

## Practicing Democracy at The University: The Faculty Members' Episodic Narratives of Competition for Academic Leadership

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to understand how faculty members experience and narrate the practice of democracy within a university setting, specifically focusing on elections for academic management positions. A qualitative, interpretive approach was employed, utilizing narrative research as the primary strategy. The study was conducted at the University of Kurdistan, with 12 participants selected through purposive, criterion-based sampling. Data were collected using episodic narrative interviews and analyzed through a three-stage thematic analysis method. The analysis yielded 236 descriptive themes, 35 interpretive themes, and 9 overarching themes. These overarching themes were examined within a three-dimensional framework—personal, interactive, and social—to address the research questions. The findings revealed that: first, the distinctive context of the University of Kurdistan differentiates it from many academic institutions in the country, making the application of standard political and managerial theories context-dependent. Second, democracy was sometimes equated with the executives implementing it; thus, poor implementation was conflated with the undesirability of democracy itself. Despite the shortcomings identified by participants, positive outcomes—such as satisfaction, commitment, morale, and organizational citizenship—should not be overlooked. University managers are advised to ensure the participation of all stakeholders, as politics is pervasive in higher education institutions. Consequently, understanding how to navigate such political environments is essential for effective academic leadership.

**Keywords:** Democracy Practice, Faculty experiences, Higher education politics, Power in the University, University elections.

## Introduction

A distinctive dimension of traditional academic culture is the concept of faculty members' participation in power. Participation is an idea shaped in line with task performance based on a remarkable spectrum of valuable academic processes, encompassing intimacy and flexibility. These allegorical conceptual materials yield an image of humble cooperation among scholarly and scientific groups. Participation is closely linked to ideas of individual academic freedom, a set of evaluative principles and standards of individual conduct, freedom from external pressures, preservation of specialized knowledge, and academic professionalism. In the real world, however, this manifests through various academic councils that reach decisions via deliberation and debate (Ramsden, 1998).

Faculty members tend toward criticism, skepticism, and sometimes destructive negativity. Participation provides a context in which these attitudes and behaviors can be liberated from constraints. The beneficial outcome is that vague and ambiguous plans become easily clarified. The disadvantages are that decisions are often made after lengthy delays and painful interruptions, or are never made at all, during which some individuals may be brutally exposed to collegial sabotage. A selfish and obstinate individual can, under the guise of participation, halt all progress, exhaust the entire group, and yet nothing changes. Moreover, this process allows individuals to evade responsibility, leading to situations where agreed-upon matters are not accepted, and no one is held accountable for failing to fulfill duties (Baldwin, 1996).

Improving the quality of education, addressing social responsibilities, and consequently contributing to national development require that higher education institutions have strong leadership, as effective leadership plays an essential role in their success. Therefore, leadership is one of the most critical aspects to consider for the future of any institution. Leadership in higher education institutions is becoming increasingly challenging for many reasons, including the poor quality of higher education, the expansion of programs and student numbers, societal expectations, and the demand to address not only national but also global issues (Hofmeyer et al., 2015).

Addressing challenges and meeting stakeholder demands requires self-motivated, experienced, and knowledgeable higher education leaders. This necessitates that academic leaders possess sound knowledge, perspectives, skills, and insight. They mostly need to create a shared vision that excludes no stakeholder (Kezar & Holcombe, 2017). Higher education leaders and managers are expected to lead wisely, which requires balancing philosophies, vision, knowledge, and moving beyond daily challenges and political struggles. Exercising this type of leadership may be difficult in contexts where the effectiveness and efficiency of the university's operating system have no strong consequences, and changes are often dictated by the ministry. Nevertheless, selecting and appointing the best candidates for each leadership position in higher education is always beneficial (Mrig & Sanaghan, 2017).

During a specific period in the past few years, the University of Kurdistan introduced and implemented a management model based on participatory-political principles, with leadership exercised through democracy and elections. The situation of the University of Kurdistan, given its particular political, social, cultural, religious, and geographical context, distinguishes it from other universities. The experience of elections for determining university managers at the University of Kurdistan was more akin to a practice of democracy, which did not last for more than two terms. A significant point of the present study is that its findings may provide an accurate understanding of the current and future landscape of higher education in Iran, as well as how to become a politically competent academic leader capable of identifying the power games that exist within higher education institutions. Hence, the main goal of the present research was to understand how faculty members make sense of the experience of democracy practice at the university—in the form of elections to determine faculty deans and how they express it in the form of substories. Accordingly, the following two research questions guided this study: 1. What narratives do faculty members have regarding the event of democracy practice? 2. What are the main components (personal, social, and interactive) of faculty members' narratives concerning the practice of democracy?

## Methodology

The present research employed a qualitative approach, and the research strategy used was narrative inquiry. The research field was the University of Kurdistan, and sampling was purposive and criterion-based. This method means that the researcher can define information from target groups according to the research topic and context. Accordingly, participants who had

experience and stories to tell about the phenomenon of senior university management elections were invited to narrative interviews through snowball sampling. To generate data, an episodic narrative interview protocol was used. The transcripts were analyzed using thematic analysis following the three-stage method of King, Horrocks, and Brooks (2019).

## Findings

A total of 236 descriptive themes, 35 interpretive themes, and 9 overarching themes were identified. In the form of a developmental discussion, while categorizing the identified overarching themes within a three-dimensional personal, interactive, and social framework, the research questions were answered. The results indicated that, firstly, the specific nature of the University of Kurdistan differentiates it from many academic environments within Iran, and the implementation of any program will be intertwined with the specific situation of the university, which makes the application of many political and managerial theories exceptional. Secondly, democracy was sometimes equated with the executives who claimed to implement it, and the undesirable implementation of it by the executives was considered synonymous with the undesirability of democracy or a clear example of it, namely elections. Despite the shortcomings that the narrators enumerated, the positive consequences of it, such as satisfaction, commitment, morale, and organizational citizenship, should not be ignored.

The application of conventional political and managerial theories requires exceptional consideration, as every initiative is inevitably intertwined with the university's specific conditions. Participants often equated democracy itself with the very individuals tasked with implementing it; thus, poor execution by administrators was mistakenly interpreted as a failure of democracy or elections per se. Despite these perceived shortcomings, the narrators acknowledged positive outcomes of the participatory process, including increased satisfaction, organizational commitment, morale, and citizenship behavior. The study underscores that, even amid implementation challenges, the constructive consequences of democratic practices in academic settings should not be overlooked.

## Conclusion

The findings revealed that the narratives emerged in eight main themes: a mechanism for unblocking, wisdom, fake/half-hearted democracy, demographic bias, a political mission instead of the university's actual mission, improvement of organizational citizenship, groundwork for university autonomy, and the conflict between expertise, bureaucracy, and democracy. The academic community of Kurdistan, except for two periods, had few opportunities to elect university administrators. No official written documents exist regarding clear criteria or transparent procedures for candidacy, selection, or appointment of senior managers in the elections held. Demographic variables such as ethnicity, language, and religion have influenced appointments without being mentioned in any official guidelines. The ministry's focus has been more on the government's political missions than on the university's actual functions. Successful managers have been forced to cultivate the skills of gaining power and political acumen, regardless of the ethical rightness of their actions. In decentralized structures, middle managers wield more power than their counterparts in centralized structures, and control over resources is key to exercising influence. Identifying decision-makers and the formal and informal power structures is vital for the success of managers. Higher education institutions, regardless of ownership type, are inherently bureaucratic and hierarchical, and over ninety-four percent of respondents in a previous study considered political knowledge essential or very important for senior managers in higher education. The differing goals of stakeholder groups and competition for scarce resources make the university prone to politicking. High levels of uncertainty and reduced communication increase negative political behaviors. A culture of fear and disproportionate use of coercive power leads to destructive political behaviors and decreased job satisfaction and organizational commitment. In some cases, the results of elections were not confirmed by higher authorities, which was criticized with terms such as "caricature democracy." Increased conflict and polarization within the university body were among the side effects of incomplete democratic practice. Managers often focused on personalities rather than issues and failed to conduct prior needs assessments. The failure to completely resolve political and social blockages was explained by the concept of a "managerial glass ceiling." On the personal dimension, themes of wisdom, demographic bias (such as the absence of women), and the promotion of organizational misbehavior emerged. On the interactive dimension, themes included political mission, groundwork for university autonomy, and the conflict between expertise, bureaucracy, and democracy. On the social dimension, themes included unblocking mechanisms, improvement of organizational citizenship, and fake/half-hearted

democracy. The unique position of the University of Kurdistan, characterized by a kind of ethno-cultural glass ceiling, distinguishes it from many other universities in Iran. Narrators sometimes equated democracy itself with the performance of its executors, attributing ineffective implementation to democracy itself. Despite the shortcomings, improvements in satisfaction, commitment, and organizational citizenship, as well as increased optimism, were significant benefits of practicing democracy. Involving only one segment of the university community is insufficient for achieving full democracy; students and staff must also be included. The main limitations of this study include low generalizability due to the qualitative approach, memory bias in memory-based narratives, and the unique context.

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