

Examining the Significance of Civil Society in Augmenting and Empowering Youth within the Context of Iraqi Kurdistan

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ABSTRACT

This scholarly abstract delves into the pivotal role of civil society organisations in the advancement and empowerment of youth in the region of Iraqi Kurdistan. In the dynamic socio-political landscape of the Kurdistan region, civil society entities have emerged as vital agents of change and progress. This article explores the multifaceted strategies and initiatives undertaken by these organisations to address the diverse needs and aspirations of Kurdish youth. It delves into the challenges faced and the innovative approaches employed, shedding light on the transformational potential that civil society can offer in nurturing a more resilient and empowered youth population. This study uses historical, descriptive, and case studies to establish that youth CSOs play a vital role in the democratisation and political process in Iraqi Kurdistan. Given the serious dependence of youth CSOs on freedom for their operations, by scrutinising the intricate interplay between civil society and youth development, this article aims to provide valuable insights for policymakers, scholars, and practitioners invested in the sustainable growth and prosperity of youth in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Keywords: Civil society, Youth, Empowering, Iraqi Kurdistan.

INTRODUCTION

In the life of any society and country, the youth are the dynamic of progress and continuous development of the areas of development of that country and society. From this perspective, the more support and encouragement given to youth to achieve their goals and abilities by the political authorities and the private sector, the more progress is guaranteed. In Iraqi Kurdistan, young people aged 15–29 make up 28% of the Kurdistan Region's population, suggesting that the youth population dynamic here will remain alive for at least the next two decades. The status of youth in Iraqi Kurdistan (IK) has seen several upheavals throughout history. Kurdish youth have consistently joined the fight for freedom with unrelenting courage, enthusiasm, and audacity. Thus, the youth are being represented in all spheres of Kurdish life. In this regard, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), until 2014, has provided good opportunities for youth participation in the political process in IK. Youth now have an advantageous position in politics at the government and party levels, hence most political parties have youth in leadership positions. However, this does not mean that the youth are not facing challenges in the development of their abilities to participate in the political process presently and in the past. Beyond the formal dimension of equality manifest in government institutions and political parties, unemployment has become the biggest threat to the lives of Kurdish youth, necessitating the migration of thousands to Europe for a better life since 2014.

Despite the injustice, factors such as unequal opportunities for youth, financial crises, and legal, political, and social obstacles, can prevent youth from participating more effectively and broadly in the political process in IK. Based on our survey of literature, there is a paucity of academic analysis that reflects the emerging trends of youth's involvement in the political process and socio-economic development in IK. Addressing this gap would go a long way in providing insight into the significance of youth participation and the role it plays in the political process in the Kurdish community.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To understand and examine the significance of civil society in augmenting and empowering youth within the context of Iraqi Kurdistan in the de facto state of IK, this study's critical analysis is based on the theoretical framework of the "public sphere," as expounded by the philosopher Jürgen Habermas (1962) in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, also known as "bourgeois theory." Habermas wrote in the context of the major political and social changes that Europe witnessed from the 17th–19th centuries in the UK, France, and Germany, during the development of capitalism in Western Europe. The theory emphasized the role of civil society and how it spread out throughout the world.

Habermas defined the public sphere as a region that divides the state and society, which stems from the private sphere. It is important to differentiate between the public and private spheres: the public consists of a group of individuals, while the private encompasses the family, individuals, and civil society in the broadest sense (referring to the sphere of social work and action). The public sphere of public authority refers to the state and government, as well as the forum in which social life and public opinion take shape. There are several vital aspects of the public sphere, one of which is that it is fundamentally open to all citizens and is shaped by every conversation in which individuals come together to form an audience. In

it, the citizen plays the role of a private person who does not act on behalf of a company or a private interest, but a person who deals with matters of public interest to form a public sphere (Habermas, 1991, p. 398).

The theoretical principles of the public sphere consist of an open discussion of all issues of public interest, in which rhetorical arguments are used to ascertain the public interest and common good. Also, the public sphere includes freedom of speech and assembly, a free press, and the right to participate in political debate and decision-making (Habermas, 1991, p. 398). Although the public sphere in IK has developed well in all areas of life and has a very sophisticated and mature democratic process compared to other parts of Iraq, it has faced some problems since 2014 which pose a serious threat to political participation, cultural tolerance, human rights, and the rule of law. These problems are particularly concerning the IK, where there are enormous potentials for political uncertainty and little progress towards democratic governance compared to mature democracies.

The public sphere of Habermas (1962) outlines an idealised forum for interaction on matters of public concern. The theory works on several levels. Firstly, it provides a model of human interaction. Secondly, it posits certain views regarding ideal, or desirable, forms of interaction. These arise from the belief in the beneficial effects of the Enlightenment, including the “ability to use one’s understanding without the guidance of another,” as described in his discussion of the theory revolving around the concept of the public sphere in Habermas and its suitability for youth’s empowerment and leadership inquiries in IK contexts. Given the nature of authority and leadership in IK, most of the communication with the public sphere occurs in the controlled political sphere. As the government is entrenched in a local public sphere, the relative power at various levels can lead to a diverse structuration of state power at the micro-level. Youth may band together to express their views at the micro-level. However, these views can be institutionalised and expanded.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Some authors have narrated the historical role of youth in Kurdish political life (Auni, 2021; Medeni, 2017; Taheri, 2007; Ari, 2019). During the early decades of the 20th century, youth in Iraqi Kurdistan started to engage in activities. Some authors (Auni, 2021), remarked on the notably active role of youth in Kurdish society Taheri (2007), reported that the first association was the Kurdistan Independence Society, established in July 1922, led by the former Ottoman officer and writer Mustafa Pasha Yamilka. Kurdish youth in Iraq were highly active in the fight for Kurdish rights, but before 1991, this did not extend to any form of gender-specific agenda; instead, they were primarily concerned with securing national rights for the Kurdish people in general and not with the particular issues regarding the youth.

Al-Madani (1997, p. 68) argued that the majority of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) in Kurdistan essentially belong to political parties and work according to their directions and agendas, both as political opposition as well as of the ruling parties. Youth organisations and student associations are particularly cultivated by political factions as recruiting grounds for the continuance of political factions, and their budgets are provided by political parties with a view to ideological control (Medeni, 2017). However, most studies of youth in Kurdistan have not adapted a particular theoretical approach and have merely narrated historical development and major milestones. Ari’s (2019) book *The Fifth Power* in the

Kurdistan Region, generally discusses the emergence of civil society organisations in the Kurdistan Region and explains the preconditions of civil society and the obstacles facing civil society in the Kurdistan Region.

In the 1920s, youth mobilised against political oppression, and later they joined the struggle as members of the underground movement, protectors, and material supporters for fighters. Like combatants in the youth's Peshmerga units, their remarkable contributions displayed leadership roles in the resistance. Despite their significant participation in the political process in IK, youth continue to face challenges including political obstacles, unemployment, economic crisis, and corruption, which have not been explored in appropriate depth. Furthermore, the political situation of youth under the shadow of the KRG and their political participation per se have not been analysed, thus this study contributes to identifying unemployment, political as well as cultural barriers (tribal and religious), and socio-economic challenges to the development of youth's political movements.

This study examines the significance of civil society in augmenting and empowering youth within the context of Iraqi Kurdistan. With the increase in the number of youth civil society organisations, the problems of young people have decreased, although their abilities have not been sufficiently developed.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study employed a qualitative research method to analyse complex interpretations of in-depth data. Convenience sampling was used to interview 17 CSOs. The research focuses on the significance of civil society in augmenting and empowering youth within the context of Iraqi Kurdistan. This study employs both primary and secondary data sources. The primary data was the face-to-face interviews with the executives and members of major CSOs. The interviews were transcribed and translated into English. Unstructured questions were used during the interviews to gather common opinions and explore the research subjects' viewpoints, attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of the significance of civil society in augmenting and empowering youth within the context of Iraqi Kurdistan. The data immersion process helped identify themes during subsequent analysis. Secondary sources included books, articles, and online newspapers published in local and foreign magazines and newspapers on the impact of CSOs on political decisions.

The study also utilised resources from the Non-Governmental Organisations (NGO) Department of the KRG as part of the primary source collection. Data was collected and organised before beginning the final thematic analysis, using standard procedures to categorise and analyse statements. Thematic analysis was conducted using inductive analysis, which allowed for the identification of themes and sub-themes based on their order, co-occurrence, and other meaning-based relations. The study's findings contribute to understanding the significance of civil society in augmenting and empowering youth within the context of Iraqi Kurdistan.

CIVIL SOCIETY IN IRAQI KURDISTAN: CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE

The origins of modern civil society in 18th-century Europe, and Western political theory concerning it, as well as national political discourses since the late 20th century,

naturally associated civil society development with democracy and socio-economic progress. Smith (1981), Gramsci (1971), and the World Economic Forum (WEF, 2013) operationally defined civil society as a vital arena wherein politics and self-organising groups, movements, and individuals can share opinions. The creation of associations and solidarities shares values, ideas, and interests. This broad understanding includes several types of political and social group gatherings, NGOs, and labour unions.

Civil society is an independent and broadly organised area that, along with organising the lives of citizens and limiting government interference, is also a strong link between the state and citizens. Civil society is a space beyond the realm of the family, the state, the family, business, trade, and the buying and selling of goods (Hoshyar,2022).

If we consider the family as the area of private life, we can consider the government as the area of law enforcement and authority, and the market sector as the area of the economy. Between these areas, there remains a gap, called the civil area, the public area, or civil society. In short, the work of civil society organisations can be summarised as follows:

1. Pooling interests.
2. Resolving societal conflicts and disputes.
3. Enabling economic growth.
4. Developing creative cultural energies.
5. Graduating new leaders in society.
6. Promoting a democratic culture.
7. Increasing tolerance and peace awareness.
8. Promoting freedom of speech and the press.
9. Raising concern to create a public sphere.
10. Helping the government make decisions on policies and implementation.
11. Working to ensure human rights protection.

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The main theme of civil society organisations and institutions in all democratic countries is to serve the citizens, not their pockets and interests. Citizens and public interests have always been the focus of their activities, paying attention, defending their fundamental and public rights, and achieving the true concept of citizenship rights, far from raising big and shiny slogans, illusions, and politics (Shorsh, 2019). Civil society organisations are all organisations that are organised and authorised to work in the Kurdistan Region according to the law, to promote and raise awareness in the areas of monitoring, activities, development, and capacity building of the young people (Chia,2012). Some CSOs in the KRG are continually active through their projects in collaboration with international organisations, such as the Public Aid Organisation (PAO), which has also played a key role in opening educational courses for refugees as well as in the field of legal education in Erbil Province (Kursk Camp).

In the same way, the Civilization Development Organisation (CDO) has played a key role in opening job training courses for state employees and providing jobs for young people in Sulaymaniyah city. The People's Development Organisation (PDO) has played a key role in protecting women's rights and empowering them in Sulaymaniyah City (Chato, 2022).

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE REGION

Iraqi Kurdistan is in the northern and eastern parts of Iraq. It consists of the provinces of Erbil, Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk, Duhok, and Halabja. Most of its inhabitants are Kurds, with notable Turkmen and Christian minorities. It has been part of Iraq since the establishment of the new Iraqi state in 1921 and has always had a vibrant and diverse indigenous civil society (McDowall, 1996, p. 166). The Hashemite monarchy established in the British Protectorate of Iraq in the 1920s was the first modern Iraqi state, which saw the birth of Kurdish parties and associations. Tribal leaders, politicians, intellectuals, officers, students, and youth formed Kurdish parties, associations, and organisations. The first association was the Kurdistan Independence Society, established in July 1922, led by the former Ottoman officer and writer Mustafa Pasha Yamilka (Tahiri, 2007, 57).

The monarchy guaranteed the right to form CSOs (Halper, 2003). In this regard, the monarchy period was the beginning of the formation of CSOs, although it forbade the activity of some CSOs that it considered a threat to its power and Western (i.e., British) interests. From the beginning of the Republic in 1958 to 1990-1991 (the period of the liberation of IK from the Ba'athist regime), CSOs were generally subjected to harassment; their activities were in most cases forbidden, and officials were persecuted by the ruling authorities, particularly Kurdish separatists demanding national rights (political independence) (NCCI, 2011).

The Ba'athist regime systematically destroyed Iraqi civil society, and intellectuals and political activists were persecuted, arrested, tortured, executed, or expelled from the country. Several youth members of these societies were killed or detained by the regime because they supported Kurdish nationalism or opposed the regime (Omer, 2022). As Davis (2005) argued, for more than four decades (1958–2003), Iraqis had no freedom to establish CSOs independent of the state and the Ba'athist regime in Iraq. According to the NGO Coordination Committee for Iraq (NCCI) (2011), most CSOs before 1991 belonged to political parties.

DEFINING YOUTH: DEMOGRAPHICS AND SIGNIFICANCE

Although there is no comprehensive international definition of youth, the United Nations defines youth as all people between the ages of fifteen (15) and twenty-four (24), regardless of gender. There are other definitions, which include youth up to 29 years of age. Among the characteristics of this group is a strong human energy with a desire to express themselves and seek knowledge. Youth is also an important stage of life; this stage is known as the stage of building economic, political, and social personalities. It is the stage of planning for the future in the economic, social, and political environment in which we live Sarko, 2023).

According to the 2018 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) survey, people aged fifteen (15) and under make up about 37% of the population in the Kurdistan Region, while the same figure exceeds 40% in Iraq. In the Kurdistan Region, it is estimated that young people make up about 40% of the population (Zuber, 2020). Youth is internationally recognised as

being between the ages of fifteen (15) and twenty-five (25). Due to conflicts and wars greatly depriving young people of normal youth and development, the organisations in Iraq and the IK regulated youth to be recognised until the age of thirty-five (UNDP meeting in Erbil, 2011).

YOUTH ORGANIZATIONS IN IRAQI KURDISTAN: TYPES AND MOTIVATIONS

The establishment of youth organisations in Iraqi Kurdistan has a long history. The first youth organisation was the Kurdistan Scientific Association in 1926, whose goal was to liberate Kurdistan, develop education, and raise the level of scientific knowledge of the Kurdistan youth. It is noteworthy that these organisations represented the youth, and youth have formed the livewire of Iraqi Kurdish society since the beginning of the Iraqi Kurdish revolution led by the late Sheikh Mahmoud in the 1920s (Gardawani, 1999). They have been involved in all the struggles of the Kurdish people in Iraqi Kurdistan since the formation of the first cabinet of the Kurdistan Regional Government in 1992. This led to youth organisations becoming both political and civil.

According to al-Shamsi (1960), in 1937, a group of enlightened Kurdish youths formed the Brotherhood Association in Sulaymaniyah under the leadership of Sheikh Latif, the son of Sheikh Mahmoud al-Barzani, whose aim was to establish the independent state of Kurdistan. It is worth noting that the Kurdistan Independence Society published a newspaper known as Call of Kurdistan. Many artistic associations were also established at that time, which were implicitly political, but they could not continue their activities due to the political instability in IK. Important youth groups engaged in education including Kurdish students, as well as publish the magazine Youth Gifts (al-Shamsi, 1960).

In 1938, a group of young students who had completed their studies in Baghdad formed the Kurdish Freedom Organisation. As Gardawani (1999) pointed out, in 1937, students mainly youths made a significant contribution to the formation of the Dark Organisation, an educational and political association that advocated for Kurdish rights. Kurdish intellectuals, writers, and nationalists also formed the Hope Party in 1939, which played a significant role in establishing and reaching out to other organisations and the society at large (Farhad, 2021, p. 26). It should be noted that both male and female students mainly youth participated in establishing societies and organisations without discrimination. They played a key role in establishing the organisations that transcended the socio-economic strata of society. Since the basic goal of these organisations was the same goal as the demands of the Kurdish people, these organisations alongside political associations, (both popular and artistic), promoted the concept of national rights (self-determination). In another way, the situation and persecution of the Kurdish people and the division of their lands were a common sorrow for all classes of Kurdish society.

Types of the youth organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan

The youth organisations and all organisations are social and administrative units that aim to serve the youth, develop the abilities and talents of young people, and conduct activities that serve to develop the abilities of young people. It is worth mentioning that the history of the emergence of youth organisations goes back to European countries in the late eighteenth century.

Organisations operating in the youth sector can be divided into three main types:

- i. Youth student civil society organisations affiliated with ruling political parties:

Their interests are focused on political gain. These associations are representatives of their respective political parties, and they receive all or most of their funds from their political parties. These organisations, such as the Kurdistan Democratic Youth Union and the Kurdistan Youth Freedom Organisation, seek to respond to the challenges of young people by providing services and facilities to build their skills through free lectures, workshops, learning materials, school field trips, student halls, etc. However, as their goal is political, they are limited in their outreach. No matter how broad their reach is, they never reach the entire society. Their main purpose is not to serve the youth, but these organisations were created by political parties to serve their agenda.

- ii. Youth student civil society organisations affiliated with opposition political parties:

Such as the United Students and Youth Organisation, the Kurdistan Students Organisation, and the Saddam Youth Organisation, these organisations are not supported by the Kurdistan Regional Government but belong to the opposition parties and are supported by these parties.

- iii. Independent civil society organisations:

They are interested primarily in the youth development sector. such as CDO, PAO, PFO, and Ruwanga are registered as non-governmental organisations targeting only young people, and others are working in different fields targeting various sectors, including the youth. Within this spectrum, some NGOs are connected to certain parties or carry the ideologies of a certain political party. However, these NGOs are more independent. They are typically funded by international organizations. (Medeni,2022).

Motivations of youth organizations in Iraqi Kurdistan

Since the establishment of the Kurdish Scientific Association in 1926, the Kurdish youth have played a key role in dozens of organisations throughout the history of Iraq, seeking freedom of Iraqi Kurdistan, and racial, ethnic, and religious equality in Iraqi society, alongside other goals. The formation and development of CSOs in IK are linked to the Kurdish nation's liberation struggle that began under the monarchy in 1926 when the IK was forcibly annexed to Arab Iraq under the terms of the Lausanne Agreement (1923).

As the actual birth of civil society work was in 1991, this coincides with the actual birth of the KRI's young generation. Those who were born before 1991 have a memory of civil society as being humanitarian and relief-orientated. While those born after 1991 view civil society as the key player focusing on politics and national development. The younger generation therefore expects civil society to play a significant role in these processes. The older generation knew little about the meaning of citizenship; their rights were limited. Such a striking difference offered the younger generation a great opportunity to effectively foster the establishment of civil society organizations and to advocate for their rights and concerns as well as the concerns of society. However, most of the youth opted to wait for others such as the government, and international and local organizations to act on their behalf. The younger generation is forgetting that they are part of the challenges and hence they should be part of the solution as well (Medeni, 2017).

The speciality of any CSO does not axiomatically exclude it from broader political and social activities. However, the work of youth and women's organisations was mainly limited to professional and political matters. It is natural for CSOs to participate in political party activities, and we see that societies and organisations in IK reflected the historical needs of the Kurdish community to secure the legitimate rights of this stage of the Kurdish liberation movement to achieve their goals. According to Farhad (2021), the Kurdistan Youth Union was established on February 18, 1953, which assigned a major role for the women from its inception.

The KDP was established as the hegemonic force in the Kurdish movement by 1946 (Farouk-Slug Lett et al. 2001; Gunter, 1996), also supported the establishment of several CSOs in IK, including the Kurdistan Women's Union in 1952, the Kurdistan Students Union in 1953, and the Kurdistan Youth Union in 1953 (Farhad, 2021).

Al-Madani (1997, p. 68), argued that the majority of CSOs in Kurdistan essentially belong to political parties and work according to their directions and agendas, including in the service of the political opposition as well as of the governing parties. Youth organisations and student associations are particularly cultivated by political factions as recruiting grounds for the continuance of political factions, and their budgets are provided by political parties with a view to ideological control (Medeni, 2017).

Medeni (2017) also considered that civil society developed in IK during the 1990s, following liberation from the clutches of the Ba'athists, and the establishment of local government. Previously, civil society was limited to establishing unions and syndicates (e.g., for students, youth, and women), directly under the auspices and control of the Go. Moreover, Medeni (2017) charted the gradual growth and contributions of CSOs from 1996 to 2003. In addition, he focused on how most organisations in IK until the collapse of 2003, began to advocate rights for disadvantaged groups such as women, youth, and children.

Gharib (2021), who is a head of the Metro Centre for the Protection of Journalists' Rights, indicated that the CSOs have played a significant role in the development of the democratic process and the development of IK as a *de facto* state, and in developing a common policy to protect human rights and freedom of expression.

HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF CIVIL SOCIETY: A JOURNEY OF PROGRESS

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YOUTH IN IRAQI KURDISTAN: CHALLENGES AND ASPIRATIONS

Following the 2003 invasion, the KRG gained significant autonomy, and the door was opened for many international organisations to help develop Youth CSOs. Barzan,2022). Training, financial, and logistical assistance created a better environment, increasing the number of Youth CSOs operating in elections, human rights, charity, youth and women's affairs, capacity building, and the environment (Majied, 2021). However, even though the KRG enjoys a relatively more democratic political system, the operations of the CSOs are still hindered by elements peculiar to MENA political cultures and local social contexts. As such, Youth CSOs suffer challenges from various sources, such as political pressure and government influence, media criticism, legal limitations, financial restrictions, cultural and religious challenges, and internal corruption in IK. These challenges limit the scope of Youth CSOs, reducing their effects on the ground.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, according to the UN, young people aged 15-24, make up 28% of the Kurdistan Region's population, which is One (1) million 727 thousand 903 people. Thirty-five percent (35%) of the population of the Kurdistan Region is under the age of fifteen (15), which is two (2) million 159 thousand 879 people. This scene shows that the dynamics of the young population here will remain alive for at least the next two decades Rudaw, 2023). From an economic point of view, this means a new labour force and a new breath, provided that socio-economic policies are designed to allow them to grow in the future. If the opposite happens, the growth of the young population, which naturally demands the distribution of wealth, jobs and political participation, could also change the political and social situation. This is why it is important to understand the perspectives of young people on economic, social and political issues. This can change society, so to understand the nature of that change, we must first understand the youth. (Rudaw,2023).

Youth have their organizations that play a good role in raising awareness among youth about their rights and freedoms. However, some of these organizations are influenced by the agendas of secular and Islamic political parties. Some academics contend that Kurdish nationalism motivated youth to engage in political life without changing the patriarchal ties that already existed in Kurdish culture (Benihana, 2003; Mojab, 2004). Most Kurdish youth organizations are supported by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). At the state level, absolute equality for both young men and women is provided by the KRG, including free education in all educational institutions, including universities. In general, men and women have equal rights and responsibilities. Youth continue to play an essential role in the post-conflict and post-genocidal society of IK, they have also participated in the political and social life of Kurdish society in the public sphere. It should be noted in this regard that Kurdish youth political activities in IK were prohibited under the former Ba'athist regime, along with any form of Kurdish association and Kurdish culture in general, which were banned and repressed under the ethnic cleansing policies of the central government in Baghdad. However, since the establishment of the KRG in 1992, they have been given the freedom to work, which has led to their growth in political life, and increased participation in the political process in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Challenges and Obstacles

According to Gulpy (2021), youth have faced several challenges that hinder the development of youth abilities and their participation in the political process, due to budget cuts by the Iraqi government since 2014. Therefore, widespread corruption, injustice and lack of equal opportunities, coupled with unemployment, financial crisis and obstacles legal, political and social actions are taken against youth as it is described in what follows.

Unemployment

In the Kurdistan Region, because of some major crises and problems faced by the public sector, since 2014, there has been no employment in the sector, if there is little, more than (50) thousand boys and girls graduate from universities and colleges. The first at the level of each department is rarely employed. Also, due to the weakness of the private sector in the economy, it has not been possible to find suitable opportunities for young people. But we can say that some of those who graduate from universities get job opportunities in the private sector. In addition, other young people in the free sector have their small projects that there are no official statistics to mention. However, an in-depth analysis revealed that a large number of these projects are run by young people. The problems facing the education process, which unfortunately is weakening year after year, as well as the mental problems of today's youth, is another phenomenon of Kurdish society. Medical reports currently reveal that mental illness is a serious problem for the future of the region.

According to the data, the unemployment rate is more than 22% of the population. However, the rate varies from province to province, according to the Ministry of Planning the figures are not real and are much lower. All these problems, require the nationalists to seriously think about development plans and programs alongside appropriate job opportunities for the youth in general. Unfortunately, the Kurdistan Regional Government has not been able to make

proper use of the human potential of the youth, to put these hidden forces at the service of economic and social development of the region. Therefore, we notice that every year hundreds of young people after being disappointed in finding work in the region, take the road abroad in the hope of achieving a secure and peaceful life.

Economic crisis

From the beginning of the legalization of the work of civil society organizations in the Kurdistan Region to the implementation of the salary savings system, in 2014 all youth organizations they belonged to political parties and civil society organizations. Like the salaried employees of public institutions, the beginning of each month is a donation They received continuity from the Kurdistan Regional Government While the Kurdistan Regional Government through the Office of NGOs allocated an annual budget for them.

However, in Iraqi Kurdistan, youth organizations belonging to political parties received monthly financial assistance from political parties. In modern society, however, some civil society organizations, according to a certain system that includes taxes and shares of corporate profits and state revenues, directly by their governments are provided with financial assistance. On the other hand, they are implementing their projects with the support of international organizations. However, in the Kurdistan Region, most civil society organizations have not been able to move from the framework of “local work and coordination” to “international work and coordination” instead of 50 organizations. Civil society institutions of the fifth power that obtaining financial resources rely on "donation The Kurdistan Regional Government and political parties have not been able to plan properly to establish contacts and coordinate with the international donor organizations organized for support in various fields Other varieties work.

This economic independence of youth organizations and some of the civil society organizations that support youth has affected the practice of the main tasks of youth work, the most important of which are: a) Creating pressure on official institutions to achieve youth goals and development Recognize and discover their abilities and talents b) Formulating strategies for the process of organizing and social and political education of youth. c) Strengthening the relationship between the youth and the political authorities. d) Supportive role for the legislature in drafting advanced laws regarding the demands and attention of youth, the role of youth in monitoring the legislature in the non-implementation of laws.

Political Obstacle

Since the Kurdish political party belongs to the Eastern world and has not gone through the process of modernization and has not been able to practice the values provided by modern culture, its goals are different from those for which the Western political party was originally established.

Due to the oppression and unwillingness of successive Iraqi governments to recognize Kurdish rights, the Kurds were forced to resort to armed revolution and the use of force and violence. This hurts the division and politicization of Kurdish society. (Arian Rashid. 2018)

The basis of the development and advancement of all political parties in Kurdistan has been the youth, and to further develop the parties, all of them have created mass organizations for the youth. This division of youth by political parties is a negative factor for the development and freedom of youth organizations, although several civil society organizations have done good work for the youth such as Ruwanga and CDO. However, the youth organizations have not been able to achieve their independence and get rid of the control of political parties, and the political party intends to use the youth organizations for its purposes, not to achieve the goals of the youth. It is worth mentioning that after the civil war of the 1990s and the formation of two governments, Erbil and Sulaimani, known as the two-administration, one of the consequences was the fragmentation of society's associations and organizations. They were so involved in political conflicts that the work reached the level of establishing two unions of doctors, two unions of engineers, two unions of lawyers, and two unions of health professionals and engineering professionals (Najih, 2021). Personal communication [Personal interview].

In addition to this statehood, the founders of Komala, Ekiti and the trade unions had to have a strong political intimacy with the two main political parties in the Kurdistan Region. This work is completely incompatible with the main categories of work of civil bodies because civil bodies must not be subordinate in order not to be deprived of their independence. The dominance of the political parties in political power, which is considered the first condition and the first type of work of civil bodies when the civil bodies are under the domination of political power. For example, can it become a force of pressure on the imperfections of the institutions of political power? This problem has not been able to give full freedom to civil society organizations in the Kurdistan Region.

Many youth CSOs in IK are hierarchical in structure, reflecting the influence of political parties on the formation of these organisations, or attempts to retroactively co-opt CSOs into party alignments. Some organisations have been created for the special purpose of political parties to find jobs for their cadres and supporters, for the sake of power and the private interests of the presidents and staff of the organisations. In this regard, Hussam, (2022) argued that “unfortunately, some of the people working in social organisations are not experts in their field, are not academically mature, and cannot activate their organisations, which prevents them from influencing the political decisions made by political parties.”

Socially

Clinging to the wrong old traditions under the pretext of authenticity, lack of inclination towards democracy and its values that they see as anti-religious and anti-traditional has resulted in a closed society and created an environment in which the youth are not happy.

On the other hand, the financial crisis has caused many social problems, one of which is divorce the deterioration of young people's marriages and the lack of confidence in a better future.

The suffocating lack of community supervision is another factor that has hampered the development of young people's abilities. Traditionalism, intensive surveillance of society, which is reflected even in the exterior of their homes and interior decorations, people are not

happy in such a society and see it as a prison environment, not an environment to develop their abilities and talents.

In a hopeful, closed society, the individual is formed as a broken and weak individual, easily disappointed and rebellious, does not believe in the rule of law and his ability, and always looks outside himself for solutions and to ensure his demands. They live, believe in their ability, work tirelessly, and are productive (Yadgar Mahmoud, 2021).

Legal Restrictions

KRG law gives more powers to the executive than to the legislative branch. Parliament cannot, therefore, hold the government accountable. The head of the PCPM, Sarwar (2022), indicated that “The presidency of the current session of parliament is weak in monitoring the government and the accountability of the cabinet.” This weakness of Parliament has caused the role of law at times to be violated, which prevents the activities of Youth CSOs. KRG law says the governor must issue a permit before a demonstration can be held. When teachers in Duhok demonstrated in 2020 against a salary delay, the demonstration’s organiser was sentenced to one year in prison for an unauthorised demonstration, violating the right to freedom of expression (Momtaz, 2021).

Akko (2022), who is a head of the legal sector in the office of NGOs, argued that the KRG NGO Law No. 1 of 2011 improved and simplified the registration and funding processes of CSOs. Nevertheless, the independence of Youth CSOs is sometimes denied on legal grounds. The law improved and simplified the registration and funding processes of CSOs, but the independence and activity of Youth CSOs are sometimes denied on legal grounds. Concerning this point, Hulshof (2022), responsible for the project and legal sectors in the Dabin organisation, argued that many independent activists were punished under Iraqi Penal Code No. 111 of 1969 or Law No. 2, Article 6, on the grounds of illegal use of communication devices in 2008.

Migration

Migration is one of the ways that young people can provide a better life for themselves and their families. The oppression of the Kurdish people during Saddam Hussein's rule, the UN sanctions against Iraq, war and poverty have been the reasons for the migration of young people from South Kurdistan abroad in recent decades. After 2005 and the recovery of the Kurdistan Region, migration decreased significantly, but in 2014, with the emergence of the threat of ISIS and cuts in the Kurdistan Region's budget by Baghdad, young people began to leave the country again (Sarbaz,2020).

Migration is one of the biggest problems facing Kurdish society in this regard unofficial figures from local media estimate that 27,000 people, mostly young people, will cross into Europe in 2020, which should be worrying for a relatively small population like Iraqi Kurdistan because this has been going on for many years and is increasing. The migration of large numbers of young people based on personal embarrassment and mostly to Western European countries has significant consequences for both the country of origin and the country of residence. The situation in Iraqi Kurdistan is disappointing - corruption, youth

unemployment, inequality and political instability appear to be the main reasons behind youth migration in the region (Ali, 2021).

Innovative approaches and collaborations

The participation of youth organizations in the demonstrations and struggles of nations has played a significant role and have been able to convey their voices to the authorities, local communities and the world and make profound changes. In the Kurdistan Region, youth organizations have played a role in protests and demonstrations, but due to the political situation in the region and attempts to suppress such youth activities by the authorities, to some extent has not had an impact on political change and development. In Iraq, unemployment, lack of services, injustice and corruption have reached a high level, so the rate of unemployment and corruption is increasing day by day, which has become a factor of dissatisfaction and frustration for most youth and citizens. In this regard, youth organizations can play an important role in positive change in all areas of life and can together with civil society organizations put pressure on the government through social media, demonstrations and presenting good projects for political, economic and social reforms. Because the opposition concedes to the government, the lack of expertise of the youth in organizational work and the lack of experience of civil society organizations on youth issues, the resistance of the youth has weakened.

On the other hand, the Iraqi government has used several methods to mislead the youth such as spreading despair, weakening the will of the youth and lack of sense of responsibility through the media, as well as weakening and defaming civil society organizations and the injustice, lack of services and corruption that exists. This is because the education system is controlled by the authorities in a way that serves its agendas. However, this problem can be solved by civil society organizations, teachers, intellectuals and elites in society and creating a youth group that believes in their abilities and can build a bright future for themselves and their nation. Changing and developing society and fighting corruption and injustice is not an easy task and it is an ongoing process that takes a long time. (Novin, 2020).

INITIATIVES AND STRATEGIES BY CIVIL SOCIETY: EMPOWERING KURDISH YOUTH

According to Medeni (2017), international organizations such as UNDP, and Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) are one of the largest supporters of civil society in Iraq and Iraqi Kurdistan and have created various programs for local NGOs. The general trend of the post-2003 phase was to develop youth capacities to make them active segments of society. However, a lack of analysis of the situation on the ground and an unclear vision of how best to support the democratic development of Iraq in the post-2003 deteriorating security situation were the main reasons why many activities failed to address the problems adequately.

Moreover, the international organisations that were present were looking for grants from other larger organizations or funding bodies, which is why these projects were working on the surface of the issues without diving deeper into the issues.

The programs and projects of the International Organizations for Youth CSOs focused on the following aspects:

- i. Raising Awareness Programs: Various issues related to democratic governing, including electoral education and civic participation, and rather specific issues related to the youth, such as the problem of unemployment and political engagement of the youth.
- ii. Empowerment and Capacity Building Programs: Focused on how to transform information into action and how to motivate young people to act based on what they learned. These programs further included election monitoring, training on how to facilitate dialogues of multiple topics, diverse leadership skills, and other community activities.
- iii. Peace Building Programs: Many activities were launched to involve young people in the process of peacebuilding to spread the spirit of tolerance mainly among children and youth.
- iv. Advocacy Campaigns: The campaigns focused on mobilizing the youth to advocate for youth concerns on multiple levels from the local and regional communities to the countrywide level.
- v. Communication with Decision-Makers: These are specific programs which have gained more attention recently. They are created to emphasize the young people in decision-making at different levels and to establish communication between the youth and the decision-makers. The programs motivate young people to take the initiative to communicate with decision-makers convey their concerns and cooperate to find effective solutions.

It is worth mentioning that some CSOs such as PAO, PFO, KEDO, Ruwanga, and the Civilization Development Organisation (CDO), have strong ties with international organisations, and their sources of funding, are the international organisations (Rashad, 2021). These organisations have participated in assisting the refugees who have fled the war against terrorist groups and sought refuge in the KFR (Sangar, 2022) Since the liberation of the places occupied by terrorists in 2014. CSOs in IK 2016 have participated in working in these areas, such as gender equality, youth project cooperation, human rights protection, and environmental protection. Similarly, CSOs work in various fields around the world. Also, CSOs' key goals are a direct factor in establishing an institutionalised and democratic system in the country (Hiwa, 2021). International organisations such as the Joint Crisis Coordination Centre (JCC), Spark of the Netherlands, and the NPA have played a good role in changing the way Youth CSOs work by opening several courses in this field (Chato, 2022).

FUTURE PROSPECTS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The Iraqi Kurdish community is a young society, which means that the demographic growth is semi-high. Iraqi Kurdish youth in society are an influential force in all sectors of life, especially politics.

Youth have their organisations that play a good role in raising awareness among youth about their rights and freedoms. However, some of these organizations are influenced by the agendas of secular and Islamic political parties. Some academics contend that Kurdish nationalism motivated youth to engage in political life without changing the patriarchal ties that already

existed in Kurdish culture (Benihana, 2003; Mojab, 2004). Most Kurdish youth organisations are supported by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

At the state level, absolute equality for both young men and women is provided by the KRG, including free education in all educational institutions, including universities. In general, men and women have equal rights and responsibilities. Youth continue to play an essential role in the post-conflict and post-genocidal society of IK; they have also participated in the political and social life of Kurdish society in the public sphere. It should be noted in this regard that Kurdish youth's political activities in IK were prohibited under the former Ba'athist regime, along with any form of Kurdish association and Kurdish culture in general, which were banned and repressed under the ethnic cleansing policies of the central government in Baghdad. However, since the establishment of the KRG in 1992, they have been given the freedom to work, which has led to their growth in political life and increased participation in the political process in IK.

The participation of youth in politics is a necessary task and depends on the development of countries and even the world. This is because young people have strong abilities and patience, they try to improve the future because they live in it. Nevertheless, Kurdish youth, after 2014, faced many obstacles. In this regard, unemployment is the biggest obstacle to developing the abilities, talents, and aspirations of young people in Iraqi Kurdistan.

To reduce unemployment, civil society organisations through the Kurdistan Regional Government should provide equal job opportunities for all genders so that Kurdish youth no longer leave Iraqi Kurdistan for political, economic, and social reasons. Furthermore, the neglecting and ignoring of the youth's opinions and rights will create a major crisis, making the country like a frozen stone that cannot move at all (Novin, 2020).

RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. Politically, political parties in general, must move beyond the token representation of youth in key roles, and youth leaders themselves must foster political acumen and skills with good knowledge and strong charisma to move from the margins of the equations into the centre of IK politics.

Also, interference by political parties in the internal affairs of civil society organisations should be eliminated, and these organisations should be given full freedom of work and activities, and equal opportunities should be provided for youth to develop their abilities and talents in civil society organisations.

- ii. It is widely thought that when young people participate in political, social, cultural, economic, and other fields, this effectively contributes to and realistically empowers them and advances the neighbourhood and the whole community or country. Therefore, it is especially important to formulate policies that give Kurdish youth in the IK and isolated areas access to empowerment possibilities. Inspiring and motivating young

people is crucial for them to achieve the goal of political participation and empowerment.

- iii. Financially and economically, unemployment is the biggest obstacle facing youth in Iraqi Kurdistan. To reduce unemployment, the KRG should provide equal employment opportunities for all genders, which will increase youth reliance on their administrative, political, and economic skills. Also, try to link the needs of society to the work and activities of the youth in such a way as to provide jobs for them.
- iv. The migration of Kurdish youth is increasing due to unemployment, politics, and neglect. To limit this migration, the Kurdistan Regional Government and the private sector should assist young people in establishing small projects so that they can become self-reliant. Opening vocational courses in a way that provides suitable job opportunities for young people.
- v. Research on youth problems by civil society organisations to find appropriate solutions in a way that serves to develop youth abilities, conduct seminars and research on youth problems, and enhance the educational and scientific capacity of youth.
- vi. Socially, it is observed that, for fear of social problems, only a tiny percentage of the young girls mentioned concerns about the effects of domestic violence at the IK youth organisation sessions. Domestic abuse is the most common kind of violence experienced by young girls worldwide. The causes and effects of domestic violence must thus be considered when discussing girls' and women's political engagement.
- vii. In terms of education, it is crucial for both male and female youth to increase their understanding and their skill sets through training and educational programmes. Training and education programmes should be established to address the needs and requirements of young girls, particularly those from disadvantaged segments of society (e.g., rural girls). To satisfy the needs of women who have little or no exposure to education, such programmes are necessary.
- viii. In terms of administration, at present, there are more youth wanting to fill the positions of authority that are rightfully theirs in the government. Therefore, it is crucial that all institutions, including the state, family, and society, cater to the requirements of youth. These include closing educational inequalities, redefining gender roles and the distribution of labour, and combating prejudiced views. Also, the creation of institutional and procedural frameworks ought to prioritise strategic female interests in the governing process to engage youth organisations' potential and capacities as democratic and equitable development venues for progress in IK.
- ix. Legally, although the Iraqi Kurdistan parliament has passed several good laws to support youth's participation in the political process, new laws should be enacted to protect and fulfil all youth's political, economic, and social demands.

Building a society where both genders of girls enjoy equal rights as boys requires a combination of progressive policies and laws and targeted public campaigns to change cultural mindsets.

CONCLUSION

Youth is the capital of the future. From this perspective, promoting, supporting and encouraging them to achieve their political and socio-economic goals is a guarantee for a brighter and more progressive future for the Kurdistan Region. However, in recent years, due to internal competition of political parties and their interference in the affairs of youth organizations to politicize them and serve the agenda of political parties have greatly reduced the freedom of youth organizations and their participation in activities and development. Also, due to economic problems, social injustice, inequality and neglect of youth, and lack of services, the phenomenon of youth migration due to unemployment and political, economic and social problems has increased.

However, some good work has been done, which if continued will be a good source for positive changes in the political, economic, social and educational fields and improve the abilities of young people in this regard. A recap of the pivotal role of civil society in enhancing and empowering youth in Iraqi Kurdistan reiteration of the importance of continued support and collaboration. The potential for a brighter future for Iraqi Kurdistan's youth. There has been a significant shift in the movement in IK that supports youth's emancipation. It is acknowledged that youth are increasingly becoming political forces on both the national and international levels. Political parties cannot disregard the interests and demands of youth, who make up 28% of the people of IK, youth's political engagement must be strengthened. Positive characteristics of youth participating in politics include their ability to improve not just their personal lives, but also the welfare of their families and communities.

Political, socioeconomic, social, education, and psychological environments are the components of the key factors considered while performing an analysis of the measuring framework are an introduction to the election system in IK; electoral data in IK; political engagement of youth; and the growth of youth organizations. It is crucial to focus on key factors to encourage youth empowerment chances. They should be encouraged to participate in various employment opportunities, including education and training programmes, resources to protect them from violence and other criminal activities, the provision of equal rights and opportunities, and the elimination of discrimination against them based on caste, creed, race, religion, ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background. IK youth organizations at all four levels of political, economic, social and education, have not developed into forums for discussion of important strategic problems. Youth can acceptably deal with these issues with the support of IK youth organizations and their support system. Promoting the chances for youth empowerment is essential when people and groups are focused on advancing their nation, and political engagement is at the vanguard of advancing youth empowerment.

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