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Between Policy and Practice: Understanding University Leadership Decision-Making in Politically Shared Systems in the Kurdistan Region – Iraq

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Abstract: The paper at hand set a goal to investigate and discuss the way of how decisions are made in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq under the shared political systems of the university. It aims at the explanation of the mixed workings that intertwine politics and everyday actions within the school administration and how the political aspects affect the decisions made in the administration, the allocation of resources, research and teaching priorities and even academic and administrative appointments.

To answer the research questions, the given study utilizes quantitative research methodology that consists in the distribution of the structured questionnaires to the university leaders namely presidents, vice presidents, deans, department heads, and directors and a systematic study of the institutional policy documents and legislative frameworks. This is a strategy set out to understand how political orientations can be transformed into administrative practices at the university level. It also tries to find out the challenge and opportunities that accompany such a play of policy and practice and what university leaders have to deal with such dilemmas in a bid to meet the aspirations of their educational institutions.

The research will help us better understand the symbiotic nature of political power and educational institutions in those settings where there is shared political system, as well as it will give very good implications to the decision-makers and other researchers interested in university governance and the effects of the political environment on it in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and everywhere. Findings indicate that the efficiency and strategic decision making among the higher education institutions take important shape under political affiliation and pressure exerted by leaders. The paper suggested the measures whereby the gross involvement of politics on academic and administrative activities could be discouraged.

Keywords: Decision-Making, University Leadership, Policy Implementation, Shared Political Systems, Kurdistan Region-Iraq.

بين السياسة والممارسة: فهم عملية صنع القرار في القيادة الجامعية في الأنظمة السياسية المشتركة في إقليم كوردستان-العراق

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المستخلص: تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى استكشاف وتحليل عملية صنع القرار داخل القيادة الجامعية في ظل الأنظمة السياسية المشتركة لإقليم كردستان- العراق. وتسعى إلى فهم الديناميكيات المعقدة التي تربط السياسة بالممارسات اليومية في الإدارة الأكاديمية، مع التركيز على كيفية تأثير العوامل السياسية على القرارات الإدارية، وتخصيص الموارد، وأولويات البحث والتدريس، وحتى التعيينات الأكاديمية والإدارية. وباستخدام منهجية بحث نوعية قائمة على مقابلات معمقة مع قادة الجامعات (رؤساء الجامعات، ومساعدي الرؤساء، والعمداء، ورؤساء الأقسام، والمديرين)، بالإضافة إلى تحليل وثائق سياسات الجامعة والتشريعات ذات الصلة، تسعى الدراسة إلى الكشف عن الآليات التي تُترجم من خلالها التوجهات السياسية إلى ممارسات إدارية على مستوى الجامعة. كما تسعى إلى تحديد التحديات والفرص الناشئة عن هذا التفاعل بين السياسة والممارسة، وكيفية تعامل قادة الجامعات مع هذه التحديات لتحقيق أهداف مؤسساتهم الأكاديمية. ستساهم هذه الدراسة في تعميق فهمنا للعلاقة التكافلية بين السلطة السياسية والمؤسسات التعليمية في سياقات تتسم بنظام سياسي مشترك، وستوفر رؤى قيّمة لصانعي القرار والباحثين المهتمين بحوكمة الجامعات وتأثير البيئة السياسية عليها في إقليم كردستان - العراق وخارجه. تُظهر النتائج أن الانتماء السياسي والضغط السياسي يُشكلان عاملين أساسيين في كفاءة القادة واتخاذ القرارات الاستراتيجية داخل مؤسسات التعليم العالي. وأوصت الدراسة بآليات للحد من التدخل السياسي السافر في الشؤون الأكاديمية والإدارية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: صنع القرار، القيادة الجامعية، تنفيذ السياسات، الأنظمة السياسية المشتركة، إقليم كوردستان-العراق.

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Introduction

In the post-conflict and politically contested areas, the governance of the higher education concerns usually performs in the areas that overlap between the political power and university leadership. Party politics plays a significant role in the governance of the university in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) where appointments of university leadership as well as strategic choices are circumvented through partisanship and regional power-sharing relationships (Ahmed, 2024; Anokye et al., 2025). Such politicization is not only lessening the quality of institutional decision-making but calls into question the international norms of academic freedom and institutional independence.

Academic institutions are the pillars of the present day societies. They do not only represent higher educational and scientific research establishments, but also many different politico-social and economical forces interact here. In shared political systems such as in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, the process of decision-making in university management acquires a specific significance, since theoretical patterns of educational policies are mixed with the specifics of practical work and depend on internal and external factors, including political pressure, economic issues, social needs, and organizational culture in general.

The study seeks to provide insights into this complicated dynamic through an understanding of the policy and practice relationship in the setting of university leadership. We shall endeavor to learn the process of formulating decision, the major decision-players and what influences the process. Having this insight, we will aspire to give detailed insights into the problems affecting university leadership in shared political systems and how the institution of decision-making can be enhanced to guarantee the independence of universities and their efficiency in the attainment of their academic and social missions.

The case of Kurdistan Region of Iraq gives an important picture of this dilemma. Although the formal administration of public universities in the region falls under the Kurdistan Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, the political influence of the political parties takes place on institutional governance, staff appointments and funding.

1ˢᵗ: General Framework and Research Methodology

Describing the sample of the studied population and the accompanying sample of the participants, the research analyzes the general direction and method as well as the statistical procedure of the hypothesis testing and analysis thereof.

1- Research problem:

Higher Education System in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq works in the complicated environment where political influences provide the high impact of the institutional boards. The political shared systems tend to influence Leadership in the university since, as much as the university leadership is arrived at based on educational qualification, it is also determined by the outside political forces and interests. The scenario is a major cause of concern because it casts a dark cloud over the concepts of leadership independence, alignment between politics in the different countries and institutional rule, and eventual effectiveness of judgment-making in the university setting. Although the post-war period issue and policy implementation in transition zones have already been discussed in previous studies, it is a significant period to learn how politically constructed systems influence the management of the structure and operations of the universities in Kurdistan. Demographic factors, which include, gender, age, administrative role and political affiliation are also other demographic factors that are related with leadership practice and perceptions. These gaps ought to be dealt with to enlighten the politics needed to transform the university and reinforce the outfit of the university governance in a sensitive political setting.

2- Objectives of the Study

A. To study the degree of influence of politically shared systems on university leadership in Kurdistan Region of Iraq.
B. In order to examine the mediation process of interaction between politically shared systems and decision -making process within the institutions of higher education by examining leadership.
C. To evaluate how much political affiliations and external political influences have over a decision, whether academic or administrative.
D. To determine the perceived sovereignty of university presidents under a politically firmly governed system.
E. In order to understand the policy into practice translation in the politics of shared systems among university leaders.
F. To study how such demographic factors (gender, age, administrative responsibility, leadership experience, and political incorporation) can affect the perception of the leadership effectiveness and the ability to make decisions.

3- Hypotheses of the Study

A. To have a look at the importance of politically shared systems on leadership in universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.
B. To examine how the university leadership manipulates the connection between politically shared systems and decision-making systems in institutions of higher learning.
C. To determine levels of influence of political affiliations and external political forces in the academics and administration decision making.
D. To test the perceived freedom of university executives in a politically affected system of governance.
E. Find out the challenges that university leaders encounter when implementing translation politics within the politically shared regimes.
F. To verify that demographic factors (including gender, age, administrative role, experience as a leader, and political party) may influence the performance of leadership and decision making.

4- Research Importance

The study of the connection between the policy and practice and the establishment of the process of decisions making in the university leadership of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is of significant importance on a few essential grounds:

a. Kurdistan Region of Iraq is a joint system, or consociational system of politics where in the political components of politics share power and decision making. This fact definitely influences the sphere of higher education as well. It is critical to understand how such political dynamics play out in making academic and administrative decisions in universities.

b. Academic and administrative independence is frequent to universities. Nevertheless, in shared political systems, politics can interfere with the selection of the university administrators, the establishment of schedules, and the allocation of resources.

c. The nature of decisions developed at the leadership level of universities will directly rely on education quality, quality of scientific research, and qualification of graduates to labor markets. In case of allowing the political factors to interfere too much in the decision making instead of letting the academic and professional standards guide making of these decisions, then it is likely that the quality of higher education and capability of the universities to produce effective results that will affect sustainable development of the region is going to be affected adversely.

d. Studies on the processes of decision making can enable identification of any problem to do with good governance, transparency and accountability within university institutions. There would be a conflict of interest or the pressure of various political parties in the case of shared systems.

e. The study provides data and suggestion that helps policymakers and university leaders understand present challenges and develop strategies and reforms to improve the decision-making process.

5- Research Questions of the Study

A. At what levels are politically shared systems of the University of Kurdistan region in Iraq influencing it regarding leadership?

B. In what way has the university leadership managed the interface between politically shared systems and the process of making decisions made in the institutions of higher learning?

C. How much does the political affiliation and external political pressure influence academic and administrative decision making in universities?

D. What is the vision of the university leadership regarding their independence in governance structure that is politically influenced?

E. The chief issues have been addressed by the heads of Universities in the translation of politics in the politically shared systems?

F. Does gender, age, administrative position, experience with leadership in higher education, and political affiliation influence the perception of people regarding effectiveness of leadership and their decision-making?

6- Research Scope

Several time, space, human, cognitive limitations characterized the study, as shown in the following way:

- Time span: The duration over which one will execute this research in data collection and analysis, June 25, 2025 to july 24, 2025.
- Place Scope: (16) Universities in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq formed part of the study.
- Human perspective: A study of Kurdistan Region – Iraq Universities Leadership.
- Theoretical (objective) scale: Between Policy and Practice: Knowledge of the University Leadership Decision-Making in the Politically Shared System in the Kurdistan Region in Iraq.

7- Research Methodology

This paper is built on the descriptive and analytical research whereby a questionnaire was served to a sample of Leadership in Universities in Kurdistan Region-Iraq to gather information; Information was then analyzed according to the descriptive and analytical statistics to arrive at the results:

- **Methods Used**: Qualitative and quantitative data will be analyzed through SPSS program in order to interpret questionnaires and test hypothesis.
- **Data Collection Tools**: Questionnaires, Google Forms, and literature reviews.
- **Research Community**: (16) Universities in Kurdistan Region-Iraq.
- **Research sample**: (440) participants in Universities in Kurdistan Region-Iraq

8- Research Model

As indicated in Figure No. (1), a hypothetical model has been derived to indicate the potential of establishing an environment that is conducive to universities in Kurdistan Region, Iraq by using Decision -Making as an independent variable and Politically Shared Systems as a dependent variable as well as Policy and Practice as a mediating variable. It also illustrates how far these factors relate to the variables in the research, as well as the correlation of the variables to the work environment that is being studied.
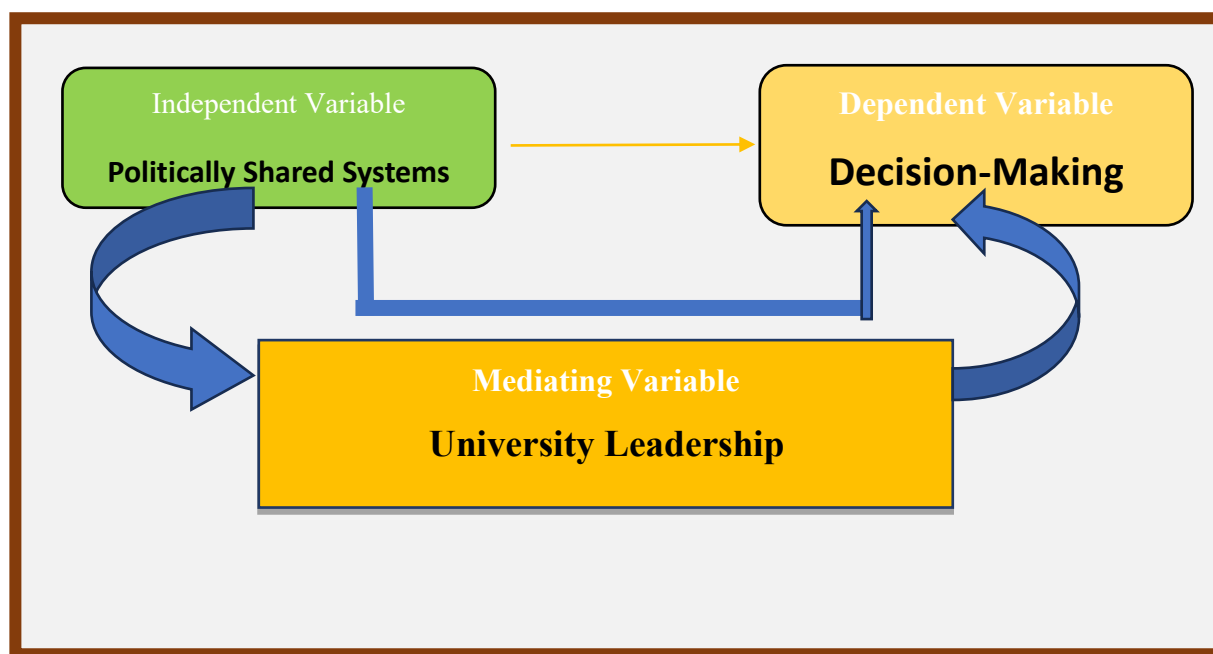
Source: Prepared by researcher

2ⁿᵈ: Literature Review

1- Theoretical Frameworks

The conceptual framework of this study is upon a number of intertwined theoretical tools, including the bureaucratic theory, institutional autonomy, policypractice gap, and political economy of education.

The bureaucratic theory considers the university as a hierarchical institution that operates according to the formal guidelines and has uniform processes. Although bureaucracy systems guarantee obedience and consistency in policies, in politically manipulated systems; they are vulnerable to capture by elites and exploitation by partisans (Soudien, 2023). This is quite specific to Kurdistan Region whereby party affiliations appear to be critical in determining bureaucratic appointments as opposed to skillfulness and knowledge.

Institutional autonomy means the freedom that universities have, to make their own academic, administrative and financial decision. It is regarded as a pillar of academic quality and effectiveness of governance. Nonetheless, research indicates that, in any system where the state power overlaps with the university management, autonomy is always suppressed (Simplicio et al., 2024).

The policy practice gap emphasizes that there exists no interconnection between official reform and the execution on the ground. Policies that serve to cultivate transparency and accountability in leadership have been shown to fail to materialize in the conduct of an institution, especially in a setting such as the KRI, through the resistance of politics, administrative confusion, or enforcement gaps (Al-Haj, 2021). Finally, the political economy approach scrutinizes the influence of greater distribution of power and resources on the manner of behavior of the institution. In this perspective, political interference in college education is not a mistake but a component of the structure where such universities are incorporated into large-scale partisan systems (Obasi, 2023).

2- University Leadership

University leadership involves the people and organs that provide directional strategy in the university, implementation of policies, and development of academic and administrative values in institutions of higher learning. This is the case whereby in politically sensitive areas like in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), university administration can be mired in webs of influence outside of the academia where leadership is not purely a meritocratic concept but also an individual of social and political capital (Banya, 2020, 640).

As indicated in the recent literature, proper leadership in the university means the ability to strike a balance between the internal norms of the academic institution and the external expectations of the surrounding socio-political environment. In this regard, leadership does not involve power anymore, but it is shaped on how to deal with the various constraints posed by institutions, the demands of stakeholders as well as political complexities (Papalexandris, 2025, 86). In settings with limited degrees of autonomy (Simplicio et al. 2024, 15) state that university heads tend to embrace hybrid styles of leadership in which they combine strategic flexibility with politics.

University leaders, presidents, dean, and top managers, in the KRI, work under two systems of governance with the formal policies being established by the Ministry of Higher Education while the informal ones are executed based on the interests of political parties (Faraj, 2022, 94). Such dualism challenges effective self-rule and places a lot of doubt regarding institutional integrity and efficacies of leadership. According to Goode (2025), institutional legitimacy especially when an appointee is influenced by affiliations rather than qualifications; this weakens the leadership accountability and vision which is long term.

University leadership is defined in terms of institutional agency and power made by presidents, deans, and executive teams to influence academic policy, interpretation, and direction as well as institutional governance. In situations where the university leadership is politicized such as the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI), the responsibility of university leadership is not only an administrative activity but a process of negotiation between peoples and collectivities (Khalil, 2024, 95).

Latest reports indicate that education chiefs in the KRI are mostly caught in-between incompatible edicts- official academic requirements against personal political demands (Ali, 2017, 123). Such leaders exist between a dual system of accountability; loyalty to political actors (upward accountability) who made their appointments, and faculty and students (downward accountability). The delicate act of balancing usually restrains leadership behavior with essentiality of strategic risk or transparent decision-making (Ahmed, 2024, 67; Jafar and Eskander, 2024, 41).

Politicized leadership structures preserve transactional management and reinforce it, according to Atrushi and Woodfield (2018, p. 276). Hence, leadership then becomes static, dealing with preserving institutional stability rather than fostering academic innovation.

3- Decision-Making

University decision-making process is systematized and unsystematized procedures that are used in formulating and implementing institutional policies, resource provisions, and strategic measures. In well established governance systems, these processes are preferably evidence-based, participatory, and skewed towards academic excellence. Nonetheless, in the system with politically shared power, common in the KRI, decision making is often veiled, top-down, and subject to the intervention of other political forces (Mohammed, 2023, 209).

The politics of patronage are common in the leadership of the Kurdistan region (public universities), where political allegiance is a prerequisite to access resources, appointment and promotions instead of merit or institutional purposes (Hassan and Zangana, 2024, 128). Such politicization may suppress innovation and concern of dissenting academic voice that reduce decision space available to university leaders.

According to Alnadi (2023, 282), decision-making under political constraints creates risk-averse leaders who do not want to take the controversial but essential reforms to remain in a political good situation. In addition, collective decision making has been weakened by the lack of transparent systems of governance and power is now concentrated in the hands of those who are politicians' appointees. This is the case because, according to Obasi (2023, 37) emphasizes in the context of West Africa that is comparable to Kurdistan in many aspects relative as politically dominated societies enforce the cultures of decision-making that are made out of survival and political persuasion rather than aims at foresight or scholastic purity.

Politically shared university systems usually involve distortion of decision-making by other non-academic interests. Instead of being made under institutional bylaws, or with the input of a wider group of people in participatory decision-making, the decisions about staffing, budget, or educational programmes are often made due to informal bargaining between political elites (Khalil, 2024, 97; Wahab, 2017, 84).

The Kurdistan Region The decision-making process in the Kurdistan Region is not transparent and is not free of control by the executive. Ahmed, (2024, Noted in 63) that over 60 percent of the staff of the universities surveyed felt that there was political participation in the running of the executive decisions. This leads to a poor policy delivery that is patchy, timely, and liable to patronage.

(Ali ,2017: 127) found that despite quality assurance reforms, internal decision-making at KRI universities remains largely symbolic due to fear of political repercussions. As Jameel (2017, 109) emphasizes, decision-making in such settings is deeply rooted in political patronage rather than evidence-based policy frameworks, hindering institutional reform and undermining trust.

4- Politically Shared Systems

A politically sharing system or also known as consociational system is a system of governance where political powers are shared among various parties based on regions, sectarians or ethnicity. Although this model was so designed to stabilize the post-conflict societies and instil a sense of representing them, it can cement the divisions between groups and take the estimation of the political competition to the level of governmental establishments such as higher education institutions (Brankovic and Levi, 2021, 61).

In the KRI political power-sharing has led to parallel educational systems based on party support. As it has been reported, ministries, university boards and even academic units serve the partisan interests as stated by Ahmed (2024, 60). The resulting political duality in turn forms an institutional environment in which decision-making is disintegrated and coherence in policies hard to establish. Political elites also affect the design of the curriculum, selection of posts, and performance appraisal, effectively turning universities into political tools of legitimation instead of knowledge creation instruments (Browne et al., 2021).

Soudien (2023, 23) notes that this type of system can easily turn the university into bureaucratic offshoots of the ruling classes, damaging their innovative and responsive ability. In addition to these, there is more. Faraj (2022, 96) shows that the politically shared governance introduces

inefficiencies into the system, since the leadership tends to violate the mandates given by the opposing political sides, which results in the delay of execution, allocation of resources to other unrelated areas, and the system-wide paralysis.

A consociational system or politically shared system governance is one where the government authority is dispersed between the key political categories in the system, usually legitimized in post-conflict scenarios, where ethnic or factional evenness are needed. Although this structure can aid political stability; it produces undesirable effects in areas such as higher education where functional autonomy is important (Stansfield, 2001, 112).

The system of politicised shared control has produced two sets of controls, formal bureaucratic control of the Ministry of Higher Education, and informal attempts by party kingmakers to interfere with appointments and budgets (Chomani, 2024, 88). As explained by Atrushi and Woodfield (2018, 280) this design is termed as structural entrapment and in that sense, leaders of the university have to reconcile the priorities of the university with that of the parties.

Moreover, the coexistence of the two, seen in the historical context, tends to transfer to the internal governance of the institutions like the University of Sulaimani or Salahaddin University, making a boundary between academic power and political allegiance unclear (Ahmed, 2016, 139). The outcome is fragmentation of institutions making them less effective in long-term strategic planning as well as collaboration in-between institutions.

5- Global Perspectives on Political Influence in Higher Education

The issue of political interference on the academic governance has been experienced in places in the world where democratic institutions are weak. In Eastern Europe, reforms after communism collapse resulted in liberalization as well as politicization of academic organization, where the post of rector and dean often were elected politically (Brankovic and Levi, 2021). Equally, there is a common case in Sub-Saharan Africa where Tertiary institutions are platforms of political patronage, thereby compromising meritocratic leadership rules and accountability within the institutions (Banya, 2020).

At the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, such as Iraq and the Kurdistan region, state and party elites are great influences in appointing the university leadership and determining the curriculum. A report by Browne et al. (2021) revealed that in some conflict-affected states such as Iraq, elite interference and divided governance usually impede the process of reforming higher education.

6- Policy Alignment and Institutional Autonomy

Tensions between top-down policy requirements and bottom-up discretion in leadership has been duly reported. Whereas ministries of higher education would promote the formulation of high-level strategic visions, university heads find themselves in a more limited environment in which political aspects play a larger role than academic logic. Research on Turkey and Jordan, among other geographical contexts, reveals that when there is centralized control, the leadership has compliance orientation, instead of visionary or innovative practice of leadership (Alnadi, 2023).

These dynamics are further complex in KRI setting in the context of the semi-autonomous pattern of governance where federal policy framework should align with the local party influence. In this vein, policy-alignment is often symbolic as opposed to operational (Mohammed, 2023).

7- Political Appointments and Governance Structures

One of the most obvious instruments of control is the political appointment of persons to leadership positions in the universities. These personal placements tend to break down the defined procedures and performance benchmarks and establish cultures of dependency and low upward accountability in institutions. A 2024 survey by Hassan and Zangana indicated that 68 % of university presidents in the Kurdistan region had been appointed by a direct political connection, with the concern that this might have raised some doubts about both legitimacy and performance.

Besides, the form of government is likely to reflect the political bipolarity of the region as there are party fringe groups struggling to gain a voice in boards, senates and other institutional governing bodies. These two systems of power result in parallel systems that blur policy consistency and prevent long term planning (Faraj, 2022).

8- Gaps in Empirical Literature

Although there has been a considerable body of literature to date on the politicization of higher education across the world, there is a relative lack of empirical and local researches on its working within politically power-sharing university systems in Kurdistan. A majority of the available literature addresses the wider area of governance or the education post-conflict reform without involving the micro-politics of decision-making institutions (Norlander, 2023). What is more, little evidence is available to how university leaders themselves conceptualize their autonomy, agency, and priorities in reform under partisan constraints.

9- Justification for the Study

The paper fills in the above gap based on delivering an empirical exploration of academic leadership in the public universities of the Kurdistan Region. It is evident on a sensitive perception of the nature of common political rule that determines leadership and policy adherence, and strategy. By producing the lived experiences and the institutional constraints of the university leaders, the study adds to a developing literature statement that criticizes the long-standing model of governance as well as staging the requirement of context-sensitive reformation. This will have a policy implication not only to the Kurdish case but also to other educational systems that are politically fragmented or post-conflict systems around the world.

10- Relationship Between Policy and Practice: Understanding University Leadership Decision-Making in Politically Shared Systems

The policy-practice nexus within the leadership of universities in the Kurdistan region - Iraq is quite dynamic and complex. The best policies that can be used to counter these hurdles are the need to increase transparency, principles of good governance, academic autonomy and the need to have a positive dialogue between the political elements and the university leaders. With the knowledge of such engagements, it is possible to formulate better academic policies that can enhance quality higher education and also help in realization of the regional knowledge society since the political systems that dominate the region are very similar to one another. This relationship is therefore very important to be used in determining the effectiveness of university governance and how it may succeed in attaining its academic, research, and societal objectives.

As learning organizations, universities play a critical role in the intellectual, economic and social growth of nations. But the point is that they are not independent, but on the contrary they are influenced in both a direct and indirect way by the political environment. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq as the political environment is marked by the plurality of political forces and shared governance systems, the political factors are very closely connected to the decision-making processes in the universities.

Key Aspects of the Relationship:

a. Political factors in leadership appointment: Accommodation and acquiescence comes through political factors in leadership appointments because the appointment of senior universities leaderships (including university presidents and deans) is usually influenced by political factors and partisan interests. It is possible to result in the appointment of persons who do not have enough academic or administrative experience, which would affect the quality of made decisions in a negative way.

b. Political Direction of Academic Curriculum and Programs: There is the possibility of political ambitions to come in the way of curriculum development or even admission of students. This may

be limiting to academic freedom and the freedom of universities in addressing the actual needs of the labor and society.

c. Funding and Resources: Political decisions made at the region government level have a serious impact on university budget and resource allocation. Also, the reliance on government funding may result in political intrusion in the way universities spend monies which slows financial independence of universities.

d. University Freedom and Pressure: Universities in their nature require autonomy in their academic and administrative matters so as to provide a neutral environment to the research and learning process. Nevertheless, this autonomy, despite being noteworthy in the situation of common political systems, is largely threatened by the politics forces in their effort to command influence and control.

e. The decision-making process: The process of decision making in leadership in university includes strategic plan and everyday decisions and is mostly shaped by internal and external politics. It might be tempted to make decisions that are presented to cadre calories, and this affects transparency and efficiency.

3rd: Data Description and Analysis

The research used quantitative methods to assess how advancements in Between Policy and Practice: Understanding University Leadership Decision-Making in Politically Shared Systems in the Kurdistan Region – Iraq at sixteen public universities throughout the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Foure hundred forty participants made up the chosen random sample and each respondent fully completed the survey. The data cleaning stage left (440) responses that became available for study analysis. SPSS software provided the platform to evaluate participant perceptions by using statistical techniques that investigated key variable relationships. The study utilized descriptive statistics for mean and standard deviation together with reliability analysis through Cronbach's alpha and correlation analysis via Pearson's coefficient in addition to linear regression analysis. Participants answered questions using a five-point Likert scale format.

1- Internal Consistency Reliability of Study Constructs:

Table (1): Internal Consistency Reliability of Study Constructs

Variables	Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Politically Shared Systems	8	0.705
University Leadership	8	0.834
Decision-Making	8	0.689

Source: Prepared by researcher

The internal consistency reliability or Cronbach Alpha as shown in Table 1 was done on the three critical constructs in the paper Between Policy and Practice; understanding of university leadership decision-making in politically shared systems in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. The construct of Politically Shared Systems had 8 items that showed a Cronbach Alpha of 0.705 which was marked as acceptable. The leadership structure of the university also had 8 items and delivered high reliability of 0.834 that is regarded as good. Lastly, the reliability coefficient of the decision making construction was 0.689 in 8 items; it falls under the questionable yet usable range. In general, all these findings indicate that measurement devices employed in every construction are of adequate internal stability and can be subjected to additional statistical processing.

2- Socio-Demographic Characteristics of University Leaders in the Kurdistan Region:

Table (2): Socio-Demographic Characteristics of University Leaders in the Kurdistan Region (N = 440)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percent (%)
Gender	Male	346	78.6
	Female	94	21.4
Age Group	31–40	31	7
	41–50	276	62.7
	51–60	133	30.2
Administrative Position	Director	56	12.7
	Department Head	268	60.9
	Dean	90	20.5
	Vice President	18	4.1
	University President	8	1.8
Years of Leadership Experience	Less than 5 years	48	10.9
	5–10 years	109	24.8
	11–15 years	129	29.3
	More than 15 years	154	35
Political Affiliation	Independent	131	29.8
	Affiliated	309	70.2
Total		**440**	**100.0**

Source: Prepared by researcher

Table 2 shows that the sample is predominantly male (78.6%) and most respondents are aged between 41 and 50 years (62.7%), indicating a mature leadership group. A significant percentage of the participants (60.9%) serve as department heads, with fewer holding senior positions such as university president (1.8%) or vice president (4.1%). Regarding leadership experience, the majority have over 11 years in higher education leadership, particularly those with more than 15 years (35%). Notably, 70.2% of the respondents reported having political affiliation, suggesting that political ties are dominant among university leadership in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq.

3- Descriptive Overview of Core Study Variables

Table (3): Descriptive Overview of Core Study Variables (N = 440)

Variable	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Politically Shared Systems	2.25	4.75	3.7216	0.52382
University Leadership	1.63	5	4.3207	0.50079
Decision-Making	2.5	4.63	3.7196	0.4208

Source: Prepared by researcher

Table 3 gives a description statistics of the variables of greatest significance in the study done using 440 respondents. Results suggest that average participants concurred with the agreement that the politically shared system influences the higher education in Kurdistan region (M = 3.72, SD = 0.52), and the new measures used to investigate the responses were moderate. The leadership of the university received the highest mean score (M = 4.32, SD = 0.50), which suggests a strong agreement that leadership is aware of institutional challenges and the need for autonomy and clear governance structures. Similarly, the decision-making variables illustrate moderate to the high agreement (M = 3.72, SD = 0.42), which reflects the perceptions that decision-making processes include strategic views and academic input, still the formulation of external political and institutional factors. Overall, the results highlight a shared approach that politically plays an important, but great role in the design of the university's rules and leadership.

4- Pearson Correlations Between Core Study Variables

Table (4): Pearson Correlations Between Core Study Variables

Variables	Politically Shared Systems	University Leadership
Politically Shared Systems	1	.497** (p < .01)
University Leadership	.497** (p < .01)	1

Source: Prepared by researcher

As seen at Table 4, there were statistically significant and positive correlations between variables. Politically Shared Systems is positively correlated at a moderate level with the University Leadership (r = .497, p < .01). This implies that when there is a corresponding policy position with the country and the region, this will lead to a better leadership at the university level.

5- Linear Regression Analysis of Politically Shared Systems as Predictor

Table (5): Linear Regression Analysis of Politically Shared Systems as Predictor

Dependent Variable	Predictor	R	R²	B (Unstd.)	β (Std.)	t	Sig.
University Leadership	Politically Shared Systems	0.497	0.247	0.475	0.497	11.998	.000
Decision-Making	Politically Shared Systems	0.592	0.35	0.475	0.592	15.363	.000

Source: Prepared by researcher

Table 5 presents the results of a linear regression analysis, which examines politically shared systems as a predictor for both university leadership and decision-making. Findings suggest that politically shared systems significantly affect the leadership of the university (R = 0.497, R² = 0.247, β = 0.497, p < .001), which means that about 24.7% of the variance under the university leadership can be explained by political alignment and policy coherence. Similarly, politically shared systems significantly predict decision-making (r = 0.592, r2, = 0.35, β = 0.592, p <0.001), and account for 35% variance in strategic decision-making processes. These results emphasize the important role of political alignment and policy consistency in the design of effective leadership and decision-making practices in the institutions of higher education.

6- Mediation Analysis of the Influence of Politically Shared Systems on Decision-Making Through University Leadership

Table (6): Mediation Analysis of the Influence of Politically Shared Systems on Decision-Making Through University Leadership

Effect Type	Path	Coeff (b)	SE	t / z	p	95% CI (LLCI, ULCI)
Total Effect	c	0.4754	0.0309	15.36	< .001	[0.4145, 0.5362]
Direct Effect	c′	0.3748	0.0344	10.9	< .001	[0.3072, 0.4423]
Indirect Effect	a × b	0.1006	0.0223	—	—	[0.0595, 0.1473]
Path a (Politically Shared Systems → University Leadership)	a	0.4755	0.0396	11.99	< .001	[0.3976, 0.5534]
Path b (University Leadership → Decision-Making)	b	0.2116	0.036	5.89	< .001	[0.1409, 0.2822]

Source: Prepared by researcher

The results presented in Table 6 indicate a strong positive significant effect of politically shared systems (PSS) on the decision-making (DM) at universities (b = 0.4754, p < .001). There is a partial mediation of the direct relation between PSS and DM when included is the leadership of the university (UL) meaning that when university leadership is added as mediator and PSS has an effect (b = 0.3748, p < .001) that is lower than without the mediator. It is also statistically significant that PSS has an indirect influence on DM through UL (B = 0.1006, 95% CI [0.0595, 0.1473]) since zero is not included in a confidence of the measurement. Moreover, the paths to the PSS to UL (B =

0.4755, p <0.001) and the UL to DM (B = 0.2116, p <0.001) are important as well, which indicates the role of the dissemination of the university management. These results indicate that the politically shared system influences the decision of the university both directly and indirectly, through the organization of the leadership behavior.

7- Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Academic and Administrative Decision-Making from Political Pressure and Affiliations

Table (7): Linear Regression Analysis Predicting Academic and Administrative Decision-Making from Political Pressure and Affiliations

Model	Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p	R	R²	F	Sig. F
1	(Constant)	2.622	0.14	—	18.664	< .001	0.343	0.118	58.559	< .001
	Political Pressure and Affiliations	0.244	0.032	0.343	7.652	< .001				

Source: Prepared by researcher

As Table 7 depicts, simple linear regression has been used in order to evaluate the aspect of whether it is possible to use political affiliations and external political pressure as predictors of academic and administrative decisions. The results are indicative of a significant model, f (1, 438) = 58.56, p <0.001, and the model made significant predictions of decision-making practice in which the political pressure and affiliations were significant predictors (β =343, p <001).

This model has a definite amount of variance in the decision of between 11.8 percent (R 2, = .118) revealing the effect as moderate. These results evidence that the political forces have a significant presence in the design of academic and administrative decision making in university settings within the politically shared systems.

8- Perceived Autonomy of University Leaders

Table (8): Perceived Autonomy of University Leaders

Statistic	Value
Sample Size (N)	440
Mean Perceived Autonomy	3.12
Standard Deviation (SD)	0.3
One-Sample t-test (Test Value = 3)	t (439) = 8.534
p-value	< .001
Mean Difference from Neutral	0.12
95% CI of Mean Difference	[0.092, 0.148]
Effect Size (Cohen's d)	0.407
Effect Size (Hedges' g)	0.406

Source: Prepared by researcher

Table 8 shows the output of one-sample t-test and analyzes the reported autonomy of the university leaders against a neutral 3 mark on the Likert scale. The scores of the mean autonomy points are m = 3.12, SD = 0.30, which significantly higher than the neutral value (T (439) = 8.534, p <0.001). The mean difference is not equal to zero in the 95 percent confidence interval ([0.092, 0.148]), which is even more indication of the statistical significance of the result. Though the distinction is regarded to be statistically significant, the magnitude of the effect is moderate (Cohen d = 0.407), a smaller but statistically significant sense of autonomy is implied by university heads. These conclusions can be made to state that the levels of freedom in the role of rule can be considered up to average as per the perception of the university leaders themselves, regardless of their shared political environment.

9- Challenges Faced by University Leaders in Translating Policy into Practice

Table (9): Challenges Faced by University Leaders in Translating Policy into Practice

Challenge Item	Mean	Std. Dev	Interpretation
Political dynamics create barriers to policy implementation	4.16	0.73	High challenge
Need for greater policy clarity to support local university leadership	4.43	0.73	Very high challenge
University autonomy is constrained by external political pressures	4.3	0.79	High challenge
External political agendas override institutional strategy	4.29	0.83	High challenge
Institutional goals are deprioritized due to political negotiations	4.1	0.82	High challenge

Source: Prepared by researcher

Based on Table 9 we can say that those in university leadership have had significant issues in translating politics in politically shared systems. The top priority issue states that there needs to be more guidance in policy in order to foster the local university directors (M = 4.43, SD = 0.73), which means that people need to be educated in the form of policy much more clearly and readily. Other key barriers are those that create impediments to university autonomy because of the outside political influence (M = 4.30) and the influence of overarching external political agenda on institutional strategies (M = 4.29). Moreover, there are impediments to the enactment of policies reported by the respondents due to political forces. The fact that institutional goals are at times dirty at the expense of political dealings (M = 4.10) and the fact that only four or five out of ten sample distributions can be said to be clean (M = 4.16). These results point out that the interference in political processes and ambiguity in the political processes are the primary hindrances to the great performances of the university leadership and strategic realization.

10- Multiple Regression Results: Influence of Demographic Variables on Perceptions of University Leadership and Decision-Making

Table (10): Multiple Regression Results: Influence of Demographic Variables on Perceptions of University Leadership and Decision-Making

Predictor Variable	Leadership (β)	Decision-Making (β)	Significance (p)Leadership	Significance (p)Decision-Making
Gender	+	+	0	0.037
Age	+	+	0.002	0
Administrative Role	+ (weak)	+ (weak)	0.057	0.07
Years of Experience in Leadership	−	−	0	0
Political Affiliation	−	−	0.012	0.004
Model R²	0.246	0.199		
Model F (df = 5, 434)	28.38	21.57	p < .001	p < .001

Source: Prepared by researcher

Table 10 demonstrates that the multiple regression analysis examined how the demographic variables, i.e., gender, age, the current administrative position, the leadership experience, the political affiliation impacts the leadership and the process of decision-making at a university. To determine the influence of the demographic factors, the model of the university leadership displayed 24.6 percent of the variance (R 2 = 0.246 p < .001), and the model of the decision-making provided 19.9 percent of the variance (R 2 = 0.199, p < .001) which indicates that both demographic factors induce moderate effects. Specifically, gender and age were positively correlated with the two outcomes, whereas leadership experiences and political affiliation indicated negative relationships with the perceptions, particularly on the management in the university. The significance of the models despite the minor effects may claim that the demographic factor is not irrelevant in the determination of the individual perception of leadership and decisions making within a politically influenced educational setting.

11- Discussion

This report gives empirical response on how the politically shared system influences the leadership and decision-making of the University of the Kurdistan region in Iraq. The findings describe a complex association between political trends and governance of higher education, which correlates with the world trends discerned in the transition or evolution of contexts.

The results of the current research came after determining a significant and medium-strength association between politically polarised structures and university leadership (beta = 0.497) and decision -making (beta = 0.592). This evidence confirms the pre-existing literature in its claim that to align and align institutions of higher learning with broad-based political systems in politically embedded contexts is to have the ability to influence leadership and institutional orientation (ElAmine, 2021; Jones & Harvey, 2017; Sultana, 2018).

The mediation analysis also supports the fact that university leadership mediates to some extent the influences of politically shared systems on decision-making and this aspect is consistent with past research on prominent influence of leadership in screening and defining external policy pressure (Ninget al., 2017). The large indirect effect shows that even though the political systems have their direct influence, how the system leadership perceives the influence and acts upon it determines the institutional decisions. It points at the significance of training and independence in leadership, as the latter tends to become the middle-ground between a political mandate and academic goals (Nordholm et al., 2021; Slemp et al., 2018). The regression study that studies political pressure and affiliations also underlines this idea that the influence of external political powers plays a great role in shaping decisions (R 2 = 0.118). The results could be compared to the ones of international studies revealing that political interference in university governance tends to diminish academic freedom and lower institutional integrity (Berggren et al., 2021). Perceived autonomy (m = 3.12) which is the lowest highest, implies that leaders might have a sense of some kind of agency, but this is compelled to be according to the expectations with regard to polities. It is aligned with studies, which claim that systems of higher education have little to no autonomy once they are under political control (Vlasova, 2018). Respondents cited various obstacles to ensuring that national or regional policy was converted into university strategies that they could play. The policy of clarifying challenges ranked top (M = 4.43), and such clarification lacked, indicating the fears of different scholars as to the issue of political ambiguity in the shared politically based systems (Fonseca & Nieth, L. 2021). The existence of barriers of university autonomy and prevailing political agenda is also the evidence of the tension in the relationship between academic rule and external control (Kori, 2016). These results show that there must be pressure to achieve a more regular and sustainable policy framework providing university administrators with a chance to concentrate on educational agendas rather than political bargains. Examination of demographic variables presents an additional dimension in view of the understanding of the leadership beliefs. The positive correlation between gender and age and leadership or decision-making may be a generational belief or optimism (Alves, 2023). On the other hand, years of leadership experience and political affiliation were negatively related, so more experienced or politically related leaders could have more significant opinions about current practice, which is perhaps due to the accumulated despair following political intervention (Stręk, 2019). It indicates the necessity of further studies how personal and professional background develops prevailing leadership responses within educational contexts in the political arena. Lastly, each one of the six hypotheses was accepted since all the statistical tests presented strong and significant conviction of each of the objectives of the study.

4th: Conclusion and Recommendations

1- Conclusion

The paper conceptually explored the area of leadership in the university and politically shared systems in the realm of higher education in the KRI. Strong empirical research has shown how with academic governance being influenced significantly and systematically by political structure of

forms, the type of leadership practice as well as the kinds of operational decision-making processes are also influenced by it. This is supported by the facts that tend to show that an endemic structural pattern exists in which political affiliations, external influences, and partisan interests would habitually get in the way of institutional autonomy and academic integrity.

Conclusions indeed affirms that university leadership is not only a subject of administrative activity or academic activity, but rather a power that balances the conflicting expectations between policy requirements and political necessity. It is in this sense that leadership here is largely independent but at the same time are usually restricted by informal networks of influence and consequently lead to decision making cultures that place a premium on political fit rather than academic qualification or institutional vision.

These observations are also supported by quantitative analyses provided in the study; they show that the three variables, namely, the politically shared systems, leadership efficacy, and decision-making outcomes, are related statistically significantly. Also, differences in perception of leadership effectiveness were established to be mediated by demographic factors, which is why the importance of individual-based effect of politics in university governance is especially emphasized by the gender, age, and political affiliation of all respondents.

Notably, the research can also be used to inform other global discussions on educational governance in the post-conflict setting as it does demonstrate how higher education institutions have developmental capacity that is dampened by politicized climates. The findings indicate that there is a dire need to realign the policies that support transparency, reconsideration of the areas of political and academic activities, and leadership models that are based on professional competence, accountability, and institutional independence.

Finally, the Kurdistan Region of Iraq is not an isolated case: the world is facing a more general issue regarding the protection of university autonomy in a context in which political pluralism is mixed with weak governance systems. To resolve this issue, it would be essential to undertake systematic changes, capacitate academic leadership, and to institutionalize governance systems that support the fundamental principles of higher education within the politically complicated environment.

2- Recommendations

According to the knowledge obtained empirically on the basis of this study, the following proposals are suggested to discover the effectiveness, autonomy, and integrity of the university leadership in the process of politically shared systems in the Kurdistan region of Iraq and other circumstances of similar type:

Appointment Mechanisms of Institutionalize Transparent Leadership:

Design and implement merit-based criteria on the appointment of leaders in universities, whereby, academic and leadership competencies, and experience should overrule a political leaning. Free vigilance bodies need to be instituted in order to check against such a criterion.

Enforce the Rules with a View of Protecting the Independence of Universities:

Enact some legislative reforms which will definitely demarcate the line between political infringements and academic administration. The law ought to give universities immunity against outside political influence in decision-making process, budgetary allocations and academic programs.

Improve the Clarity of the Policies and the Communication Vanes:

Ministry of Higher Education and university councils have to make sure that all the institutional policies are consistent, available, and match the missions of universities. Ambiguity can be reduced through clear systems of direction and dialogue systems between policymakers and university leaders so as to build responsibility against each other.

Leadership Capacity Development

Offer formal training schemes and professional growth experiences to university leaders so as to prepare them with competencies to negotiate through difficult political conditions. Such subjects should address resolving conflicts, ethical leadership, planning, and institutional resilience.

Encourage the Spirit of Inclusiveness and Participatory Governance Systems

Advocate the most inclusive models of decision-making, with faculty, students and administrative personnel alike taking part in important institutional procedures. Enlarged participation puts less concentration of authority, transparency and legitimacy.

Establish Independent Quality Assurance and Accountability Mechanisms:

Establish or invest external agencies to undertake regular audit and assessments of the university governance, leadership practices and decision making processes. Such mechanisms are not supposed to be dictated by political organs.

Promote Comparative and Cross- Regional Research Activities:

Encourage more empirical studies regarding university governance in politically divided or post conflict areas. Comparative studies are capable of revealing trends, can advise policy change, and exchange best practices within and beyond national borders.

Integrity Institutional Culture and Civic Promotion

Make investments in institutional ethics programs to promote academic ethics, accountability and integrity throughout university operations. The culture of fostering this can be slowly used to offset the burden of political patronage.

Political Interference trends monitoring and evaluation:

Consolidate periodic mechanisms of reporting in order to record and evaluate coverages of political interference in the university activities. Evidence-based policymaking can be encouraged by monitoring information in form of data.

The recommendations are meant to facilitate the move away politicised governance of higher education institutions to a more professional, accountable and independent format of university leadership as better placed to play its academic, social and developmental roles.

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