



SUCCESS STORY

Art Rallies Support for Constitution

An exhibit displays six artists' views of the Iraqi Constitution



Photo: USAID/Jessica Morse

An artist at the exhibit explains that the blue hands represent Iraq “emerging from the barbed-wire bonds of oppression.”

USAID sponsored a constitutional art exhibit that toured Iraq a week prior to the referendum, encouraging people to vote.

To rally support for the October 2005 constitutional referendum, six Iraqi artists showcased their perspectives on the constitution in a touring art exhibition that included a showing at the National Assembly. The exhibit was a small part of a much larger USAID-supported “get out the vote” campaign, which resulted in record turnouts at the Iraqi polls.

National Assembly members wandered through the exhibition, awarding them an opportunity to hear the “voice of civil society,” said Dr. Issam Adawi, head of the USAID program that sponsored the exhibit. One of the key drafters of the constitution was moved to tears when he saw a picture depicting Iraqi children living in a land free from corruption.

Many pieces depicted Iraq emerging from a struggle. One simply showed a map of Iraq with the word “constitution” stamped boldly in the center. All of the images reflected the artists’ hope for the future and a freedom of expression unparalleled in Iraq for years. “The artist is a combination of freedom and imagination; these two concepts were not in the dictionary of the former regime,” said Basil, a longtime artist from Basrah.

“Artists are sensitive about the environment surrounding them. With the constitution, we can now breathe freedom,” explained one of the artists.

The exhibit was sponsored in part by a USAID program that aims to promote a vibrant civil society in Iraq by educating Iraqis about constitutional issues including women’s rights, human rights, and anti-corruption.

In the months before the referendum on the constitution, USAID distributed numerous posters and pamphlets throughout Iraq, held constitutional dialogues, and sponsored weekly television programs to educate voters about the constitution. A measure of the program’s success was the immense turnout of eligible voters for the referendum: over 60% of those eligible voted — 1.5 million more than the number of Iraqis who voted in the January 2005 elections.