Strength in Diversity

The current political landscape across the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) leaves little room for youth to express their needs. Most have grown up in a deeply dysfunctional state, without tangible prospects for the future. With over 60% of the KRI’s population under the age of 30, providing opportunities to engage in local and national politics is critical.

With the support of the donor, the US Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour, Search for Common Ground and Civil Development Organization established Youth Leadership Councils (YLCs) in the KRI, under the Promoting Inclusive Governance for Youth and Women project. Each council hosts Dialogue Sessions and Town Hall Meetings, inciting conversations between local authorities, community members, and youth.

Viyan, one of the 30 Halabja participants, believes her YLC is filling an important gap in her community. The engagement fostered by the YLC is a first for many Halabja youth, who find themselves disconnected from governance processes, unable to influence decision making, and lacking linkages to civic groups.

Viyan’s peers first selected her leadership, electing her as secretary. “People voted for those they truly believed in, with the skills suited to the position,” she explains. She adds that given the KRI’s clientelist and competitive political climate, open debates, healthy campaigns, and diverse leadership choices are new, important experiences for her group. Through the YLC, Viyan also feels empowered to show that strong women exist in her community: “Men often have opportunities to showcase their skills, and women do not. Our YLC’s mixed leadership can now set an example for our communities, proving that women have the leadership qualities and skills to contribute to progress.”

During the YLC Dialogue Sessions, Viyan also noticed greater civic engagement initiatives emerging from groups that were previously isolated from one another. As a Muslim woman, Viyan would not regularly have a chance to engage with members from the Kaka’i religious group; the YLC gives her this opportunity. “This is where the Halabja YLC’s real capacity lies,” Viyan comments, “in the fact that different religious and ethnic groups in my community opened their doors to communicate, share and try to understand each other.”

For Viyan, building inclusive governance structures goes beyond facilitating youth inclusion in decision making processes. She stresses that solidarity across historic ethnic, religious, and gender-based divides will allow Iraq’s younger generation to evolve into leaders. Viyan encourages youth in Halabja to “go outside of the YLC circle,” continue initiatives, and help generate change together.

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