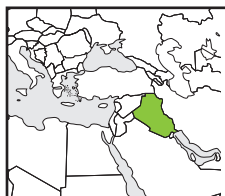


The growing role of civil society



After decades of war, neglect and mismanagement, the country's social and environmental situation is critical. Iraq continues to struggle with an unstable government, corruption, and vast human rights abuses, including attacks on minority groups. Until greater levels of peace and security are achieved, progress in terms of creating and utilizing a successful sustainable development model will prove difficult. While there is increasing civil society participation and democratic involvement, repression and human rights abuses demand persistent attention in order to guarantee a democratic future.

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Iraq continues to struggle with the formidable challenges brought on from years of social unrest and war. The demonstrations that shook the country in February 2011, calling for the elimination of poverty, unemployment and corruption illustrate the new role that Iraqi citizens are beginning to play in a society where democratic participation was formerly violently repressed or silenced altogether. Although still amidst a backdrop of insecurity and highly deficient civil liberties, civil society organizations are growing and playing an ever-increasing role in the nation's democratic development.

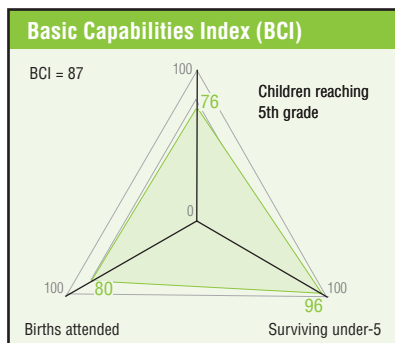
Civil society's vital role

Iraqi citizens went to the ballot boxes on 7 March 2010 and voted for 325 new Members of Parliament to represent them in the Council of Representatives. Unfortunately, the first session of Parliament on 14 June 2010, in a constitutional breach, was left open without electing a Speaker or deputies. This political and constitutional paralysis prompted civil society organizations to launch the Civic Initiative to Preserve the Constitution (CIPC), filing a lawsuit before the Federal Supreme Court. The Federal Court ordered the Chairman of Age to call on MPs to resume the session and to elect a Speaker and two deputies.¹ Civil society observers hailed the decision as a sign of the independence and impartiality of the judiciary, but it also showed that a separation of powers is the cornerstone of a successful democracy.

The most important conclusion that can be drawn from the court decision, however, is the vital role that can be played by Iraqi civil society in the process of building a modern civil State. The lawsuit was followed by another CIPC campaign to collect signatures and put pressure on political blocs to fulfil their election commitments to their constituents. According to CIPC figures, more than 800 NGOs, associations and unions, in addition to prominent figures of different cultural, academic and social backgrounds from various parts of Iraq, participated in the campaign.²

1 Federal Supreme Court, №55 Federal 0.2010.

2 See: <cipciraq.wordpress.com>.

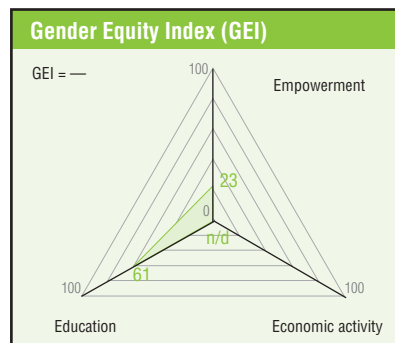


The CIPC has crystallized as a civic framework to achieve multiple objectives including: accelerating the formation of a national partnership government on the basis of sincerity, competence and integrity; drafting a programme to consolidate security and political stability; reforming institutional infrastructure; strengthening the political process through the political parties law; amending the election law; respecting the independence of the judiciary, as well as increasing its efficiency; providing public services; improving the performance of government agencies; ensuring the protection of human rights and public freedoms through constitutional and legal guarantees, including freedom of expression, association, the press and access to information; addressing poverty, unemployment, displacement and discrimination against minority groups.³

Minorities at risk

Despite the fact that levels of displacement have stabilized in recent years, a major terrorist attack on a Catholic church in Baghdad on October 31st 2010 forced some minority communities to reconsider the option of resettling elsewhere. By November 2009 about 350,000 internally displaced people had returned to their districts – 60% of which returned Baghdad – although most of the returnees were Arabs (Sunni and Shia), and therefore not considered part of a minority group. Reports from the International Organization for Migration (IOM)

3 Ibid.



have shown that only 52% of all internally displaced persons wish to return, with 20% wanting to re-settle elsewhere.⁴ According to figures from the Ministry of Displacement and Migration (MODM) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), the number of displaced people within Iraq is about 2.8 million people, mostly Arabs (Shia and Sunni), and with nearly 250,000 people from Chaldean, Assyrian, Armenian, Sabeen Mandaean, Faili Kurd, Yazidi and Shabak minority groups.⁵

The lack of effective Government action to address the problems of the country's minorities has prompted civil society organizations to push for greater action against discrimination and attacks on minorities. The CIPC, for example, has organized Parliamentary roundtables on minority concerns, illustrating how civil society can and should participate in issues of national importance. The CIPC discussions highlighted the need to increase minority participation in the political sphere, and to eliminate racist educational policies and other forms of misinformation which contribute to ignorance-based discrimination. They also underlined the fact that since 2003 many minorities have left Iraq, and it is expected that more will continue to leave, owing to the lack of security; lack of constitutional protection or non-discrimination laws; weak representation in Government and Parliament; as well as the domi-

4 L. Mumtaz, *Still Targeted: Continued Persecution of Iraq's Minorities*, Minority Rights Group International, p.19.

5 IDMC, *Little new displacement but in the region of 2.8 million Iraqis remain internally displaced*, (4 March 2010), <www.internal-displacement.org/8025708F004BE3B1/(httpInfoFiles)/B0DB25F7122F4390C12576DC003B49AF/\$file/Iraq_Overview_Mar10.pdf>.

nance of an exclusionary culture in a society based on discrimination and ignorance.

Mass protests and Government repression

Iraq was not isolated from the mass demonstrations known as the “Arab Spring” in 2011. The slow pace of formation of the Iraqi Government (over 7 months of arduous negotiations), the deterioration in public service delivery, in addition to increasing levels of poverty and unemployment, all fuelled the first sparks of protest which started in poor and neglected neighbourhoods north of Baghdad. Throughout the month of February demonstrations were held in the cities of Kut, Diwanayah, Basra and Anbar, and in a number of others. In the oil-rich city of Basra, in southern Iraq, voices began to be heard demanding an end to corruption, with demonstrators carrying yellow cards (like those used by football referees) to express public dissatisfaction with the Governor and some local officials. Similar resentment was also rising in the rest of the provinces due to a growing lack of services. Criticism regarding restrictions on public freedoms, corruption, and the high salaries of parliamentarians turned into popular slogans and protest banners. Most importantly, the demonstrations brought an end to the law requiring a legal license to protest, which had thwarted hundreds of demonstrations in previous years.

As a result of the vast popular protests, Prime Minister Nuri Al-Maliki issued a directive in February 2011 to cut his monthly salary by half. This represented a recognition of the unreasonable gap between the salaries of senior officials and those of junior staff and the average Iraqi, and inspired proposals to review the salaries of all senior Government officials and reduce the budget for all three Presidencies – of the Republic, the Council of Ministers, and the Parliament – which add up to a large proportion of the State budget. As in other Arab countries, major demonstrations were called for Friday, 25 February, 24 hours before which the Prime Minister requested a meeting with civil society leaders. The CIPC gave the Prime Minister a strong message, demanding the elimination of poverty, unemployment and government corruption.⁶ In light of the looming protests, the Government put security services on full alert and, in addition to using force to disperse the demonstrations, arrested and tortured four journalists involved in the protests.⁷

The February uprisings launched an unprecedented movement to establish civil society

6 Interview with Hanaa Edgar, Secretary of IAA, (February 25 2011).

7 Interview with four journalists who were arrested (Baghdad: March 4 2011)

WAR AND THE ENVIRONMENT

After the First Gulf War, the Saddam Hussein administration started a series of works aimed to dry the Mesopotamian Marshes region, a wetland zone located in the southern areas of the territory which provided habitat for peoples such as the Marsh Arabs and also for a great diversity of wildlife. The draining of the marshes, in fact, started in the 1950s and continued to the 1970s to reclaim land for agriculture and oil exploration, but, during Hussein’s presidency, the works were expanded and accelerated, mostly as retaliation for the 1991 failed Shia uprising, since the dissidents were thought to be looking for shelter in the marsh region. The drying operations consisted mainly in the opening of three canals (the Third River, the Glory Canal and the Prosperity Canal, as they were called) built as a manner of redirecting waters from the Tigris to the Euphrates. By the late nineties, the Central Marshes became completely desiccated; in 2000 the United Nations Environment Programme estimated that 90% of the marshlands had disappeared.¹

The environmental damage was regarded as catastrophic.² Bird migration areas were lost, and several plants and animals species endemic to the region became extinct. The salinity of the soil increased, resulting in loss of dairy production, fishing and rice cultivation, and over 19,000 km² of the region became a desert. The majority of the Marsh Arabs were displaced to nearby areas, and an estimated 80,000 to 120,000 fled to refugee camps in Iran.³ After the 2003 US invasion, embankments and drainage works were broken open, and the marshes began to re-flood, but the recovery – and the corresponding regrowth of natural marsh vegetation – was slow, and the most severely damaged sections of the marshes have yet to show any signs of regeneration.⁴

But the loss of the marsh ecosystem was not the only negative environmental consequence after two decades of war. For instance, the country presently faces severe soil, water and air pollution from toxic substances released by the destruction of military hardware and factories, according to the UNEP.⁵ (Also, the Tigris and the Euphrates – which provide most of the irrigation and drinking water) are now essentially open sewers plagued by industrial and hospital waste, fertilizer run-off from farming, and oil spills. The restoration of water and sanitation systems, the cleaning up of main pollution hotspots and waste sites, as well as the prevention of further soil erosion and desertification, are some of the most pressing environmental concerns in Iraq.⁶

1 Wikipedia, *Draining of the Mesopotamian Marshes*, <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Draining_of_the_Mesopotamian_Marshes>; *Mesopotamian Marshes*, <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mesopotamian_Marshes>; and *Glory Canal*, <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glory_Canal>.

2 *The Mesopotamian Marshes of Southern Iraq*, (March 2003), <www.public.iastate.edu/~mariposa/marshes.htm>.

3 Wikipedia, *Draining of the Mesopotamian Marshes*, <en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Draining_of_the_Mesopotamian_Marshes>.

4 See: <ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=37031>.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

organizations and networks to monitor Government activities and human rights situations, and established the important role that Iraqi citizens can play in securing democratic national development.

Recommendations

To realize the vision of the February uprisings, several things need to be done:

- Pave the way for women participation in governance and implement adequate measures to eliminate family and societal gender-based violence.
- Address impunity in financial corruption and forgery, prosecute perpetrators of terrorism and organized crime, and investigate cases of criminals who repeatedly escape prison.
- Implement a national strategy for poverty alleviation. The overwhelming majority of citizens suffer from poverty and unemployment, and the worsening economic, social and services crises, especially in water supplies, food, energy, housing, low levels of health care.
- Accelerate legislation related to political, civic, economic and cultural issues, particularly regulating political parties, elections, oil and gas. ■