

# Iraq elections: Not politicizing women, but making politics female

by Shehla Salih - 12/05/2018 09:12



Perspectives induced by social, religious and personal predicaments have made it more difficult for women to participate equally in political spheres, which have also led to the obvious absence of women in politics. This goes back to a long history of neglecting women's political role. While in the 19th century the common understanding was "women's main duty is to marry a person and to live under his knowledge and control", today, the situation in Iraq shows a "glimpse of change" of the mentality which disguised itself in various forms.

Saudi Arabia was the last country to give women the right to vote and to be elected, in 2015. Now the Vatican has to catch up too in this regard.

In the 1950s Iraq became the first Arab country to have a female minister and to have a law that gave women the ability to ask for divorce. In 1979, the Iraqi constitution declared all women and men equal before the law; this helped women to get voting and election rights. In January 1971, Iraq also ratified the International

Covenants on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), which provide equal protection under international law to all. In 1980, women could vote and run for election. In 1989, 27 women were elected to Iraq's 250-seats of the National Assembly. Therefore, Iraq ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), in August 1986, which obliged countries to set a quota system for women.

Having rules that protect women on paper is not the ultimate solution to develop and to get a better life for women in society, especially if the regulations did not apply correctly or political, social and cultural aspects of the community aren't ready for a social change in support of women. In other words, women have political rights, but they don't have essential roles in the society or high positions in governmental institutions. As we can see today in Iraq; there is no quota system for women applied to the government and the council of ministries. 22 departments of the Iraqi government, only one ministry is represented by a woman. It's the same in Kurdistan region, in 19 ministries, there is only one woman minister.

Women's role in Iraqi parliament is limited because the parliament itself is not independent. The structures of the political parties are formed from top to down. The head of a political party has absolute power. Thus, parliament members have to act according to party leaders, even if they don't particularly agree with the policies.

Through a real democratical system, women can obtain equal representation. However, the existence of a large number of women represented doesn't necessarily mean that it is a democratic country. If women don't participate in politics and play their role in changing the society instead treated like puppets, it means that the political scene is nothing but vanity. As an example, the percentage of women representatives in the U.S. is 19% while it's 61% in Rwanda.

Women Quota system has led to increased participation ranges according to the first parliament term in Iraq. The range of last election term, 2014, was higher than now, of 9033 candidates, 2607 were women, which makes around 29%. In this upcoming election in total 7018 candidates, 1983 are women. In past election term, for the first time, there was an independent woman list in Basra, in which the head and all candidates were female. However, they didn't get any parliament seats.

The other difference of this election is that 19 election lists are lead by women. Five of them are from Kurdistan (Sulaimanya, Hawler, Duhok, and Kirkuk). Iraq has 14 women who are head of the election lists.

However, the existence of women as a first rank candidate doesn't solve everything. One of the most common problems during propaganda time was to attack "morality",

especially attacks to personality and their relationships. Some women couldn't handle it and gave up. Because of the lack of strict rules on social media, two weeks ago, some videos and pictures of Intizar Ahmad with a Saudi man were posted.

On the other side of these attacks on social media, there is a more sneaky version of the male-dominant character of the elections despite the huge number of women candidates. A beautiful face has a significant impact on voters. Being beautiful sometimes is the only reason for most of the men to vote. The choice is based on which woman is more beautiful than the other, without reference to see her abilities or the program she offers for the future of Iraq. However, if we have a look at female candidates' slogans, we can see that they lose women norms in their speeches and acts. Slogans of some candidates during the propaganda time was about problems between the Iraqi government and Kurdistan Regional Government. That's not a problem, the problem is the male-dominant character of the power politics; in Iraq, all political parties are under a "male ruler".

There are many people who believe that women candidates can't represent their interests because they are not capable. General narrative is that the women are an instrument for men's desires, they use women to get more votes and to prove the existence of "a democratic process", but later men do their best to keep women away from essential positions at the ministries or government. They believe politics is not a woman's duty; their duty is being busy with children and family.

For a brighter future in Iraq, women have to be represented by women with policies on gender equality, social change and creating the suitable environment for women - by women to fight for their rights. The aim is to make politics female, not to politicize women.