

Peace and Freedom Organization  
Peace building Program  
Youth department



# A Policy Paper on Strengthening the Role of Youth in Governing the Iraqi State

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## 1. Introduction

In October 2021, Iraq saw the fifth parliamentary elections since the invasion of the country in 2003. The elections were held prior to its due legal timing in response to demands of large youth-led anti-government protests that broke out in October 2019. Participants marched out in protest of endemic corruption, mismanagement, unemployment, poor services and investment, among others. Government reaction to the uprising was violent and bloody, causing death of hundreds and the disappearance of many. Against this backdrop and as a response to the demands of the protestors, the fifth parliamentary elections in the country were held a head of schedule. The polls witnessed record low turnout levels since the overthrow of the government in 2003. Compared to the previous one in 2018 where turnout levels stood at 44.5%, an all-time low on its own, this year's participation levels have by official accounts reached 41%, counting the number of registered voters, and 34% when counting the total number of those aged 18 and above.

Holding snap elections was a core demand for the protestors. This demand was met and not many people voted. It is true that the violent with which the protest movements were faced might have caused many to abstain from voting, but the fact that it was held in response to calls from the protests, should have pushed more people to vote. The clear question is what happened? This question becomes all the more pronounced in light of radical changes to the electoral law, namely the adoption of single non-transferable vote system and district-based constituencies.

In attempting to shed light on reasons behind not going to the ballots, Peace and Freedom Organization brought together numerous youth activists, many of whom were participants of the protests, from a wide range of provinces across Iraq to a two-day workshop. The workshop was dedicated to understanding barriers to participation in the recent votes among the youth, who were the leading force behind the October uprising. Workshop participants engaged in a structured discussion with the aim of identifying political, economic, social, and legal impediments that lead to the low turnout levels. They then also provided their visions for the way forward.

## 2. Challenges

Numerous challenges were raised during the structured discussions, leading to the identification of multiple points that stand in the way of active participation of the youth, ranging from the legal, to the political, to the social, to the economic, and to the social.

### 2.1 Legal barriers to youth participation

In October, 2019, thousands in Baghdad and southern provinces took to in demand for an overhaul of the entire political system, following years of dysfunctionality and incompetence that have roiled the country. The youth took a leading role in the protests which soon spread across the country and spurred reactions from the ruling parties, some of which showed no objection, being blamed for the state's ills. As the protests grew wider and dragged into the early months of 2020, so did counterforces aiming to stifle and dismantle the bulging crowd. A spree of targeted killings of the organizers and supporters of the demonstrations, a violent governmental crackdown on the protestors which reportedly left around 600 fatalities, and the onset of the global coronavirus pandemic forced to the protests to fizzle out. The protests, however, did yield positive outcomes. In addition to agreeing to hold early elections, a new electoral law incorporating the demands of the protests of formulating smaller electoral units and seats allocations, was also ratified 11 months after the issuance the first draft in the parliament. The results saw the allocations of 83 electoral units and the adoption of single non-transferable vote mechanism in the new electoral law. Yet, voter turnout remained on the decline compared to previous parliamentary votes. Out of a total of 2021 22,116,368 electorates, 9,629,601 of them actually voted, amounting to 44% though this percentage was disputed by an elections monitoring coalition of local networks and organization which put it at only 38%. Notwithstanding the disparities in the percentages, there are other barriers, mentioned below, that are still seen to be preventing active participation in the election process especially among the youth.

**2.1.1** The assigned minimum age of candidacy excludes many youths from the ability to nominate. The first draft law submitted to the parliament identified the age threshold at 25 years to appease the demonstrating youth, but the parliament brought it up to age 28.

The age threshold increase is thought to have caused frustration among youth not only because it leaves out many young people from the ability to partake in the legislature, but also it may also cause the youth to feel unrepresented.

**2.1.2** Minorities appear to be reluctant in actively participating in the elections because the new electoral law does not entail provisions that can adequately guarantee true representation for the minorities. Although the law allocates nine seats for the minorities, voters, regardless of ethnic or religious affiliation, can vote for minority candidates. This is seen to increase the influence of political entities who can ask their supporter to vote for minority candidates close to or serving their agendas. In the absence of a unique voter register for the minorities, this potentiality is more likely to occur and hence the need for establishing a voters list for the minorities.

**2.1.3** The decision to disallow overseas Iraqis to vote eroded trust in the process further. Around one million Iraqis who meet the legal requirements to vote could not cast their votes because of a ruling by the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC). Citing health concerns as well as the inability to finalize the requirements in time, IHEC announced that oversea voting will not take place. This decision has bolstered mistrust in the electoral process in that it accentuated a common understanding among the youth that the process can be manipulated at whim by the ruling political parties in ways that serve their interests. Iraqis living abroad tend to be critical of the political parties and are thought to be supporters of independent candidates.

**2.1.4** Not implementing law 36 of 2015 hampered active participation of the youth in the election process. The law prohibits political parties from conducting military activities, possessing arms and armed groups, and exercising violence in its activities. Yet, the reality openly and clearly proves otherwise. Many of the political entities at least violate the first provision in that they do possess affiliated, though perhaps not officially, armed groups and some may have exerted violence and extortion in the elections.

**2.1.5** The youth are not represented in the Commissioners' Council. While it is true that assigning judges to the Council may help empower the Council and increase its independence, restricting the membership of the council to solely judges, deprives the youth from accessing decision-making positions, hereby decreasing their voice and by extension their trust in the process. Ultimately, becoming a judge means passing the threshold of being young as it requires years-long of experience and proven credentials.

**2.1.6** Weak rule of law has fed into the rising mistrust in institutions in the government among the youth. Many laws and the constitutional provisions remain unimplemented, or at least selectively put into force in service of the needs and the interest of the ruling political parties. This has generated widespread mistrust and a lack of confidence in the political process as a whole, especially among the youth who were brought up in the post-2003 Iraq.

**2.1.7** The new electoral law has empowered tribes and regionalism tendencies, further eroding trust in institutions among the youth. As the new law zooms in constituency to district levels, tribes now can have louder voices in deciding who makes it to the parliament since most tribes hold sway exactly at the same administrative levels. The law thus places more support behind tribes and accentuates their hold to areas under their tribal influence and domain.

## **2.2 Political barriers to youth participation**

In addition to legal factors that impede the young population from actively partaking in the recent elections, political issues also appear to have pushed this growing section of the society away from casting votes in the last parliamentary election in Iraq. It is important, however, to stress that the political impediments do not relate to recent political developments only, rather they are the results of dynamics that have been manifest since the overthrowing of the Baa'th regime in 2003.

**2.2.1** Calls to boycotting the elections. Political entities such as the Community Party and the National House called for boycotting the parliamentary elections, an unprecedented development since the invasion of Iraq in 2003. The latter is associated with the protestors. Such a call has had resonance among the youth who accordingly not only refrained from casting votes but also actively encouraged the larger community to avoid taking part in voting as well.

**2.2.2** Past elections have had a bearing on the youth's will to go the ballots. Prior to the last parliamentary vote, Iraq has held four more rounds which, according to the youth, have had little to no impact in bringing about changes in the dysfunctional governance system. To them, the process is just a tool to recycle the same politicians and political entities who will 'share the cake' amongst themselves without really caring about public interests. Such a failure has yielded a strong sense of apathy among the youth, many of whom may have come to the realization that the ruling political parties will do what it takes to manipulate and rig the results regardless of youth's participation in casting votes.

**2.2.3** Ruling political parties exert undue influence over the government and the media. For the youth, there is little doubt that the hegemonic political powers have been exploiting the government for their own interests and would actively see to keep their grip on power through exploitation of the media and illicit use of finances and political legacies of cronyism and favoritism. This have generated an unfair and imbalanced battleground where the new and independent candidates who often lack financial and institutional support are put up against peers with large financial and institutional backing. For the moment, there are no limitations in place about the extent to which finances can be used in the campaigning stage.

**2.2.4** The youth do not believe that elections can bring about a change in the process of government formation. The adopted conventional consensus mechanism of forming the government has given rise to an understanding amongst the youth that elections results are of little use in changing the government. Ultimately, the youth are thought to believe, the winners, that is the ruling political parties, will share the government branches, the presidency and the cabinet postings,

amongst themselves regardless of the results of the elections. To take part in the elections is, therefore, futile.

**2.2.5** The atmosphere was not conducive to holding elections given security concerns and political instability in the country. While the October protests did lead to holding the elections, they also instated a divide in the public because of the violence used in reaction to the protests and its acquisition of an international dimension where it became a point of rivalry between the US and Iran. All these concerns were felt while also the fight with IS was still continuing and the fear of violence was, and still is, quite present. Altogether, these factors contributed to having low turnout levels among the youth and the wider public in the last elections.

**2.2.6** The scale of violence used against the protestants and the various attempts to squash the protest movements left many among the youth hopeless about the future of the country. While true that the decision to hold early elections was a response to the demands of the many who took to the streets, the brutality with which the protests were met caused many fatalities, injuries, disappearings and threats with death for a large number of protestors, supporters and organizers of the movements. Additionally, many of them have either left the country while others are in hiding in fear of malicious court cases that are thought to be in the tune of a hundred in Dhi Qar province only. Such events have animated a sense of fear and hopelessness among the youth, many of whom have decided to boycott the process in response to the overall brutality.

**2.2.7** That few of the perpetrators of the violence committed against the protestors are still at large have left the youth despondent about the government's will to bring about change. The Iraqi government has formed committees to investigate the violence committed against the youth protestors in the October protest movements. Yet, many of the assailants are yet to be taken to the courts to be held accountable, asserting a phenomenon of widespread impunity while also leaving many victims in the lurch without providing any type of redress. This reality has also dented youth's confidence levels in trying to effect change.

**2.2.8** Youth participation in decision-making levels remain low, casting a shadow of doubt on the government's intent to make them real partners in bringing about change. The youth fill no positions in the high-level ranks of making policies and decisions, nor in the strategic committees formulated to amend the constitution or implement national reconciliation. In no government cabinet in post-2003 Iraq, were the youth of 18-29 years of age considered, and they remain completely unrepresented in other key governmental positions because of administrative procedures that either take years of experience as a metric for promotion or are just filled by appointment from political parties who almost entirely place their own affiliates. Such dynamics have widened the gap between the youth and political activism.

**2.2.9** Poor levels of political awareness amongst the youth and absence of youth-focused programs during election campaigns have generated political inertia amongst the young population. Many youth, , remain unaware or at least partially aware of the importance of political engagement and activism while also lacking the knowledge on how the political system and governance operate. That coupled with a semi-complete absence of adopting election manifestos and position papers, least for the youth, by almost all of the political entities and candidates, have reportedly distanced the young generation from engaging in the election process. It is worth mentioning that in the last elections, only the Kurdistan Democratic Party laid out and used an election manifesto.

### **2.3 Economic and service-related barriers**

Iraq is acutely oil dependent. Money generated through oil exportation makes around 86% of Iraq's revenue. Despite exporting large quantities of oil and attempts to improve the economic system, its economy is still fraught with major challenges for various reasons, explanations of which fall beyond the scope of this report. Nevertheless and put simply, the country has been buckling under hefty public expenditure and endemic corruption while services provision remains ghastly poor. These factors and others that will be outlined below are seen to have reduced participation in elections, especially within the youth.

**2.3.1** Grave and protracted deficiency in delivering public services may have contributed to keeping the youth away from the ballots. For years now, public services such as power supply, provision of healthcare and education, pavement of roads and the supply of other basic services especially in the southern provinces of Iraq have at least remained profoundly under-supplied if not mostly compromised. There should be little doubt, according to the youth, that what the public decipher from such a state of service provision is abject indifference to the needs of the people by the side of the successive governments. There is little incentive, accordingly, for the youth to head towards the ballots while service supply is in dismal conditions.

**2.3.2** High rates of unemployment among the youth may have contributed to the youth abstaining from casting votes in the last elections. Employment levels in Iraq have been steadily increasing since 2003. In 2021, unemployment rates reached 13.74% while in the preceding year, the levels arrived at 12.76%. The youth, and especially females comprise an ignorable portion with each reaching 10% and 30.59% respectively. That in addition to the fact the number of the newly graduates who remain without jobs is ever increasing and that those working on monthly contracts are yet to be transitioned to permanent public employment. The government is not seen to have clear vision as to how to tackle the issue of rising unemployment while each year throngs of graduates keep flooding the wavering market. In protest and perhaps in despair as well, these sizeable sections of the community are believed to have stayed home during the last election, indifferent to who is going to make it to the parliament.

**2.3.3** The hegemony of the political parties against the backdrop of worsening overall dynamics, has severely eroded confidence in the prospects of political participation. There are several stated reasons for such an erosion of trust including but not limited to, an increase of poverty levels, reduced support for strategic investments, insecurity, modest private sector, and the absence of a thorough and an up-to-date social security law. Put together, these factors are seen to have inordinately empowered political parties which are perceived to take advantage of the fragile economic, security, health, and livelihood conditions through financially luring the public for voting purposes.

These factors are thought to have contributed to an increase in public militarization and poverty, which is said to have reached 35% in certain provinces. In their attempts to hold the reign of power, the ruling political parties have attempted to extend their influence over chiefs of tribes, thereby alienating the disenfranchised youth and pushing them further away from political engagement.

**2.3.4** Lack of basic facilities for the youth has created a gap between the youth and political participation. There is a clear shortage of educational, health, political, entertainment, and cultural amenities dedicated for the youth across the country, a paucity that has come about because of dire corruption levels which is seen to have overshadowed the Ministry of Youth and Sports as well. In consequence, the schism between the youth political activism has been widening.

2.3.5 The stated factors have not only kept the youth in their houses during the last elections, but they have also increased their desire for immigration, through legal and illegal means.

## **2.4 Other barriers**

**2.4.1** Restricted freedoms confine political participation, specifically among the youth. Various freedoms including freedom of assembly, expression, belief, and press, in Iraq have come to endure challenges and restrictions mostly imposed due to state weakness, the presence of numerous armed groups, weak rule of law and a lack of legal solid legal provisions. Iraq now, for instance, occupies a low position in the 2021 World Press Freedom Index of Reporters without Borders. These factors are perceived to have contributed to the curtailing of freedoms and rights in Iraq, prompting a sense of political dismay and apathy.

**2.4.2** Social norms and behaviors erect impediments to political engagement among the youth. Customary and traditional practices are not uncommon in many parts in Iraq, a reality that might have generated a generational gap with the lifestyle of the young people. The younger generation may find it difficult to align itself with the conventional way of living, characterized by restricted set of standards that touch upon, clothing, belief, and political opinions, among others. These bottlenecks are to an extent seen to have alienated the youth from public and political participation.

**2.4.3** Security forces' reactions to protests have diminished trust in bringing about changes in the political establishment. In attempting to quash the peaceful protest movements that broke out in October 2020, federal forces detained thousands of protesters, many of whom were young, in the first few months since the start of the protests. In the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and specifically in Dohuk, the pandemic and allegation of 'misusing electronic devices' were used to disperse young demonstrators some of whom faced imprisonment, despite international denunciations and interferences to overturn the court decisions. These dynamics are thought to have contributed to the low turnout levels in the last parliamentary elections, especially in Dohuk which interestingly has reportedly seen an uptake in immigration desires among its younger population, a factor that could potentially be linked to the political disengagement.

### **3. Proposed Recommendations**

#### **3.1 Laws and Regulations**

**3.1.1** Streamline standing for parliament through lowering the minimum standard of candidacy from 28 to 18 years of age and removing the requirement of having a list of 500 supporters. This change requires amending the first and removing the sixth provisions of Article 8 of Law no 9 of 2020, Parliamentary Elections Law in Iraq.

**3.1.2** Ratify and adopt the draft law of Supporting Young Graduates. The draft law, which has gone through the first reading in 2017 and yet to be concluded via the second reading, stipulates allocating a monthly sum of 250000 Iraqi Dinars for unemployed young graduates. The issuance of this law will go a long way towards ameliorating the economic conditions of a growing unemployed section of the graduates and perhaps encouraging political engagement as well.

**3.1.3** Amend the Penal Code No. 111 of 1969. Despite changes, the penal law still needs improvements in order to iron out any potential conflict with the Iraqi Constitution and the International Law. As such, Articles 225, 226, and 243 should be amended or revoked. These provisions, given their nebulous language, have been used to justify silencing dissent, including the October protests.

**3.1.4** Issue a law to guarantee the right to legally counter baseless charges. Many malicious and unfounded charges were filed against numerous participants of the protest movements by way of weakening the protests. Once, the charges are proved baseless, cases are closed without holding the plaintiff accountable.

**3.1.5** Enact its totality the Political Parties Law No.36 of 2015. This law prohibits political parties from having armed wings and exercising military activities, a prohibition yet to be fully implemented.

**3.1.6** Issue a law to guarantee the right to protest. In the absence of such a law the right to protest remains subject to political manipulation and violence that can, as seen in the recent protest of October 2020, cause avoidable widescale harm and damage.

**3.1.7** Amend articles 44 of the Political Parties Law of 2015 to ensure a fairer distribution of annual governmental financial support to the political parties. According to this provision, 80% of the allocated overall annual sum would be set for each political party with representation in the Iraqi Parliament. The financial support would be set based on the number of Parliamentary seats. The rest of the allotted amount would be distributed over political parties that are registered but have not made to the Parliament. This mechanism provides little incentives for growth of the smaller political parties.

**3.1.8** Enact Accountability and Justice Law. This law has been implemented selectively. For the protesting youth, perpetrators of the violence during the protest movements are yet to be detained and held accountable. Committing crimes with impunity can alienate the youth further from public and political engagement.

**3.1.9** Issue a law to regulate social security for all sectors. This may require amending Labor Law of 2015. Public sector is the main employer in Iraq while the private sector is yet to be regulated with legal provisions that could improve scale of the sector and provide benefits tantamount to those in the governmental one.

**3.1.10** Allocate 25% of the parliamentary seats to the youth, similar to the women's minimum representation standard. This will allow for the youth to actively participate in the overall political dynamics and will also give them a sense of agency and voice to advance the needs for the youth.

**3.1.11** Support active participation of the minorities through:

- Issue a law to protect the ethno-religious minorities
- Implement the Federal Court's decision to increase the quota seats for the Yazidis to 5 parliamentary seats.
- De-restrict the right to standing in the parliament for the Sabeans from Baghdad province only. The new electoral law restricts candidacy for the one-seat-quota of the Sabeans who are legally registered in the province of Baghdad, while many of them inhabit southern provinces.

## **3.2 Political Dynamics**

**3.2.1** Obligate candidates to draft and advance election manifestos. A few of the political entities who have stood for the parliamentary elections have written manifestos or visions and pledged for their implementation. And in cases where manifestos are indeed propounded, rarely do the youth and matters related to their affairs make it to them.

**3.2.2** Establish youth-focused course, associations, and institutions to raise awareness about the importance of political engagement.

**3.2.3** Confine the limits of finances that can be used in election campaigns. Given their long-standing involvement in the governance system, most of the ruling parties have access to funds in a way independent or smaller political entities do not. This reality has clearly created inequality in accessing means to promulgate publicity and exposure prior to elections.

**3.2.4** Keep as much distance as possible between Independent High Electoral Commission as well as the Federal Court and the influence of political parties. These two essential institutions must remain neutral and independent for the public and the youth to have hope in believing in the electoral process to bringing about meaningful change.

**3.2.5** Activate and reduce the influence of the political parties on syndicates and unions. For now, these institutions are believed to have been caught in the power struggle between the political entities. There is a dire need for these institutions to regain their due standing and power through the active inclusion and participation of the youth.

**3.2.6** Broadcast all the parliament sessions live and uncut. Closed sessions have decreased trust in the parliament in that many think that it is in these sessions that shady deals are made or where truths are concealed, resulting in not only weakening the parliament but also in delaying the passage of laws and the formulation of faulty legal provisions.

**3.2.7** Activate Iraqi Youth Parliament. This important institution is seen to have lost its role in developing, enabling, and preparing the youth to partake in the political arena. Activation of this parliament could send signals to the youth, that authorities care about the youth and their affairs.

**3.2.8** Enable the youth to be active participants within the governmental institutions. Due to regulations that gives precedence to years of experience rather than credentials regardless of age, the youth are deprived from being active members of important governmental positions and committees. Most of the positions of directorate generals are occupied by people who tend to be older in age. Not only that, but these positions are also filled through confessionalism and political allotment. The youth are rarely considered for such positions.



### **3.3 Socio-economic dynamics**

**3.3.1** Design and implement strategies to create job opportunities for the youth. Rising unemployment levels beg the need for having national and rigorous plans to boost the economy, fight corruption and breaking the rentier state of the economy.

**3.3.2** Design and/or activate specific and actionable laws to support small and medium size enterprises among the youth. The sense of neglect and marginalization felt amongst the youth should be reduced through providing the required support to encourage creative and developmental projects.

**3.3.3** Create safe spaces and fora dedicated to youth activities. It is clear that there is a dearth of such facilities and amenities for the youth the country. In fact, properties that belong to the Ministry of Youth and Sports have been given out in investment bids that are seen to have made it all the more difficult for the youth to access.

**3.3.4** Facilitate the participation of the disabled persons in the electoral process. This important segment of the society has endured abject exclusion in the whole political process; not only there is little to no considerations for supplying the required means to ease their participation in casting votes, but they also remain quite distanced in the overall process of political engagement.

**3.3.5** Support the active participation of the youth in public and civic activities such as seminars, conferences, townhall meetings, among other things. To have a vibrant youth population, their active engagement in multiple and variegated activities are essential. This requires building the infrastructure, mentorship, and providing continuous support.



## Peace and Freedom Organization

Peace and Freedom is a non-governmental and not-for-profit organization that works in Iraq and the Kurdistan Region to protect human rights and civil rights and ensure peaceful co-existence through promoting trust and collaboration between the diverse components of the society and supporting governmental and non-governmental institutions in developing policies guaranteeing freedoms, rights and social justice in accordance with international standards.

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