

Policy Brief

Is there an NGO to Parliament Pipeline for Iraqi Women?

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In the October 2021 parliamentary elections, Iraqi women broke their record for the most seats ever won by female candidates in Iraq's post-2003 history, reaching [95 seats](#) in a 329 seat legislature. Even more notable is that 57 of these women won their seat without the need for Iraq's 25% women's quota to kick in. On the surface, these are respectable gains for a country that has undergone regime change only two decades ago, but deeper analysis reveals that this is a quantitative – but not necessarily qualitative – success.

Among the earliest signs of optimism in the October 2021 elections was the participation of younger women from civil society and from the Tishreen protest movement. Tishreen was the largest anti-government protest movement in post-2003 Iraq, engulfing Baghdad, and other governorates in southern Iraq for months in the fall and winter of 2019 and 2020. One of the many aspects of Tishreen that was highlighted by foreign media was the degree of women's participation in it. The rosier accounts of Tishreen describe it as a space of gender equality, though subsequent research has challenged these depictions. Nevertheless, Tishreen was a moment of political awakening for many young activists in Iraq, including women.

Some of these women ran as independent candidates taking advantage of the new electoral law, which divided Iraq into 83 districts from the previous 18. Smaller districts allowed women to manage campaigns in their own communities, instead of having to appeal to entire governorates. Other women joined emergent political parties, like the Emtidad Movement. However, the overwhelming number of women either joined existing traditional parties

(including Islamist ones) or ran as independents with partisan ties, which emerged when they later joined coalitions with traditional political elites.

Established parties, and the women who run with them, have a history of sidelining the women's rights agenda in Iraq. They deploy an array of mechanisms, directly and indirectly, to stymie progress and to challenge existing institutions that protect women, such as the secular personal status law. For those female parliamentarians who are genuinely devoted to women's empowerment, the challenge is to advance their career in an environment that considers heading the women's affairs parliamentary committee to be at best – an unimportant job – and at worst – a punishment. For those from powerful parties, they are further constrained by party dynamics and demands. This is hardly unique to Iraq, as women globally struggle to balance the demands of their political careers with the oftentimes imposed responsibility of promoting and protecting women's rights.

Despite this, Iraq has had a handful of powerful and devoted female parliamentarians over the years and many of them trace their political origins to civil society work. This raises the question: can civil society produce female leadership? And, in a permissive electoral environment, can this translate into positive gains for women's rights in Iraq?

In theory, there are two mechanisms through which civil society can promote women's political participation. First, civil society can increase the communication and coordination capacity as well as the political knowledge of their members and volunteers. In turn, this would allow their members to have the logistical and intellectual tools to run a compelling campaign. Second, civil society can intentionally train both potential female candidates and existing parliamentarians through workshops and trainings. Both mechanisms have been at play in Iraq and have received support from the international community, though to various degrees of success.

The female candidates who ran in Iraq for the first time in 2021 describe themselves as being inspired by the Tishreen movement or being born from it, but at the same time, they also credit traditional civil society for providing a basis for their training and empowerment. And, to their credit, women's organizations in Iraq do not focus their efforts exclusively on first-time candidates or liberal candidates but reach out and welcome women from a broad range of political orientations. Many of the older women's organizations in Iraq are associated, in one way or another, with the Iraqi Communist Party, but their training and empowerment policies are not exclusively directed at communist, socialist, or liberal segments of Iraqi society.

Civil society has been able to train a new cadre of young women who emerged in the Tishreen protest movement and who made the decision to run for politics subsequently. These women were neither the predominant participants nor the predominant winners of the election, but they represent hope for change. They face similar challenges to other female parliamentarians including a lack of access to informal political space, sexism in the workspace, and reputational costs. They face additional challenges due to their positionality in the protest movement, including uneven resources and lack of policy experience. These challenges are not insurmountable, and in some cases, they are being addressed to some capacity. The struggle for women's substantive participation in Iraqi politics will continue to evolve and develop and observing how these women rise to meet the challenges of a new era of politics will be telling for Iraq's experiment in democratization.

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