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The Role of CSOs in The Democratisation Process in Iraqi Kurdistan

Peranan CSO dalam proses pendemokrasian di Kurdistan Iraq

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Abstract

This article examines the role of CSOs in the democratisation process in IK and shows that they have a strong and important position in the Kurdish community. Historically, all Iraqi governments have not believed in democracy, so CSOs have had no role to play. However, since the establishment of the Kurdistan Regional Government in 1992, it has, to some extent, followed the democratic system and provided the freedom to work for CSOs. Nevertheless, CSOs have faced many obstacles until they reached the strong position, they now have in participating in the democratisation process. This study uses historical, descriptive, and political analysis to establish that CSOs play a vital role in the democratisation process in Iraqi Kurdistan by using proposals and pressure. Given the serious dependence of CSOs on freedom for their operation, the study concluded that CSOs need to be free from political and financial independence to carry out their activities without hindrance and have more roles in the democratisation process.

Keywords: CSOs, Role, Iraqi Kurdistan (IK), Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), Democratisation Process.

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Abstrak

Artikel ini mengkaji peranan CSO dalam proses pendemokrasian di IK dan menunjukkan bahawa mereka mempunyai kedudukan yang kuat dan penting dalam masyarakat Kurdish. Dari segi sejarah, semua kerajaan Iraq tidak mempercayai demokrasi, jadi CSO tidak mempunyai peranan untuk dimainkan. Walau bagaimanapun, sejak penubuhan Kerajaan Wilayah Kurdistan pada tahun 1992, ia telah, sedikit sebanyak, mengikuti sistem demokrasi dan memberikan kebebasan untuk bekerja untuk CSO. Namun begitu, CSO telah menghadapi banyak halangan sehingga mereka mencapai kedudukan kukuh yang mereka miliki sekarang dalam menyertai proses pendemokrasian. Kajian ini menggunakan analisis sejarah, deskriptif dan politik untuk menetapkan bahawa CSO memainkan peranan penting dalam proses pendemokrasian di Kurdistan Iraq dengan menggunakan cadangan dan tekanan. Memandangkan pergantungan serius CSO terhadap kebebasan untuk operasi mereka, kajian itu merumuskan bahawa CSO perlu bebas daripada kebebasan politik dan kewangan untuk menjalankan aktiviti mereka tanpa halangan dan mempunyai lebih banyak peranan dalam proses pendemokrasian.

Kata kunci: CSO, Peranan, Kurdistan Iraq (IK), Kerajaan Wilayah Kurdistan (KRG), Proses Pendemokrasian.

Introduction

The term "civil society" refers to voluntary, non-profit organisations that work for the public interest, are bridges between the government and the people, and whose goal is reform and do not seek to seize power. Through their participation in raising people's awareness of their rights and duties to build a civil state based on democratic elections, commitment to freedom of expression, and protection of human rights, CSOs have an active role in promoting the democratic process in Iraqi Kurdistan (IK). This has led to the development of the democratic process, the protection of human rights and freedom of expression, providing equal opportunities for Kurdish citizens, the monitoring of the affairs of the government and local councils, and reducing corruption. They have also played a good role in helping the poor and refugees through international organizations. In IK, CSOs must abide by set regulations and have official approval to function. In this regard, CSOs such as PAO, Ruwanga Institute, Metro Center, and CDO among others

function according to the law of NGO No. 1 of 2011. There are community-based or civil society groups that serve as middlemen in interactions between the state and society. Civil society has been defined not only as the engine of the transition to democracy but also as equally crucial to the vitality of democracy. IK is accelerating its obligation to democracy through the direct contributions of the CSOs to the democratisation process. Additionally, the impacts of human rights organisations and other international bodies that bar non-democratic countries from participating in various events have progressed democratisation in IK. The role and contributions of civil society to the democratisation process in IK have gone through a very difficult period under different Iraqi governments. The civil society in IK was successful in achieving the aforementioned goal; however, the role was changed in 2003 to that of deepening democratic practices. How to construct democratic institutions that support stability, political peace, and economic growth is one of the main problems confronting the KRG. This issue is serious since IK has an extensive history of political strife and previous repressive regimes. The general aim of this research is to examine the role of CSOs in the democratisation process in IK from 1992–2022. The study used both primary and secondary sources of data collection. For primary data, the researcher interviewed ten CSOs leaders and five academics. This method was used to obtain first-hand information from participants who were purposively sampled for this study. Also, the study used secondary data such as library books, articles from academic journals, and internet sources.

Literature Review

Several academics have tried to characterise the democratisation process. In this regard, Anderson (2012) indicated that "democratization" alludes to important political shifts in the direction of democracy. In general, the transition to democracy may be from a dictatorship into a completely democratic system, from a dictatorship into a semi-democratic system, or from a semi-dictatorship into a democratic one.[1] Additionally, such a transition may be successful, as it was in the United Kingdom, or it may encounter opposition and undergo continual adjustment, as it did in Argentina. Any democratic process

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[1] Anderson, L. (Ed.) Transitions to democracy. Columbia University Press. 2012.

should aim to provide people with the right to vote and the freedom to express themselves in their political system. According to Sorensen (2010), "democratization" is the process of moving from an authoritarian to a democratic regime. Wealth, education, foreign involvement, and civil society are a few factors that impact democracy.[2] According to Sadiki (2014), a strong civil society is required to rally the populace behind democratic goals. However, in order to have a vibrant civil society, a democratic atmosphere that promotes freedom of speech must be established.[3] Regarding this point, after the KRG was established, a democratic atmosphere and freedom of speech were established; however, it is not without its shortcomings. Francis Fukuyama claims that liberal democracy is a kind of human rule in his landmark book, "The End of History and the Last Man."[4] In reaction to this assertion, Samuel Huntington authored "The Third Wave," outlining three waves of global democratic tendencies. While the second wave represented the establishment of an authoritarian government during the interwar era, the first wave delivered democracy to Northern America and Western Europe. Samuel claims that the third wave started in 1974 and is still running strong now. The democratisation of the former Soviet Union and Latin America serves as an illustration of the third wave.[5] According to Ginsburg (2012), governments are driven by a political power that results from both resources and legitimacy. In an open election, the public's voice gives democratic governments credibility, and a thriving economy is produced through effective taxation.[6] Civil society, history, and economic expansion are a few of the factors that kick off the democratisation process. The majority of people have put forward ideas including wealth, culture, social equality, foreign engagement, foreign business, education, and international collaboration, yet there is considerable debate regarding what makes democracy happen more rapidly or more slowly. Since authoritarianism is seldom practised in the wealthiest democracies, according to Grugel and Bishop (2013), a high

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[2] Sorensen, Georg. "Democracy and democratization." In Handbook of politics, pp. 441-458. Springer, New York, 2010.

[3] Sadiki, Larbi. *Routledge handbook of the Arab spring*. Taylor & Francis, 2014.

[4] Fukuyama, Francis. "Social capital, civil society and development." *Third world quarterly* 22, no. 1 2001, P. 7-20.

[5] Huntington, Samuel P. *The third wave: Democratization in the late twentieth century*. Vol. 4. The University of Oklahoma Press, 1993.

[6] Ginsburg, Tom, Zachary Elkins, and James Melton. "Do executive term limits cause constitutional crises?" Comparative constitutional design 2012, P. 350-379.

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is associated with democracy.[7] Suzan (2013) referred to the transition to a democratic system as the first step in the path of democracy and the first step in the community and authority's use of democratic practices, thus achieving the rule of the majority so that the people are the source of authorities and the enactment of laws without wasting the rights of minorities. The Kurdistan people began to activate their interaction and solidarity with the political process through their participation in all fields to build and achieve freedom, pluralism, and democracy among all components and national, religious, and intellectual trends. In the sense of achieving balance in the structure of a single society, without regard to any other consideration, this, in turn, strengthened the programmes of economic, social, cultural, and political development.[8]

Historical Background

Due to differences in culture and political, social, and religious circumstances, civil society in IK differs in terms of its evolution from that of the Western world. While in western society, civil society grew out of necessity due to the complexities of the governmental role in everyday affairs, in IK, civil society came about as a result of dissatisfaction with Iraqi state policies. Although there was some freedom of work for CSOs during the monarchy in Iraq, they participated in the democratisation process and had some freedom of opinion and press. For example, in IK, the Kurdistan Independence Association was established in 1922 by some intellectuals under the leadership of Mustafa Pasha Yamolki, who was a writer and former officer in the Ottoman Empire. Their main objectives were Kurdistan's independence and the spread of science and literacy.[9] However, the freedom enjoyed by CSOs during the monarchy was taken away during the republican period. Because the Kurdish nation was in the liberation phase and CSOs were a living part of society, they were mixed in with the civil struggle and the political struggle. The ethnic differences that successive Iraqi

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[7] Grugel, Jean, and Matthew Louis Bishop. Democratization: a critical introduction. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013.

[8] Suzan Amidi, "The Democratic Experience in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq" 08-28-2013. Retrieved from https://pukmedia.com/EN/details/?Jimare=18987.

[9] Tahiri, Hussein. *The structure of Kurdish society and the struggle for a Kurdish state.* Mazda Publishers, 2007.

governments have pursued against the Kurdish nation have led to the banning and repression of their activities. According to Azad (2022), During the Ba'ath regime, many civil society activists, including teachers, students, women, and artists, were arrested, and some were executed or martyred in demonstrations against the Ba'ath regime.[10] Many of the early civil society groups in the pre-uprising era re-emerged before the 1990s as democratic activists. Some of the most strident pro-democracy activists against continued Baathist rule are affiliated with both parties (KDP and PUK).[11] Thus, the contemporary pro-democracy movement in IK has its roots in the early pre-independence days. After the March 7, 1991, uprising, a door was opened for the freedom of civil society organizations, and they participated in the transition of the democratic process. However, this did not provide good freedom of organisation due to the outbreak of civil war by the two ruling parties in Kurdistan between 1994 and 1998. However, after the Washington peace agreement in 1998 between the PUK and KDP, freedom of action was once again available for the activity of CSOs. After the fall of the Ba'ath regime in 2003, CSOs have gained more freedom of work and activities, especially after the enactment of Law No. 1 of 2011, which established the Office of NGOs Local, but here they just sign up for work.[12] Nowadays, CSOs play a vital role in the democratisation process in IK by participating in electoral reform, advocating for human rights and freedom of expression, mobilising the media, monitoring elections, and promoting equality.

The Rise of CSOs Activity in IK

In the 1990s in IK, many new CSOs were established to defend citizens' rights and extend the frontiers of political rights and freedoms throughout the country. During this period also, IK experienced not only exponential growth in the area of human rights and social activism but also growth in the area of personal freedoms. These emerged to coordinate the struggle for civil liberties. The establishment of the office of NGOs by the KRG in 2011 created the quintessential pro-democracy

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[10] Azad Tofiq. Personal communication [Personal interview]. On January 25, 2022.
[11] Omer Nuradini. Personal communication [Personal interview]. On January 6, 2022.
[12] Hogr Chatto. Personal communication [Personal interview]. On January 7, 2022.

civil society organization that advocates processes and procedures, human rights, and addresses social ills throughout IK.[13] All CSOs and NGOs of the "constituent bodies" are under the office of NGOs for example, some of the CSOs include the Metro Center, PAO, KEDO, Ruwanga Institute, PAY Center, PFO, CDO, and Kurdistan Women Organizations. The KRG created an enabling environment for organisations to ensure human rights and the importance of preserving democracy's foundations.[14]

CSOs have played a significant role in the development of democracy and the formation of several independent institutions and bodies in the region. For example, the PAY Center has a platform (separation) and conferences every year, and their reports are sent to several ministries, including the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research, for reform, and others in IK that have influenced the political situation in the country, such as Metro for the Defense of Journalists' Rights and the Pay Center for Parliamentary Monitoring.[15] In fact, since 2013, there has been a positive change in the work of CSOs, including their influence on the development of the democratic process. They were able to lobby the parliament to pass several new laws, such as the demonstration law and the access to information law, and amendments to some laws, such as the law to reduce the proportion of political parties' budgets in the state budget (July 1, 2014), which was an important and positive development. The CSOs in Kurdistan have their own identity and image, and the reality of our society is reflected in its leaders. There has been an attempt to develop democracy in IK. And CSOs have a role to play in democracy.[16] CSOs working in the field of elections played a role in monitoring the elections. In terms of building the institutions of the Kurdistan Regional Government, they have proposed the establishment of several new offices, including the Anti-Corruption

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[13] Hoshyar Malo. Personal communication [Personal interview]. On February 2, 2022.

[14] National Endowment of Democracy, IK at the crossroads: A report on civil society. June 21, 2017. Retrieved from, https://www.ned.org/events/iraqi-kurdistan-at-the-crossroads-a-report-on-civil-society/

[15] Sarwar Abdulrahman. Personal communication [Personal interview]. On January 24, 2022.

[16] Sangar Yusif. Personal communication [Personal interview]. On January 6, 2022.

Commission, the Human Rights Commission, the Environment Commission, and the Office for Combating Violence against Women.[17]

Democracy and Democratisations

The term "democracy" literally signifies "the role of the people." Abraham Lincoln's definition of democracy is close to its literal meaning.[18] Democracy is defined as the "government of the people, by the people, and for the people" in the statement. This definition's straightforwardness does not do credit to the idea's fiercely divisive nature. Dahl's views, which argue that the policy-making process is centralised even though it may seem to be decentralised and include negotiation among relatively independent groups, give voice to the pluralist version.[19] Therefore, democracy can only be characterised as relative at best. Traditionally, democratisation studies within political science have been classified as comparative politics. It usually studies authoritarian regimes and their loss of power. [20]According to Ekman (2014), the underlying structures of society became the deciding factor in whether democracy was possible or not. Economic development and modernization, as well as education, urbanisation, and welfare, would inevitably lead to democratisation as new actors demanded access to and representation in the political system. The relationship between democratisation and structures can be seen as deterministic. Also, he said that democratisation is only possible under certain circumstances, such as an elevated level of socioeconomic development or a politically responsive political culture.[21] Rustow (1970) was one of the first to use the term. In practice, the term "transition" has come to mean a shift from a non-democratic to a democratic political regime. The term can also be applied in reverse, from democracy to non-democracy.[22] A transition is

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[17]Dlsoz Shafiq. Personal communication [Personal interview]. On February 6, 2022.

[18] Lincoln, Abraham. *Abraham Lincoln: Speeches and Writings Vol. 1 1832-1858 (LOA# 45)*. Vol. 1. Library of America, 1989.

[19] Dahl, Robert A. *On democracy*. Yale university press, 2020.

[20]Amnå, Erik, and Joakim Ekman. "Standby citizens: diverse faces of political passivity." European Political Science Review 6, no. 2, 2014. P. 261-281

[21] Ibid, pp.67-68

[22] Rustow, D. A. Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model, in Comparative Politics, Vol. 2, No. 3, April 1970, pp. 337-363.

not a specific transition; it is the general transition of a regime. [23] When the United States invaded Iraq in March 2003, the Middle East was a hot topic in international relations. Part of the invasion's goal was to bring democracy to the country. The invasion was dubbed "The Greater Middle East Initiative" by George W. Bush to promote economic development and collaboration among states, businesses, and civil society leaders. Bush's goal was to promote democracy in Iraq so that democracy could spread throughout the Middle East.[24] In this regard, we can see in IK that the establishment of government institutions was the first step toward democracy following 1991 and the first parliamentary election process on May 19, 1992. Lindberg and Sverrisson (2016) believed that democratic regimes are strongly associated with wealth, urbanisation, and other factors of economic development like democratisation.[25] Wealth, education, urbanisation, and industrialization are all aspects that are explained by the modernization hypothesis. This idea holds that cultures advance from traditional to modern societies, which have developed cities, a solid educational system, and industries—all of which are precursors to a democratic society. According to research, education enhances political tolerance, lowers inequality, and increases the likelihood that people will participate in political processes.[26] Manor (1999) claimed that the success of any democratic movement mostly rests on government commitment rather than power dynamics.[27] According to Ifeanacho and Nwagwu (2009), democracy refers to more than just a change in the form of governance. It extends beyond the overthrow of autocratic governments, the setting up of political parties, and the holding of elections. They believe that the institutionalisation of democratic values as part of a society's daily culture is a more accurate way to define democracy.[28] The contribution of CSOs to the democratisation process during the establishment of the de facto state of

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[23] Huntington, Samuel P. Op.cit.

[24] Girdner, Eddie J. "The Greater Middle East Initiative: Regime Change, Neoliberalism and US Global Hegemony." *The Turkish Yearbook* 36, 2005.p. 37-71.

[25]Lindberg, Staffan, and Árni Sverrisson, eds. social movements in development: The challenge of globalization and democratization. Springer, 2016.

[26] Parry, Geraint, and Michael Moran. "Democracy and democratization." Routledge, 2015. pp. 263-286.

[27]James Manor, *The Political Economy of Democratic Decentralization* (Washington DC: World Bank, 1999. P 5.

[28] Ifeanacho, Martin Ikechukwu. "Democratization and National Integration in Nigeria." *Bangladesh e-Journal of Sociology* 6.1,2009.

IK Within democratic political theory and democratisation studies, civil society is always identified as the necessary component for the establishment of democracy. As Browers (2006) highlights, according to much contemporary democratic theory, civil society forms the bedrock of good democratic governance. Policymakers also share this belief, and strategies of democracy promotion in the region are often built on the idea that strengthening civil society will lead to democratization.[29]

The Democratisation Process in IK

IK's political system is a parliamentary democracy with multi-party elections that is nominally subordinate to Iraq's federal parliamentary republic but has had extensive powers as an autonomous region since 2005, thanks to the Kurdish Regional Government established under the Iraqi constitution.[30] Its de facto state is based on its political and economic activities, which are increasingly in direct conflict with the Baghdad authorities. The Kurdish experience demonstrates that if given the opportunity, Iraqis can establish democracy. Iraqis today can look back on a past that provided political and cultural space for all the country's ethnic groups. In Iraq, historical memory can play a significant role in rebuilding civil society and establishing democracy. The leaders of IK have established assistance for the formation of associations and organizations, as well as various political forums such as social media and television channels. This entails bringing as many people as possible into the political debate and allowing society to have an impact on politics through associations and organisations. Regarding that point, Eric (2005) refers to the expansion of civil society under the KRG between 1991 and 2003. He points out that professional unions, labour unions, women's organisations, and employer organisations were established in an atmosphere of freedom and democracy.[31] A diverse ideological written media and a radio and television network flourished, giving Iraqi Kurds full cultural and political expression for the first time in their history. This freedom

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[29] Browers, Michaelle L. *Democracy and civil society in Arab political thought: Transcultural possibilities.* Syracuse University Press, 2006.

[30] Barzan Akaram. Personal communication [Personal interview]. On January 5, 2022.

[31] Davis, Eric. *Strategies for Promoting Democracy in Iraq.* Vol. 31. United States Institute of Peace, 2005.

included criticism of the Kurdish political leadership because of what many viewed as trends of absolute authoritarianism on their part. Also, new schools and hospitals were built, and the role of women was greatly enhanced in Kurdish society through educational opportunities, political and administrative participation, and other increased opportunities. The increase in the number of CSOs in the post-Saddam era is evidence of the amount of freedom the Kurds enjoyed after 1991. Two main factors influence the democratic process in IK: external factors and internal factors. External factors, such as the US occupation of Iraq and the arrival of international organisations in IK. While internal factors include the Washington agreement to reconcile both ruling parties, the overthrow of the Ba'athist regime, the enactment of a new Iraqi constitution, and the development of CSOs and independent media.[32] In contrast, some people believe that the system of government in the Kurdistan Region is not democratic; it is a family system of government, and there is no separation between the three powers: the executive, the legislative, and the judicial.[33]

Civil Society Relations with The KRG and Political Parties

Despite the shortcomings of the political system in IK, there is good development of CSOs under the KRG. For example, there are different views among CSOs about this point; for example, some of them indicate that there are two reasons for the growth of CSOs in IK, one is public awareness, and the other is cooperation with international organisations. While others believe that the CSOs are more crisis-ridden under the KRG. Previously, the organisations were reliant on the ruling political parties. New organisations have recently been founded on voluntarism, challenging political parties' monopoly over institutional engagement. Watts (2014), refers to how, despite pressure from the ruling parties and the organisations' limited resources, civil society has been able to maintain its independence through activities such as lectures, seminars, public debates, protests, and strikes. One of the successful organisations in IK was the "Kurdish Disabled Group," which gathered about a thousand activities to create a list of fifteen (15) issues related to welfare benefits and attempted to influence their authorities

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[32] Davis, Eric.Op.cit
[33] Hussam Barznji. Personal communication [Personal interview]. On January 16, 2022

by striking and demonstrating in front of the parliament.[34] The existence of CSOs and their participation in the process of democratic development in the Kurdistan Region is especially important. Because it will be an effective way to convey the character of democracy, freedom, and human rights in the Kurdistan Region and strengthen its position at home and abroad. For example, the World Economic Forum (2013), notes that civil society is important because it serves as a forum for government and self-organizing groups, movements, and individuals to exchange ideas.[35]

There is no law in IK prohibiting CSOs from participating in politics. Because this section of the article is about the relationship between the state and CSOs, it would be reasonable to investigate whether one can engage with the state without becoming embroiled in power struggles. Furthermore, it becomes clear that CSOs must engage in politics when we define power. It is clear that CSOs cannot stay out of politics. Politics exists, whether one defines it as "the capacity to change the probability of outcomes"[36] " politics as who gets what, when, and how"[37] or "the participation in decisions about severe sanctions, that is, about major rewards and deprivations," or "the ability to make things happen that would not have otherwise happened." Even when using David Easton's input-output model, civil society is the primary source of political system inputs such as demands and support. [38]In IK, CSOs cannot avoid politics, regardless of how one chooses to see the situation. The lack of clear restrictions in the NGOs No. 1 Act (2011) prohibiting NGOs from participating in political action seems to be an acceptance of this. However, the NGOs Act did not remove the previous Societies Ordinance, which imposed certain limitations on the political activities of civil society groups. However, the 2011 legislation makes it clear that CSOs must adhere to non-partisanship when it comes to party affiliation. As a result, it is considered a violation of a fundamental tenet of the CSO

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[34] Watts, Nicole F. "Democracy and self-determination in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq." Conflict, Democratization, and the Kurds in the Middle East. Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2014. P.141-168.

[35] Watts, Nicole F. Op.cit.

[36] World Economic Forum. The future role of civil society.2013, Retrieved fromhttps://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_FutureRoleCivilSociety_Report_2013.pdf.

[37] Dahl, Robert A. On democracy. Yale university press, 2020.

[38] Lasswell, Harold D. Politics: Who gets what, when, how. Pickle Partners Publishing, 2018.

legislation when a CSO engages in political campaigning. However, the issue is one interpretation. The political party's agenda and a CSO's agenda may coincide, be similar, or overlap. It would be simple for individuals who oppose CSOs to construe it as the CSO intentionally supporting the political party's objectives.[39]

The Participation of CSOs in The Democratisation Process

The participation of CSOs in the democratisation process CSOs have played a significant role in the development of democracy and the formation of several independent institutions and bodies in the region. Also, CSOs participated in protesting the civil war from 1994 to 1998; in this regard, they visited the politburo of political parties and made proposals to the parties to end the civil war. For example, the IK women's groups had an important role in the peacebuilding process in IK, and they established the Campaign for Democracy and Committee for the Defense of Human Rights to promote the restoration of civil life in IK. Following the civil war of 1994-1998, civil society organizations' primary focus shifted to preserving national unity, national reconciliation, rehabilitation, and reconstruction. With the increase in oil revenue, the emphasis shifted to infrastructure development and social services provision. From early 1991 to 1998, civil society groups played a role in adapting to the modern challenges of managing an ailing economy through structural adjustment programs, rationalization, nationalization, and, with the return of democracy, privatization, poverty alleviation, empowerment, and so on. Also, before the advent of the fourth republic, CSOs played a vital role in the enthronement and consolidation of democracy in IK. From the foregoing, it can be deduced that the role of civil society in the democratisation process in IK includes opposing authoritarian and undemocratic principles and values. establishing human rights legal standards and advancing the application of human rights norms through high-profile test cases, promoting legal and judicial reform through legislative advocacy, providing legal assistance to disadvantaged persons, communities, and groups, Supporting the government through the law, advancing the application

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[39] Easton, David. "The political system: An inquiry into the state of political science." Ethics 65.3,1955.

of international legal instruments on human rights in IK law, working with the government and their institutions to promote laws, policies, and practises that address the rights of poor and excluded communities, Voter education on electoral principles and guidelines, election observer and monitor training, and electoral reform advocacy include peacebuilding and conflict resolution, promoting access to justice, public interest litigation, budget tracking, constituency outreach, and research and documentation in thematic areas of democracy and governance, as well as the promotion and defence of the constitution and the rule of law. On the contrary, some CSOs believe that they have a weak influence on democracy and rebuilding institutions because the system of government in the Kurdistan Region is not democratic, but a family system of government, and there is no distinction between the three powers: executive, legislative, and judicial. Also, it is doubtful that civil society effectively contributes to the democratic process, whether at the group level as a social need or as an individual psychological need. If we look at the democracies of developed countries, we see that under civil society, groups like sociology, individualism, and psychology have become the real beneficiaries. Therefore, deficiencies in the establishment of civil society hinder the democratic process; providing democracy is a form of genuine democracy. In fact, since 2013, there has been a positive change in the work of CSOs, including their influence on the development of the democratic process. They were able to lobby the parliament to pass several new laws and amendments, such as the law to reduce the proportion of political parties' budgets in the state budget (July 1, 2014), which was an important and positive development.[40] The CSOs in Kurdistan have their own identity and image, and the reality of our society is reflected in its leaders. There has been an attempt to develop democracy in IK. And CSOs have a role to play in democracy. CSOs working in the field of elections played a role in monitoring the elections. In my opinion, CSOs have a positive role to play in the development of democracy. In IK, CSOs grew, and many new professional and public organisations were formed to protect the rights and demands of those organisations. There was also a great deal of freedom and freedom of the press, more emphasis on human rights, and equal opportunities for people to work. From this point of view, several good

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[40] Hassan, K. *Kurdistan's politicised society confronts a sultanic system*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 2015.

laws have been passed in the Kurdistan Parliament, such as the Law of Freedom of the Press, the Right to Get Information, the Law of Demonstration, the Law of the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and the Equality between Women and Men, and the increase in the participation of women in all offices of the KRG. On the other hand, the democratic process in the Kurdistan Region involves parliamentary elections and the formation of a new regional government. Elections are held the same way for municipal councils to change administrative officials and oversee the work of the administration. In addition, all political parties hold elections to renew their institutions. They hold their congress. For example, so far, the KDP has held 13 congresses and the PUK has held 4 congresses, and all CSOs and professional and democratic organisations hold their congresses. For instance, the Kurdistan Teachers Union, representing all parties, has held seven congresses so far.[41] According to Diamond (2008), internal and external pressures drive democratisation. However, it appears that despite the external factors, such as supporting and encouraging the US and European countries to assist in the democratisation process in IK, the internal factors have driven citizens and politicians toward democracy more than the external factors.[42]

Challenges of Civil Society Organizations in The Democratic Process in IK.

There are many challenges to the role of CSOs in promoting the democratic process, which include political culture, the KRG, the corruption of some CSOs, and inadequate funding. We will discuss the following:

1. Political culture

Political culture is a powerful and unifying concept of political science.[43] In this regard, we see that compatibility between political culture and the structure of the political system is necessary for the

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[41] Omer Nuradini, Op.cit.

[42] Diamond, L. The democratic rollback-the resurgence of the predatory state. *Foreign Affairs.* 2008. P 87, 36.

[43] Chilton, S. Defining political culture. *Western Political Quarterly*, *41*(3), 1988. P.419-445.

stability and functioning of the system. In this sense, political culture is a direct product of the dominant public order.[44]

The principle of political culture in the IK Region constructs political issues in the form of discourse, which is Kurdish political parties, each with its own political system.[45] The study of political culture needs to be viewed as a variable or mediating factor between the current public system and actual behaviour in everyday life. Tribalism, religion, and the governance system itself are the basis for the creation of political elites in IK, and such elites are the determinants of political culture in the region and play a key role in political and social life in Kurdish society, underpinning the heroic culture of charismatic Kurdish national leaders. The political culture dominated by tribes and religions hurts the participation of CSOs in the democratic process. because the tribes and religious leaders believe that the progress of CSOs risks their power. On the other hand, some CSOs operating as opposition parties have forgotten their role as bridges between the people and the government, and their job is to reform, not overthrow the government. This has led some other organisations and people to consider the opposition parties as mercenaries of their regional countries.

Most of Kurdish society accepts CSOs, but the idea of civil society in the European sense cannot be 100% accepted due to cultural and religious differences, for example, the principle of absolute individual freedom. This has caused these organisations to be opposed by Kurdish society and has hurt society and the development of the democratic process.

Moreover, political Islam is intertwined with ethnic identities in IK, which in turn shapes the political environment and the zone of operation for CSOs. Several political Islamist preachers and Salafis in IK believe that European ideas of gender equality should not be followed because they come from a different society than Islamic society, and equality between men and women is prohibited by Islamic law. For example, the list of the Justice Group in 2018 was against the amendment of the

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[44] Almond, G. A., & Verba, S. The civic culture. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1963.

[45] Zemnako A, Omid,Gh, Jamal, M. Discursive Formation of Political Culture in the Political Parties of Kurdistan Regional Government. 2020. Retrieved from,https://research.uok.ac.ir/~jmohammadi/en/ViewResearchEn.aspx?ResearcherID=102993

Personal Status Law regarding the marriage of second, third, and fourth wives.[46]

2. Government Patronage:

Hussam (2022), also opines that "the poor economic conditions of IK have also led to the emergence of a civil society that is state-inclined because members of such groups believe strongly that by showing loyalty to the incumbent government, material resources are "assured".[47] The relationship between CSOs and the state is largely characterised by suspicion and tension. For the most part, state officials have viewed CSOs as competitors for power, influence, and legitimacy in the public sphere rather than as development partners.[48]

It is worth mentioning that the KRG discriminates between CSOs and pays more and more attention to the proposals and demands of CSOs that work to achieve the agendas of both ruling parties (KDP and PUK).[49]

3. Corruption of Some CSOs

A small number of CSOs have been obligated to participate in the democratisation process in their work. Some CSOs, such as the Al-Amal Association, Al-Masala, Public Assistance Organization (PAO), and PFO, make decisions collectively, and they have been doing so to track the risk of corruption in their organizations.[50] These are neutral CSOs that receive assistance from international organizations. On the contrary, other CSOs have not widely implemented democratic mechanisms for electing new boards of directors,[51] and in most cases, the director of an organisation controls decision-making and other processes in their internal policies.[52]

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[46] Choli, F. "Salafism and Threat to Kurdistan Security", September 6, 2015. Retrieved from https://www.rudaw.net/sorani/opinion/06092015.

[47] Hussam Barznji. Op.cit.

[48] Dana Abdul   Personal communication [Personal interview]. On September 29, 2021.

[49] Ibid.

[50] Sangar Yusif.Op.cit.

[51] Barzan Jawhar. Personal communication [Personal interview]. On March 18, 2022

[52] United States Agency for International Development. (USAID). (Civil society organization sustainability index for the Middle East and North Africa 7th edition – November 2019.

The CSOs also rarely audit their financial accounts and do not have annual reports of income and expenditure unless funders of foreign donor organisations request them. It is worth mentioning that, according to both the internal rules of the KRG and federal NGOs, CSOs must submit annual financial reports to the Office of NGOs, but in 2018, only about 500 organisations submitted annual reports to the Office of NGOs in the KRG and the Federal Government.[53]

Divisions among the IK civil society along ethnic and regional lines have not helped its democratic advocacy. [54]This has led to disunity and disagreement among the IK CSOs in terms of decision-making and unity of purpose.[55] The internal contradictions within the membership make it difficult to agree on common positions during the period of engagement with the state. Such inherent divisiveness weakens efficiency and makes the associations vulnerable to penetration by government agents.

4. Inadequate Funding

According to Blnd (2022), the biggest obstacle to the growth, and independence of CSOs is their weak financial capability.[56] It is no longer doubtful that CSOs in IK have had considerable influence on democracy and electoral practices in IK.[57] One of the critical challenges of CSO in IK is the issue of insufficient funds. Most CSOs rely on government funding for their various operations, which is not a healthy development as it breeds the loyalty of these organisations to the government.[58] There is also the reduction of international organisations' donor funds, especially in the area of democracy, which will reduce the activities of civil society organizations.[59]

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[53] Ibid

[54] Sirwan Anwar. Personal communication [Personal interview]. On March 13, 2022

[55] Najih Mohammed Gulpi. Personal communication [Personal interview]. On December 23, 2021

[56] Blnd Dler. Personal communication [Personal interview]. On December 21, 2021.

[57] Farhang Rashad. Personal communication [Personal interview]. On October 2, 2021.

[58] Najih Gulpy.op.cit.

[59] Othman Gulpy. Personal communication [Personal interview]. On October 1, 2021.

The Future of CSOs

There are three scenarios for the future of the role of civil society organizations in the democratic process in IK as follows:

The future of civil society organizations depends on the activities of civil society organizations, the Kurdistan Regional Government, political parties, economic, social, and religious aspects of the Kurdish people. If there is unity among political parties, the role of civil society organizations in the democratic process will increase. In this scenario, the state views CSOs as its partners in development and other state operations, leading to the perception that CSOs help the state. These activities are often those that pertain to social welfare and advocacy. There are a lot of CSOs in IK for example Barzani charity and CDO that fit this description.

The second scenario is if KRG considers the CSOs' activities to be a danger to its interests. These activities would include instances when the CSOs were giving political opponents of those in power a forum, whether actual or hypothetical. Fortunately, the majority of NGOs and CSOs that work to promote democracy, and equality and uphold human rights in IK are seen by the government from that perspective.

If the government and political parties work against democracy and human rights, the role of civil society organizations in promoting democracy will decline.

The third scenario is the one in which the KRG feels that national security is at risk due to the activities of some CSOs in most cases, this would happen when it comes to the sources and levels of funding. When funding is from outside the country, and the involved amount is too large from the standpoint of the KRG, then questions start to be raised. Monitoring of the activities becomes closer and generally, the CSOs in question would face hurdles here and there whenever they came into contact with the KRG. Again, the most likely candidates in this basket are the quasi-political NGOs. These would include human rights NGOs and those which are specifically created to do political roles as is the case with election observation and monitoring.

Conclusion

CSOs play an important role in the advancement of democratic principles, such as raising awareness of personal rights and freedoms by participating in and monitoring the voting process for the Kurdistan Parliament, the Iraqi Parliament, and local councils, monitoring the agenda of the government and parliament, protesting against corruption, demanding equal rights opportunities, freedom of expression, social justice, and the rule of law. Meanwhile, several new laws have been passed and amended under pressure from civil society organizations, such as the law on demonstrations, the law on reviewing the composition of the High Council of the Election Commission, and many other laws. In addition, several new offices and bodies of the Kurdistan Regional Government were established on the proposal of civil society organizations, such as the Integrity Committee, the Human Rights Commission, and the Foundation for NGOs. Nevertheless, there are two different perspectives on the role of CSOs in the democratisation process. In this regard, some of the leaders of CSOs and academics believed that CSOs had played an active role in the development of the democratic process. On the contrary, others, believe that organisations played no role in the development of democracy in the Kurdistan Region, that Kurdish society was also politicized, that parties controlled all aspects of life and that democratic development in IK was extremely weak. In reality, the number of CSOs is increasing day by day, but there are differences in the level of influence they have on the democratisation process. It depends on the working methods, financial and human resources, and level of communication within and outside the organisation. For example, organisations with high human and financial capacity and strong levels of communication at the domestic and international levels have a profound influence on the democratic process and state-building. On the contrary, organisations with low human and financial capacity have a weak role in democratisation.

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