

SYRIA/IRAQ

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August 2018

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Minority Representation in the KRI

OPEN THINK TANK AND KAS HOLD A CONFERENCE IN ERBIL ON MINORITY GROUPS' POLITICAL REPRESENTATION IN THE KRI

The Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) is home not only to Kurds, but also to various ethnic and religious minorities such as Assyrian-Chaldeans, Turkmens, Armenians, Arabs, Christians, Yazidis, Kakais, Shabaks, Zoroastrians and Sabians. To date, out of the 111 seats constituting the Kurdistan Parliament, eleven seats are reserved for Assyrian-Chaldeans, Turkmens and Armenians together, with other minorities remaining excluded from this quota system. With the upcoming regional elections in the KRI, Yazidis and other minorities pushed for better representation in the parliament. On August 16, 2018, Open Think Tank (OTT) and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Syria/Iraq Office held a conference in Erbil to discuss the limitations of the current political representation system of minorities in the Kurdistan Parliament. Members of the Kurdistan Parliament, representatives of the Kurdish Prime Minister's Office, ethnic and religious minorities and of civil society, as well as academics and religious leaders gathered to exchange possible recommendations to tackle the challenges of the current quota system in the KRI.

The first panel of the conference gathered Members of the Kurdistan Parliament, representing the Descendants of Mesopotamia (Assyrian-Chaldeans), Armenians and Turkmens, as well as a Yezidi former Member of the Iraqi Parliament. The importance of representing not only ethnic but also religious minorities, as in the Iraqi Parliament, was identified as a way to properly reflect the diverse composi-

tion of the KRI. Proper representation in the parliament would ensure that the rights of minorities are protected and that these minorities are given equal opportunities. Claims that big parties were exploiting and interfering in elections due to the lack of separately-regulated elections for minorities led to some recommendations being made to the parliament regarding special registration, special ballot stations or ballot papers for minority voters, as well as a separate election day. In addition to their parliamentary representation, the importance of minorities taking part in the executive branch, particularly the Council of Ministers, was highlighted. Overall, the quota system was praised as the only means for minorities to get seats in the parliament and, thus, have their rights protected. For now, the quota system and the corresponding notion of positive discrimination are the only way to ensure representation of groups that are too small to get the minimum of 20,000 votes necessary to be elected into parliament. However, all panelists agreed that the quota system should ideally be overcome in the future, as it is inherently flawed.

Dr. Jaafar Emniki, Deputy Speaker of the Kurdistan Parliament and Member of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), sat on the second panel with Mr. Adnan Mufti, former Speaker of the Kurdistan Parliament and member of the PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan). They both acknowledged the importance of minorities' representation in the parliament and praised the KRI for being a good example in the region, having already used the quota system in their first elections in 1992. Dr. Emniki admitted that the gov-

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ernment's objective of achieving an inclusive society has not yet been reached. Nonetheless, he reiterated the commitment of all main political parties to maintain the number of seats for the "components" of Kurdistan and to ensure their representation. He insisted on using the legal term "components" for minorities, as it has a positive psychological effect and helps improve their sense of belonging. Dr. Emniki agreed with previous statements on the importance of including religious minorities in the current representation system, which does not reflect the latest demographic changes. He stated that increasing the quotas in the Kurdistan Parliament would be a sound call, not only because it sends a positive image abroad but also because it allows for better reflection and inclusion of the Kurdish components in the political system. Interference by bigger political parties or even external actors should be completely rejected. Mr. Adnan Mufti took the recognition of the Kurds after the end of the dictatorship as an example of how the Kurds should treat minorities, noting that these communities have been present in Iraq for more than 1,000 years. He mentioned that the support of the Kurdish population was necessary for the government to enhance representation of minorities. However since 2006, when a lot of efforts were undertaken in this regard, tensions have risen between communities. Mr. Mufti stated that both the political parties and the minorities were responsible for an imperfect representation system. To solve the issue, the electoral law should be amended and the representation of minorities should follow international law. Aside from this, the main political parties should invest more in their minorities' candidates by letting experienced leaders chosen by their communities run on their behalf for the minorities' seats.

The last panel contained representatives of different minorities and the civil society, who stated that the political participation of minorities had improved as more minorities' parties were competing than in the previous elections. Nonetheless, political parties were said

to only exploit this issue to prove to the international community that they are moving forward. The Yezidi participants stated that the issue lies not so much in their representation, but in exercising their right to political participation, especially on the committee and government level. Some minorities also have an issue with the definition of their identity, which does not allow them to be represented as a minority per se, but only as Kurdish candidates on the electoral lists of other parties. As such, minorities should be considered as backbones for democracy. It was mentioned that the responsibility to achieve justice falls on institutions and the Kurdish community as a whole, and that coexistence and peace in society should be achieved above all.

In conclusion, opinions about the quota system as the only chance for small minorities to be represented and be able to protect their rights were rather positive. However, the majority supported its reformation to achieve effective participation and to reflect the actual importance and societal contribution of minorities.