

# Women of Iraq & elections: an opportunity for women's rights and political participation

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Iraq is in ongoing preparations for the parliamentary elections on 12 May. Due to the lack of commitment of the powerful blocs to fulfil their promises toward the people -- which increases the gap of loss of confidence between the citizens and the government-- the elections will be between people who already engaged in the opposing sides of politics rather people actively participating in the election through down-to-earth political projects.

Until now, the government didn't bring any solutions and reconciliations that bring government rhetoric back to credibility in light of the evident spread of corruption and sectarian allocation.

Despite people retreating from the political scene, the attention turns to the high participation of women candidates, which has become a topic of hot debates in the

streets of Iraq. There are more than two thousand women participants in the legislative elections of Iraq, in which they hope for having a distinctive role to defend women's rights and other relevant issues.

The 2018 parliamentary election has been distinguished by women-led electoral lists in several governorates of Iraq and the Kurdistan region, as the number of women obtained the serial number (1) on the electoral lists is eight. This a new situation in the Iraq elections that caused by a couple of lists to demonstrate their intention of empowering women, with the emphasis on a general civilising approach of some lists and considering women-leadership as a significant challenge that may break the masculinity of the political scene and ostensible participation of women in the electoral lists. It is far from impossible that women may gain their seat outside the frames of "women's quota".

It does not mean that there are parties which are ready to "exploit" the nomination of women in electoral alliances relying on the female component for obtaining the largest possible number of seats and taking benefit of the women quota. The situation strongly reveals the necessity of precautions about the women's participation not to be exploited as a way to electoral success.

At the capital level, in Baghdad, there are extensive competitive lists, women candidates are topping the head, such as MP Magida Al-Tamimi for the Sa'airon Alliance, MP Hanan al-Fatlawi for the Alliance of Willingness, while MP Huda Sajjad is leading Fatah (conquer) List of Diwaniya province, in central Iraq. The proportion of women candidates taking place on the top raises to 5 women in Kurdistan Region provinces. In Sulaymaniyah, Shilir Abdul-Hamid is leading the list of Kurdistan Communist Party, Viyan Sabri of Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) in Dohuk, while Juan Hasan at the top of Kurdistan Islamic Union list in Kirkuk and Tania Taher of Democratic Socialist Party in Erbil.

On the other hand, the election campaign witnessed a couple of violations and threats faced by female candidates, which is ignoble action against women, reached in some ways to abuse through disseminating videos on social media sites as well as tearing and distorting their posters. Many polls indicate the opportunity of women who are leading many lists may not be accepted or will not succeed --even they hold their positions in the lists-- due to lack of commitment to some of them.

On the other hand, the traditional dominant approach of many "male" members of the political parties may hinder the roles of many women candidates, in case, they win and reach parliament. That could also be a failure and may frustrate the morale of women's rights activists and significance of their political participation.

According to Iraqi constitution and Independent High Electoral Commission laws, the percentage of female candidates should not be less than 25% as a minimum, whereas the Electoral Commission reports point out the number of female and male candidates for the parliamentary and local elections scheduled next 12 May is 6904 in all Iraqi governorates. 25 coalitions and 63 electoral entities, while 329 parliamentary seats are contested. In Baghdad only, nearly 2,000 female and male candidates, 40 parties and electoral coalitions are competing for 71 seats, 69 general seats and 2 other seats; one for Sabian and one for Christians.

Despite the strength and capability of the Iraqi woman to face challenges and to lead the political scene in an election competition with men, their chances of grabbing leadership positions in the government structure are likely to be minimal, unless there could be a truthful intention, and political will believes in women as real partners in the political process.

Here, we should not underestimate women's capacities in the field of proper voting or candidating as representatives of the people. They are able to govern actively, wisely and in a balanced way, as we know from the history. But we have already seen the Iraqi woman could have the freedom of entry for this experiment and even if they step in; it will be controlled by a particular list submissive to goals not concerned with the people's interests. In case the larger list wins, woman candidates will be enrolled in the weakest and feeblest positions. In the past, even if woman candidates had a valid and vital position, they would remain under the control of the "biggest". This is what led the country to backwardness, however, today as the status quo deteriorated, so there is a need to enhance the culture, high values and coexistence among the people to support the participation of women and develop their capacities to take advanced positions in the government. It is also necessary to say women must support women for the voting process.

Therefore, the civil society organisations for defending women's rights and the feminist movement activists are working together to support women candidates and training them on how to run their electoral campaigns. These organizations also call upon governmental, non-governmental and international agencies to protect women candidates from any violations that occur due to lack of deterrent measures. Women's rights defenders are keen to intensify the activities to support women candidates by all available means, as well as to launch twitter campaigns promoting the independence of women's voices from male domination and give them the opportunity to vote for whomever they want. In addition to that, some hashtag campaigns have been launched to call for "women support for women" to support women candidates and create a network among them to propagate for the

significance of electing women candidates.

In general, women know the necessity to participate in the elections through voting and bringing Iraqi woman to positions eligible for them. And, women of Iraq have emphasised the need of contribution of women for building democracy and civil state, and their capability to play more significant roles to correct the political processes like taking the initiative for peace and societal coexistence plans and creating the culture of dialogue and respect for the others.

Few days only remain apart from a major event in which we all look forward to extensive participation for the elections despite all signals of reluctance displayed by a series of public opinion polls on social media sites. In the meantime, the position of those, who are interested in the elections, remains more optimistic. They dream to change the situation by pushing Iraq forward to keep pace with the regional urbanisation movement, promote citizenship and mutual understanding between women and men as real partners, whose interests are providing a decent living for the daughters and sons of Mesopotamia, land of civilisations, culture and science.

*Translated from Arabic into English by The Region*