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The Influence of Social Media on the Result of the Election in Iraqi Kurdistan Post-2020

تأثير وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي على نتائج الانتخابات في إقليم كردستان العراق بعد عام 2020

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Abstract:

This article analyses the political influence of social media in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), concentrating primarily on the period since 2020. Although digital platforms initially became a prominent political influence after the widespread adoption of internet connectivity and smartphones in 2011, the article contends that the period commencing in 2020—characterised by the August 2020 closure of NRT, the December 2020 internet shutdown during salary protests, and the ensuing intensification of digital surveillance and legislative repression—represents a qualitatively different phase, which serves as the primary evidentiary foundation of the article. Utilising documented case studies, press freedom statistics, digital surveillance analyses, and scholarly research, the article contends that digital activism has yielded quantifiable yet structurally limited political outcomes. Social media has broadened public political discourse, challenged the media hegemony of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), and heightened demands for accountability; however, its transformative capacity is consistently restricted by digital surveillance, legislative repression, opposition fragmentation, and the appropriation of digital platforms by ruling party networks. The article asserts that social media serves as a mechanism of pressure and a catalyst for awareness, rather than a revolutionary political force. It posits that substantial democratic consolidation in the KRI necessitates the amalgamation of digital activism with comprehensive institutional reforms, legal safeguards for free expression, and an autonomous civil society.

Keywords: Social Media, Iraqi Kurdistan, KRI, Digital Activism, KDP, PUK, Political System, Press Freedom, Corruption, Civil Society.

الملخص:

تحلل هذه الدراسة التأثير السياسي لوسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في إقليم كردستان العراق، مع التركيز بصورة رئيسية على الفترة الممتدة منذ عام 2020. وعلى الرغم من أن المنصات الرقمية بدأت تمارس تأثيراً سياسياً بارزاً منذ الانتشار الواسع للاتصال بالإنترنت والهواتف الذكية في عام 2011، فإن الدراسة ترى أن المرحلة التي بدأت في عام 2020، والتي تميزت بإغلاق قناة NRT في أغسطس/آب 2020، وقطع خدمة الإنترنت خلال احتجاجات الرواتب في ديسمبر/كانون الأول 2020، وما أعقب ذلك من تصاعد في الرقابة الرقمية والتشريعات المقيدة للحريات، تمثل مرحلة مختلفة نوعياً، وتشكل الأساس الرئيس للأدلة التي تستند إليها الدراسة.

واستناداً إلى دراسات حالة موثقة، وإحصاءات حرية الصحافة، وتحليلات المراقبة الرقمية، والدراسات الأكاديمية، تخلص الدراسة إلى أن النشاط الرقمي قد حقق نتائج سياسية قابلة للقياس، لكنها ظلت محدودة من الناحية البنيوية. فقد أسهمت وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي في توسيع نطاق النقاش السياسي العام، وتحدي الهيمنة الإعلامية للحزب الديمقراطي الكردستاني (KDP) والاتحاد الوطني الكردستاني (PUK)، وتعزيز المطالب بالمساءلة؛ إلا أن قدرتها على إحداث تحول سياسي ظلت مقيدة باستمرار بفعل المراقبة الرقمية، والتشريعات القمعية، وتشنت قوى المعارضة، واستحوذت شبكات الأحزاب الحاكمة على المنصات الرقمية.

وتؤكد الدراسة أن وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي تؤدي دور أداة للضغط ومحفز لرفع الوعي، أكثر من كونها قوة سياسية ثورية. كما ترى أن تحقيق ترسيخ ديمقراطي حقيقي في إقليم كردستان العراق يتطلب دمج النشاط الرقمي مع إصلاحات مؤسسية شاملة، وضمانات قانونية لحماية حرية التعبير، ومجتمع مدني مستقل.

الكلمات المفتاحية: وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، إقليم كردستان العراق، إقليم كردستان (KRI)، النشاط الرقمي، الحزب الديمقراطي الكردستاني (KDP)، الاتحاد الوطني الكردستاني (PUK)، النظام السياسي، حرية الصحافة، الفساد، المجتمع المدني.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq holds a constitutionally acknowledged autonomous status within the Iraqi federal framework, predominantly administered by a political duopoly of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). This structure, established following the administrative division of 1991 and solidified during the constitutional agreement of 2003, has resulted in a semi-authoritarian governance framework marked by patronage-driven politics, restricted civil liberties, and systematic constraints on political dissent (Stansfield, 2003). For decades, the KDP and PUK maintained near-total dominance over formal political institutions, mainstream media, public employment, and security forces, making traditional oppositional politics precarious and institutionally marginal.

The year 2011 signifies the inception of this phenomenon, attributable not only to the regional disturbances of the Arab Spring, which impacted the KRI's comparatively insulated political framework, but also to the rapid proliferation of internet connectivity, smartphones, and social media platforms among the Kurdistan Region's populace. This initial phase is regarded as background; the pivotal transformation transpired post-2020, when the cessation of NRT, the weaponisation of internet shutdowns, and the legal criminalisation of online dissent redefined social media from a nascent public sphere into a primary and contentious arena of political strife. A novel form of political opposition emerged: social media, characterised as both organised and spontaneous political activism, dissent, and civic mobilisation primarily executed through digital platforms such as social media networks, independent online news portals, video-sharing services, and encrypted messaging applications. This article methodically analyses the evolution of this phenomenon, identifying its roots in 2011 while focusing on developments post-2020, evaluating its overall influence on the KRI's political system across six key areas: political awareness, narrative contestation, accountability pressures, opposition cohesion, state repression, and digital co-optation.

The primary argument presented is three-parted. Initially, social media has substantially broadened the KRI's political public sphere, allowing previously marginalised voices to access considerable audiences within mainstream political discourse. The structural response of the existing political establishment—encompassing legislative restrictions, digital surveillance, media suppression, and internet shutdowns—has systematically diminished the transformative capacity of digital activism. Third, social media is best described as an evolving pressure mechanism rather than a force that can fundamentally restructure the region's political system independently. Enduring political transformation necessitates the integration of digital activism within robust institutional frameworks, an autonomous judiciary, and safeguards for civil society that are presently lacking.

The article continues as outlined below. Section 2 offers a contextual and theoretical framework, positioning the KRI's digital political ecology within the wider discourse on digital activism and political transformation. Section 3 examines particular thematic effects. Section 4 provides eight comprehensive case studies accompanied by quantitative data. Section 5 presents a quantitative and statistical analysis of essential indicators. Section 6 provides a proportional analysis of impact domains. Section 7 examines counterarguments and structural constraints. Section 8 provides a potential conclusion.

2. THEORETICAL AND CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Digital Activism and Political Change: Theoretical Perspectives

The connection between digital media and political transformation has garnered continuous academic interest since the early 2000s. Optimistic perspectives, linked to scholars like Philip Howard and Muzammil Hussain, highlight the ability of digital networks to reduce the organisational expenses of collective action, circumvent state-controlled information pathways, and enable swift horizontal mobilisation (Howard & Hussain, 2013). Clay Shirky's significant framework underscores how digital tools facilitate coordinated action in the absence of formal organisational structures (Shirky, 2008). These viewpoints garnered significant attention in the examinations of the 2010–2012 Arab Spring, during which social media distinctly expedited the spread of protests throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Subsequent scholarship has provided significant corrections. Zeynep Tufekci's research on networked protest delineates the "tactical freeze" issue: digital movements can swiftly garner substantial participation but often lack the organisational resilience, internal decision-making frameworks, and strategic adaptability that have traditionally supported social movements during state repression (Tufekci, 2017, pp. 55–90). The KRI case exemplifies this critique, as social media has shown remarkable ability for mobilisation while struggling to convert digital energy into durable institutional political power.

2.2 The KRI Political Context: Semi-Authoritarianism and Patronage

The political system of the Kurdistan Region is aptly described as a competitive authoritarian hybrid, wherein formal democratic institutions exist alongside systematic practices that erode authentic political competition. The KDP and PUK maintain authority via interconnected systems of patronage allocation (public sector jobs, oil profits, party-linked enterprises), media supremacy (owning or influencing the majority of broadcast and print outlets), security sector infiltration (the Asayish intelligence and security apparatus), and judicial sway (Middle East Institute, 2021). Gareth Stansfield's foundational analysis of Iraqi Kurdish political development characterises this system as one in which "political parties operate concurrently as governments, military forces, and employers. Stansfield (2003, p. 5).

This structural context is essential for comprehending the rise of social media as the sole feasible platform for dissent and the systematic constraints on its influence. The KDP and PUK's ability to address digital challenges is not solely repressive; it encompasses co-optation (party-affiliated digital media, clandestine social media networks), strategic selective tolerance (allowing certain online criticism while suppressing organised opposition), and the implementation of legislative measures that criminalise digital dissent under vaguely defined counter-terrorism and defamation laws.

2.3 The Evolution of Digital Infrastructure in the KRI (2011–2025)

By 2022, internet penetration in the Kurdistan Region was estimated at 68–72%, while social media usage among the populace was approximately 55%, marking a significant rise from single-digit percentages in the early 2000s (Freedom House, 2022). Facebook continues to be the preeminent platform for political discourse, boasting approximately 2.3 million users in the KRI. Telegram has become an essential platform for secure political communication, especially after the 2018 internet shutdowns that highlighted the weaknesses of less-encrypted channels (Ali, 2018). YouTube contains

significant amounts of video journalism and documentary activism. Table 1 summarises the primary digital platforms and their political significance.

Table 1: Digital Platform Usage and Political Significance in the KRI (2022–2025)

Platform	Estimated Reach	Primary Political Use	Opposition Impact	State Response
Facebook	2.3M+ users (est. KRI)	Political commentary, protest organising	Very High	Monitored; accounts suspended
Telegram	~800K users (est.)	News channels, encrypted messaging group	High	Encrypted; partial blocking
Twitter/X	~400K users (est.)	Political discourse, journalist outreach	Moderate	Monitored; some censorship
YouTube	~1.5M users (est.)	Video journalism, documentary activism	High	Selective geo-blocking
NRT Online	Major opposition outlet	Critical news coverage, live streaming	High	Office raids; shutdown 2020
Rudaw Digital	Broad reach	Mix mainstream/opposition commentary	Moderate–High	Mostly tolerated
WhatsApp	Widespread	Closed group mobilisation, leaks sharing	High	Harder to monitor

Sources: Freedom House (2022); EUAA (2022); author's compilation.

3. THEMATIC IMPACT ANALYSIS

3.1 Political Awareness and Expansion of the Public Sphere

Before the extensive proliferation of social media, political information in the Kurdistan Region was predominantly disseminated through party-affiliated broadcast media (Kurdistan TV for KDP; GK TV for PUK; KNN for the Change Movement), resulting in minimal institutional opportunity for independent political commentary (Syan, 2015).

The advent of Facebook political commentary pages, independent online news platforms, Telegram news channels, and YouTube documentary journalism has resulted in what Mohammed Mohammad's doctoral research describes as a "contested digital public sphere"—a domain where previously marginalised voices, such as youth activists, displaced civil servants, independent journalists, and civil society participants, can engage with audiences of hundreds of thousands without necessitating party affiliation or institutional endorsement (Mohammad, 2018, pp. 45–67). A 2023 survey by the Rudaw Research Center revealed that roughly 71% of KRI youth consider social media their principal news source, highlighting a significant transformation in information consumption (Rudaw Research Center, 2023).

This heightened political awareness has produced quantifiable repercussions on political discourse. Historically suppressed or underreported issues in mainstream media—such as the financial mismanagement of oil revenues, systemic nepotism in public sector employment, the non-payment of civil servant salaries (a persistent crisis since 2014), and human rights violations by security forces—have garnered sustained public attention via digital platforms. The 2017 salary protests in Sulaymaniyah and Raniya, along with the December 2020 demonstrations advocating for salary payments and immediate elections, heavily relied on social media for mobilisation and dissemination of information, illustrating the tangible political ramifications of increased digital awareness.

3.2 Contestation of Party-Dominated Media Narratives

A second significant area of impact pertains to the challenge against the KDP and PUK's near-monopoly on the political narrative. The Middle East Institute's evaluation of KRI politics indicates that the governing parties "exercise considerable control over the administration and media," while opposition parties are "largely incapable of leveraging public discontent regarding governance" via mainstream avenues (Middle East Institute, 2021, pp. 12–18). Social media has partially undermined this monopoly by establishing alternative information ecosystems that disseminate investigative journalism, leaked documents, dissenting commentary, and critical analysis unavailable through party-controlled channels.

The most significant institutional embodiment of this contestation was NRT (Nalia Radio and Television), frequently characterised as the KRI's primary opposition television channel, which established a substantial digital and online presence. NRT's digital platforms—streaming services, social media accounts, and online news portal—expanded its audience beyond traditional broadcasts and facilitated prompt real-time reporting on protests, corruption allegations, and political developments that KDP/PUK-aligned media routinely minimised or overlooked (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

The importance of this narrative dispute should not be exaggerated, however. The KDP and PUK maintain predominant control over the information landscape via a blend of direct ownership, reliance on advertising, and political coercion. Karwan Syan's doctoral research on online journalism in the KRI indicates that even seemingly independent outlets function under considerable structural limitations, such as financial instability and the persistent threat of regulatory shutdown (Syan, 2015). Moreover, as discussed in Section 3.6 below, the parties have actively occupied digital realms through clandestine media networks and disinformation campaigns, which complicate any simplistic narrative of social media as a tool for democratic empowerment.

3.3 Anti-Corruption Advocacy and Accountability Pressures

Corruption is a salient characteristic of governance in the Kurdistan Region. Iraq is positioned 154th among 180 nations in Transparency International's 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2024), with various evaluations highlighting the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) as severely impacted by systemic embezzlement, fictitious employee registrations, misappropriation of oil revenues, and nepotism in public sector appointments (AL-Behadily & Tuwaya, 2022). Social media has functioned as an essential medium for enhancing anti-corruption dialogue, facilitating the publication and swift distribution of investigative reports, leaked financial documents, and whistleblower accounts that would otherwise lack a feasible platform for dissemination.

The UNDP's 2024 extensive report on grand corruption in the Kurdistan Region, facilitated by the aggregation of publicly documented evidence on digital platforms, identified systematic misappropriation in the health, education, and oil sectors (United Nations Development Programme, 2024). Social media facilitated the circumstances that rendered such investigations both essential and politically feasible by maintaining an ongoing and vocal public discourse regarding governance failures. Digital platforms have enabled the organization of anti-corruption civil society campaigns, such as the youth-led "Don't Go, Fix It" initiative from 2021 to 2023, supported by SPARK, which utilised online activism to direct youth political engagement towards advocating for domestic institutional reform instead of emigration (SPARK, 2023).

Nonetheless, the systemic effect of these anti-corruption pressures remains significantly constrained. No senior officials from KDP or PUK have been successfully prosecuted for corruption based on evidence disseminated via digital platforms. The requisite accountability mechanisms to convert digital exposure into legal repercussions—such as an independent judiciary, prosecutorial autonomy, and witness protection—are lacking. AL-Behadily and Tuwaya's examination of local corruption indicators in Iraq determines that "absent structural reforms to oversight institutions, public awareness initiatives are improbable to result in systemic accountability. (AL-Behadily & Tuwaya, 2022).

3.4 State Repression and the Escalation of Digital Control

The governing parties of the Kurdistan Region have responded to the proliferation of social media by developing an increasingly elaborate apparatus of digital repression. This includes various, intersecting strategies: internet shutdowns during critical political crises; the legal prohibition of online dissent; physical incursions on media establishments; the apprehension and confinement of journalists and activists; and the methodical surveillance of social media by security agencies.

The Freedom House report, *Freedom on the Net 2022*, records four notable internet shutdown incidents in the KRI from 2018 to 2021, including an eight-hour blackout during the December 2020 salary protests and daily four-hour shutdowns over ten days during examination periods in September 2021, highlighting the normalisation of digital infrastructure control as a tool for social management (Freedom House, 2022). In 2022, the Kurdistan Journalists' Syndicate documented 73 violations of press freedom, predominantly affecting digital media practitioners (Kurdistan Journalists' Syndicate & International Federation of Journalists, 2023). A pivotal report by the EUAA revealed the systematic deployment of "electronic armies"—networks of monitored informants and online agents—to surveil and intimidate digital opposition figures in the KRI (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022, pp. 23–31).

The KRI parliament's adoption of a digital media bill in August 2020 marked a notable legislative advancement, associating online publications with anti-terrorism laws and establishing criminal liability for social media users accused of disseminating "defamatory" content—a provision sufficiently

expansive to criminalise ordinary political dissent (Human Rights Watch, 2020). Human Rights Watch and the Committee to Protect Journalists both documented the closure of NRT's offices in Erbil and Dohuk in October 2020 without judicial authorisation, subsequent to the outlet's reporting on opposition-organised protests (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Committee to Protect Journalists, 2020). These incidents collectively illustrate that repression is not solely a reactive tool but a strategically employed mechanism for mitigating the political repercussions of social media.

3.5 Opposition Fragmentation and the Limits of Digital Cohesion

A significant structural vulnerability of social media in the KRI is its organisational fragmentation. Digital activism in the Kurdistan Region is disseminated through numerous Facebook pages, Telegram channels, YouTube channels, and WhatsApp groups, each functioning with distinct ideological perspectives, personal networks, and strategic aims. This fragmentation serves as both an asset—allowing varied voices to participate in a pluralistic digital opposition ecosystem—and a critical liability, as it hinders the consolidation of digital momentum into a cohesive, enduring political force capable of contesting the KDP/PUK duopoly at the institutional level.

The May 2021 Kirkuk protest case (Case 5 below) exemplifies this limitation: a Facebook-organized demonstration garnered substantial online engagement yet attracted only around fifty participants in person (European Union Agency for Asylum, 2022). The MEI's evaluation determines that there is "no viable alternative" to the KDP/PUK in the near future, as opposition parties are "weak, fragmented, and incapable of translating their online presence into institutional authority. Middle East Institute, 2021, pages 12 to 18. The disparity between digital mobilisation capabilities and offline organisational strength constitutes a fundamental structural limitation of social media in the KRI.

3.6 Digital Co-optation and Shadow Media Dynamics

A facet of social media that complicates clear narratives of digital democratisation is the proactive encroachment of digital spaces by established parties and their associated networks. A 2024 analysis released by Chawy Kurd detailed the activities of "shadow media" networks—social media accounts, pages, and channels directly or indirectly associated with KDP and PUK networks—that systematically propagate disinformation, orchestrate hate speech campaigns against opposition figures, amplify narratives favourable to the parties, and intentionally undermine public confidence in independent digital platforms (Chawy Kurd, 2025).

This dynamic has significant implications for evaluating the impact of social media. Digital platforms are not impartial environments where opposition activists possess intrinsic structural advantages; rather, they are contentious domains where established parties utilise considerable resources and organisational capabilities. The outcome is that the same platforms facilitating anti-corruption exposure and opposition mobilisation concurrently act as conduits for incumbent disinformation and political manipulation. The 2024 study by Mawlod, Jabar, and Ahmad on social media harassment in the KRI illustrates that digital platforms have evolved into venues for targeted intimidation campaigns against women activists and journalists, thereby introducing a gendered aspect to digital repression.

4. CASE STUDIES: SOCIAL MEDIA IN ACTION (2017–2025)

This document presents eight case studies detailing particular instances of social media and governmental responses in the KRI from 2017 to 2025. Six of the eight articles align with the post-2020 analytical focus; the two earliest (December 2017 and July 2018) are preserved as foundational precedents that established the repressive framework subsequently intensified after 2020. All instances

are derived from substantiated press freedom reports, human rights enquiries, scholarly research, and authenticated media coverage.

Table 2: Key Case Studies of Social Media in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (2017–2025)

Year	Location	Digital Activity	Authority Response	Outcome/Impact
Dec 2017	Sulaymaniyah, Raniya	Social media mobilisation; live streaming of protests	Curfew; NRT offices searched; security force deployment	Temporary pressure; no structural reform
Aug 2020	Erbil/Dohuk	NRT/social media calls for anti-corruption protests by Shaswar Abdulwahid Qadir	Asayish raided NRT offices without court order; broadcasting suspended	Loss of opposition media independence; bill remains contested
Dec 2020	KRI-wide	Social media-organised salary & election protests; ~8-hour internet shutdown	Internet blackout; media closures; security clampdown	Demonstrated state digital control capacity; protests continued
Jul 2018	KRI/Iraq-wide	Cross-platform protest coordination amid Iraqi unrest	Social media networks blocked indefinitely at Baghdad request	Highlighted KRI-federal coordination in digital suppression
May 2021	Kirkuk	Facebook-driven protest with large online following	Minimal crackdown; turnout ≈ 50 persons	Exposed gap between digital mobilisation and offline action
2020–22	KRI-wide	Digital journalists covering protests face arrest/equipment seizure	73 media/journalist rights violations in 2022 (KRI)	Elevated cost and risk for digital opposition actors

Year	Location	Digital Activity	Authority Response	Outcome/Impact
2024	KRI-wide	"Shadow media" networks sow disinformation; erode public trust online	No formal crackdown; parties benefit from digital manipulation	Complicates digital opposition; shows co-optation dynamics
2021–2023	KRI-wide	Youth digital campaigns (#DontGoFixIt); SPARK youth activist programmes	Acknowledged but no legislative response	Embedded digital activism into youth political culture

Sources: HRW (2020); Freedom House (2022); EUAA (2022); IFJ (2023); CPJ (2020); Kurdistan24 (2018); author's compilation.

Case 1 (December 2017) precedes the article's analytical emphasis post-2020 but is included for context: it illustrated the KRI's nascent digital mobilisation infrastructure, as social media platforms, notably Facebook and subsequently Telegram, facilitated swift coordination of mass protests throughout Sulaymaniyah, Raniya, and surrounding regions in reaction to austerity measures and unpaid salaries. The government's measures—curfews, deployment of force, and searches of media outlets—set a precedent that is evidenced by the subsequent post-2020 cases, which demonstrate a recurrence and escalation of these actions.

Case 2 (August 2020) exemplifies the most consequential direct clash between social media and governmental authority. The opposition leader Shaswar Abdulwahid Qadir's utilisation of NRT and social media to advocate for mass protests directly led to the KRI government's extrajudicial closure of NRT offices in Erbil and Dohuk—this represents the most prominent case of physical media suppression instigated by digital dissent (Human Rights Watch, 2020). The simultaneous enactment of the digital media bill, which associates online publications with anti-terrorism legislation, constituted a calculated legislative effort to limit the legal operational scope of social media.

Case 3 (December 2020) is analytically significant as it records the KRI government's implementation of an eight-hour internet blackout in response to salary protests organised via social media (Freedom House, 2022). This episode exemplifies the state's readiness to exploit control over digital infrastructure, even at the expense of considerable economic and social upheaval, and highlights the extent to which internet connectivity is now regarded as a political asset necessitating active oversight.

Case 4 (July 2018) serves as a pre-2020 background case, exemplifying the transnational aspect of digital repression in the KRI: the perpetual obstruction of social media platforms throughout the

Kurdistan Region, instigated by the Iraqi federal government's request during widespread protests in southern and central Iraq, indicates that internet regulation in the KRI is influenced not only by the political strategies of the KDP/PUK but also by collaboration with Baghdad, a pattern that reemerges in the post-2020 cases examined subsequently (Ali, 2018).

Case 5 offers a crucial counterpoint to overly optimistic narratives regarding digital mobilisation, as the Kirkuk Facebook protest exemplifies the enduring disparity between online participation and offline collective action.

Cases 6 and 7 collectively illustrate the rising expenses incurred by digital opposition figures—73 recorded violations of media and journalists' rights in 2022, systematic arrests of journalists, and the intentional disinformation campaigns employed by incumbent networks to diminish opposition credibility (Kurdistan Journalists' Syndicate & International Federation of Journalists, 2023).

Case 8 illustrates the enduring integration of digital activism within the political culture of KRI youth. SPARK's "Don't Go, Fix It" programme from 2021 to 2023 involved a core group of 21 young activists who conducted a sustained advocacy campaign that integrated digital outreach with in-person community forums. This initiative showcased the capacity of youth-led platforms to foster civic engagement beyond mere reactive protest; however, it also highlighted the reliance of such initiatives on external (NGO) organisational and financial support due to the lack of independent civil society infrastructure (SPARK, 2023).

5. QUANTITATIVE AND STATISTICAL OVERVIEW

The following tables present a comprehensive quantitative summary of essential indicators concerning social media, press freedom, digital penetration, and governance in the KRI. The statistics have been sourced from verified institutional entities and are appropriately cited.

Table 3: Key Statistics on Social Media and Digital Governance in the KRI

Indicator	Value / Finding	Source
Internet penetration (KRI, 2022)	~68–72%	Freedom House, Freedom on the Net 2022
Social media users as % of KRI population (est. 2022)	~55%	Freedom House, Freedom on the Net 2022
Press freedom violations in KRI, 2022	73	Kurdistan Journalists' Syndicate / IFJ 2023

Indicator	Value / Finding	Source
NRT office closures (2020)	1 documented incident (Erbil and Dohuk offices)	HRW 2020; CPJ 2020
Internet shutdowns in KRI (2018–2021)	4 documented events	Freedom House 2022; Kurdistan24 2018
Youth identifying social media as primary news source (KRI survey, 2023)	~71%	Rudaw Research Center 2023
KRI corruption perception rank (Transparency International, 2023)	Iraq: 154/180	Transparency International 2023
Digital media bill provisions criminalising online speech	Yes (adopted 2020)	Rudaw; HRW 2020
Arrests of journalists/activists for online activity (2020–2024)	Dozens documented	EUAA 2022; IFJ 2023

Sources: Freedom House (2022); EUAA (2022); IFJ/KJS (2023); HRW (2020); Rudaw Research Center (2023); Kurdistan24 (2018); Transparency International (2023).

6. IMPACT DISTRIBUTION: PIE CHART AND THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Figure 1 (below) illustrates a proportional distribution of the primary impact domains of social media in the KRI, based on the thematic analysis in Section 3 and the case study evidence in Section 4. The percentage weightings represent the relative importance of each domain, as demonstrated by documented incidents, scholarly literature, and institutional reports, rather than relying on a singular survey tool.

Figure 1: Proportional Distribution of Electronic Opposition Impact Domains in the KRI (2011-2025)

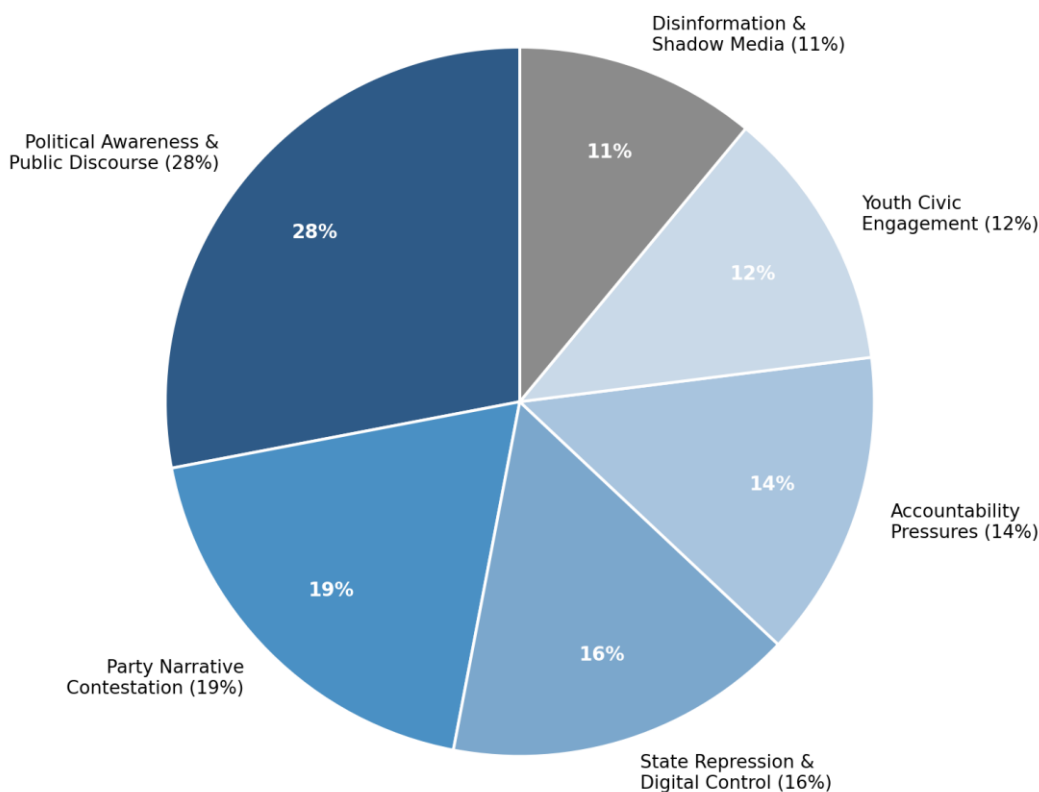


Figure 1 / Table 4: Proportional Distribution of Social Media Impact Domains in the KRI (2011–2025)

Impact Domain	Share (%)	Analytical Note
Political Awareness & Public Discourse	28%	Most significant measurable impact domain
Party Narrative Contestation	19%	Growing but incomplete; digital alternative media expanding
Accountability Pressures	14%	Limited systemic reform; online exposure triggers some responses
State Repression & Digital Control	16%	Documented escalation: shutdowns, arrests, legislation
Disinformation & Shadow Media	11%	Parties exploit same platforms; polarisation increasing

Impact Domain	Share (%)	Analytical Note
Youth Civic Engagement	12%	Structural growth in digital youth activism post-2018

Note: Percentages reflect relative analytical weight derived from documented evidence across impact domains. Sources: see Sections 3 and 4; Freedom House (2022); EUAA (2022); Rudaw Research Center (2023); Chawy Kurd (2025); HRW (2020).

The domain of political awareness and public discourse (28%) represents the most significant impact area, indicating the robust and well-documented evidence that digital platforms have greatly expanded the political public sphere in the KRI. This discovery corresponds with Mohammad's doctoral research and the Rudaw Research Center's 2023 youth survey data (Mohammad, 2018). State repression and digital control (16%) and party narrative contestation (19%) illustrate the persistent conflict between social media and the prevailing political establishment—each area is significant enough to be recognised as a major impact category, yet neither is conclusive on its own. The disinformation and shadow media sector (11%) is likely undervalued due to the challenges in systematically documenting co-optation activities, yet it signifies an increasing analytical concern as evidenced by the 2024 report (Chawy Kurd, 2025).

Table 5: Thematic Impact Matrix

Theme	Level of Impact	Key Observations
Political Awareness	Significant increase in public discourse on corruption, governance, reform	Social media functions as surrogate public sphere; strongest among youth and urban populations
Party Narrative Contestation	Partial; digital platforms provide alternative viewpoints	KDP/PUK retain dominance over mainstream media; digital gains remain fragile
Accountability Pressures	Moderate; some corruption cases received public attention	No systemic accountability reform; institutional barriers remain intact
Opposition Cohesion	Low; digital activism fragmented across platforms and ideologies	Absence of unified opposition structure limits conversion of online energy into electoral power
State Repression	Significant escalation	Internet shutdowns, media raids, surveillance, legislative restrictions have expanded since 2018

Theme	Level of Impact	Key Observations
Disinformation/Manipulation	Growing; shadow media networks exploit same platforms	Incumbents co-opt digital space; polarisation and trust erosion documented (Chawy Kurd 2024)
Youth Civic Engagement	Notable growth	Digital activism embedded in youth political culture; translating online activism to structural change remains challenge

Sources: Author's synthesis; Mohammad (2018); MEI (2021); Freedom House (2022); EUAA (2022); Chawy Kurd (2025).

7. COUNTER-ARGUMENTS AND STRUCTURAL LIMITATIONS

7.1 Digital Penetration Does Not Ensure Political Authority

A fundamental counter-argument to optimistic evaluations of social media is that digital reach does not inherently convert into political power. The KRI case offers significant evidence to support this stance. Notwithstanding significant social media engagement and recorded instances of digital mobilisation, the KDP and PUK have maintained their structural preeminence in all five national parliamentary elections conducted since 2005 (2005, 2009, 2013, 2018, and 2024), encompassing the latest elections. Opposition parties that have attempted to utilise digital engagement—most prominently the New Generation Movement (Newey Nwê) under the leadership of Shaswar Abdulwahid Qadir—have realised limited electoral successes but are still distant from challenging the core power structure (Middle East Institute, 2021).

This illustrates Tufekci's assertion regarding the organisational shortcomings of digitally-native movements: although networked protests can facilitate swift tactical mobilisation, they generally lack the hierarchical decision-making, resource allocation, and enduring strategic capabilities characteristic of established political parties with extensive patronage networks (Tufekci, 2017).

7.2 Legislative and Security Framework Constraints on Digital Freedom

The KRI's legal and security framework systematically restricts the operational scope for social media. The 2020 digital media bill, expansive cybercrime legislation, and the enforcement of anti-terrorism measures against online dissent generate a chilling effect that transcends the instances of actual prosecution. The EUAA's 2022 country guidance explicitly designates the KRI as a region where "electronic armies" conduct systematic surveillance of online dissidents, and where online activism may serve as a basis for detention and persecution (pp. 23–31). This structural limitation indicates that the most politically influential forms of digital dissent are simultaneously the most perilous for their participants, fostering rational incentives for self-censorship that diminish the effective intensity and radicalism of social media.

7.3 The Shadow Media Dilemma: Digital Realm as Contested Domain

The appropriation of digital platforms by established networks fundamentally undermines any analysis that regards the digital realm as inherently advantageous to dissent. According to Chawy Kurd's 2024 report, the KRI's "shadow media" phenomenon entails the organised use of party-affiliated social media networks to spread disinformation, orchestrate harassment campaigns, and distort public discourse, thereby undermining trust in independent digital platforms (Chawy Kurd, 2025). This dynamic complicates the more optimistic model proposed by Howard and Hussain, whose analysis of digital media's mobilising power did not fully foresee the degree to which established political actors would cultivate increasingly sophisticated capabilities for digital counter-mobilisation (Howard & Hussain, 2013). The implication is that the technologies enabling social media also furnish tools for its restriction and delegitimisation.

7.4 Structural Deficiency of Autonomous Institutions

The primary structural limitation is the lack of institutional infrastructure necessary for transforming digital opposition pressure into policy change or accountability results. An independent judiciary that can act on online corruption evidence; a truly autonomous electoral commission that can guarantee competitive elections; and a civil society sector with adequate financial independence from party patronage to serve as a legitimate counterbalance to the KDP/PUK duopoly: these institutions are either nonexistent or inadequately independent in the KRI (Turki et al., 2023). In their absence, digital activism functions within an institutional void where pressure cannot be efficiently transformed into results.

8. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This article has argued that social media in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq constitutes a politically significant yet structurally limited phenomenon. Originating in 2011 but attaining critical political relevance only since 2020, digital activism has significantly broadened the KRI's political public sphere, established alternative information channels that contest KDP/PUK media supremacy, intensified anti-corruption dialogue, and exhibited an ability for mass mobilisation that has imposed tangible political repercussions on the current establishment. These are authentic accomplishments that have significantly transformed the fabric of political life in the Kurdistan Region.

The structural influence of social media on the political system of the Kurdistan Region has been constrained. The KDP and PUK maintain their essential control over the region's political economy via patronage networks, media supremacy, security sector oversight, and increasingly through digital co-optation and legislative suppression. Social media has failed to generate an autonomous opposition capable of competing in elections, instigate a structural transformation in accountability institutions, or facilitate enduring policy reform regarding corruption, service delivery, and civil liberties that have driven digital activism.

The evidence indicates that social media acts as a pressure mechanism and awareness catalyst: it amplifies the political repercussions of severe governance failures, maintains critical public discourse, and fosters civic engagement—especially among youth—yet it cannot replace the institutional framework necessary for democratic governance. The transformation of digital pressure into substantive political reform necessitates autonomous judicial institutions equipped to address corruption evidence; authentic civil society organisations financially independent from political patronage; enforceable legal protections for journalists and digital activists; electoral processes characterised by true competitive integrity; and an international community prepared to condition its engagement with the KRI on quantifiable governance reforms

Future research must focus on the swiftly changing dynamics of shadow media and digital co-optation in the KRI; the gendered aspects of digital repression and the capacity of Telegram and encrypted platforms to maintain opposition networks impervious to traditional surveillance; and the circumstances under which digital activism can be effectively integrated into broader coalition-building strategies that connect online mobilisation with offline institutional authority.

In conclusion, social media in Iraqi Kurdistan is neither the transformative power that optimistic narratives propose nor the insignificant chatter that detractors assert. This is a legitimate, evolving, and contentious political phenomenon, the ultimate importance of which will be dictated not by the sophistication of its digital instruments but by the quality of the institutional context in which it functions—an environment that political actors, civil society, and the international community are all capable of shaping and responsible for influencing.

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