Turkish and Iranian influence in the Baghdad parliament because of their denominational differences as Sunnis and Shiites, respectively. Shi'a Turkmen are more likely to identify with Iran and Shi'a parties, whereas Sunni Turkmen are more likely to identify with Turkey. Therefore, the rivalry between Ankara and Tehran hinders Turkmen from acting in concert politically. Iraqi Turkmen won 7 seats in the parliament, 1 from Turkey-backed Iraqi Turkmen Front, 3 from the pro-Iran Fatah bloc and 3 from other parties. However, Iraqi Turkmen parties' decision to run under a single list<sup>26</sup> in the last Iraqi election and form a Turkmen Group<sup>27</sup> in the parliament can be seen as successful attempts for the Turkmen's efforts for unity. Having said that, the Turkmen Group which consists of seven members of parliaments from different political parties will face a real test between the party decisions and the parliament group when it comes to divisive issues.

Looking at the KRI, the discussions of minority quotas' exploitations do not scale down. On the contrary, powerful political parties, in particular the KDP, have been accused of using quota seats for their own agenda by the other Kurdish parties and some minority groups. Most of the minorities such as Christians and Turkmen living in the KRI reside in the areas of KDP influence, Duhok and Erbil. For instance, Sulaimaniyah-based Gorran Movement asserted that several Peshmerga and Police members were told to vote for minority lists in 2018 elections by the Erbil-based KDP.<sup>28</sup> It is also claimed that some Turkmen parties are created by the Kurdish parties in the KRI and they are backed in return for political support.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, besides the Badr Organization, KDP is also allegedly accused of interfering in Christian quotas in the 2018 elections by mobilizing non-Christian voters.<sup>30</sup>

Shaswar Abdulwahid, the leader of Sulaimaniyah-based New Generation Movement (NGM), also criticized the ruling parties both in Iraq and the KRI for using the minorities as political cards. He argued that those selected within the minority quotas in both parliaments do not represent the interests of the minorities but of the ruling parties.<sup>31</sup> It is claimed on Abdulwahid's NRT TV that four out of five Christian MPs in Iraqi parliament are considered to be close to the PMU



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while nine out of eleven seats in KRI parliament are considered to be close to KDP. According to the news, “The KDP’s armed forces are said to have voted for the candidates, although the candidates are presented as representatives of the Christian, Turkmen and Armenian communities in parliament.”<sup>32</sup>

**How does the political representation of minorities influence their rights?**

Ethnic-religious tendencies formed the backbone of the Iraqi system, especially in the order established after 2003. The ongoing turmoil in the country, where a hybrid form of politics in which nationalism and sectarianism are intertwined, harms the most vulnerable groups. Minorities were frequently the victims of the violent wave during 2006-2007 where tens of thousands of Iraqis were killed and many more fled the country. Also, since the significant part of the minorities’ population lives in the disputed areas, they suffer from the security gaps between the Erbil and Baghdad governments. Furthermore, minorities living in the disputed areas such as Mosul were damaged by the rise of Sunni radical groups and this destructive process reached a peak with ISIS.

Capturing Mosul in 2014, ISIS proposed to Christians to either convert to Islam, pay the *jizya*, or leave the region. While many of them chose the third option, Yazidis were never offered such an option. Hundreds of thousands were displaced, and thousands of women were enslaved. Almost half of the Christians have returned to their homes after the defeat of ISIS, but they feel insecure compared to other groups in the country. On the other hand, half of the Yazidis have been living in the refugee camps for seven years.<sup>33</sup> Although ISIS attacks continue in Ninewa, Kirkuk, Erbil and Baghdad, minorities cannot make their voices heard enough because they do not have sufficient political representation.

Furthermore, the fact that some minority groups act together with pro-Iranian militias both politically and militarily raises concerns among other minority groups. 30th and 50th Brigades of the PMU—Shabak and Babylon Brigades, respectively— which are the two main Iranian-backed minority militia groups operating in the Nineveh plains, are reflected in reports as trying to control checkpoints in Christian-dominated areas and ignoring crimes against Christians, including sexual assault and robbery.<sup>34</sup> However, minority group actors partnering with the PMU may deliberately allow exploitation in return for political and security advantages. This dynamic could also be considered as a win-win strategy for both sides.

***Dominant party-backed quota MPs simply feel responsible for meeting the expectations of their supporter parties rather than the minority community***

The tension and distrust between various political or religious groups in Iraq increase the uncertainty about the future of the country and keep the fears of minorities alive. Minorities are victims not only of sectarianism and extremism, but also of political competition. Since 2003, parties in Iraq have been unable to speak with one voice, and veteran politicians have failed to formulate a political program that transcends this particularism. The situation is similar among minorities. In this respect, the failure of minority groups to unite in such a fragmented and hybrid political sphere will make it sustainable for dominant parties to instrumentalize them.

It is safe to say that dominant parties' exploitation of the minority quotas has caused further fragmentation among the already divided minorities. Not only does this process expose them at failing to send independent MPs to the parliament, but also results in the loss of faith in the quota system and democracy. Dominant party-backed quota MPs simply feel responsible for meeting the expectations of their supporter parties rather than the minority community. Therefore, dominant party-obtained minority quota MPs can only advocate their community as much as these parties allow it. This also means leaving the solution of existing issues that the minorities are experiencing to the dominant parties' mercy.

Furthermore, while the ruling parties enjoy the discourse of offering ethnic and religious quotas, in reality they consider them as bonus seats. For example, when the KRI Parliament voted on stripping immunity from Soran Omar, the Kurdistan Justice Group MP, only the minority MPs supported the revoking of his immunity, alongside the KDP.<sup>35</sup> Another example was seen back in 2015, during the heavy discussions on KDP leader Massoud Barzani's presidency term, in which the minorities supported him to remain in office, whereas many political parties objected to extending Barzani's term.<sup>36</sup> In that, a minority parliamentarian that is elected with the backing of a dominant party cannot be expected to make a strong opposition to this party due to not having enough support within their minority community and the fear of losing political backing of the dominant party.

In fact, taking into account the formidable challenges that the mainstream opposition parties experience due to the economic, military, and political domination of ruling parties both in Iraq and KRI, minorities should not be expected to be able to amend the given loophole in the election system on their own. Having said that, in order to prevent the ruling parties from

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using the minority quota, NGM President Abdulwahid offered a special voter list for which only minorities can vote. His party called for a reduction of minority seats, whereas the KDP Politburo Secretary Fazil Mirani opposed that idea.<sup>37</sup> Not surprisingly, decreasing the minority quota seats would not get any support from the dominant parties since it would only help the opposition or rival parties. Besides that, the solution should not be taking away quota seats but contrarily saving them from the influence of dominant parties. However, as long as this loophole continues, ethnic and religious minorities cannot make themselves heard enough in the political area, being left in disunity, vulnerability, and dominated by ruling parties.

### **Conclusion**

Iraq's post-2003 ethnic, religious, and sectarian structure provides the Shi'a Arabs, Sunni Arabs, and the Kurds with the biggest portion of political representation. While several ethnic and religious minorities are given limited quota seats both in Iraqi and the KRI parliament, many of them also lack a reserved quota. Those who lack a minority quota have to join the dominant parties to be able to represent their communities and undoubtedly end up carrying the party identity, rather than the minority ones. Dominant parties consider the constitutional minority quotas as bonus seats and interfere in quota candidates both in Erbil and Baghdad parliaments in many ways. Consequently, the loophole in the election system, in which the minority quotas can be voted by anyone, reveals that the quota system does not work properly and forces many minority MPs to follow the dominant party's agenda. Meant to help minority communities participate in the political representation and defend their rights, the quota system's gaps appear to be manipulated.

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