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January 29, 2009

Iraqi Women Vie for Votes and Taste of Power

By SAM DAGHER

BAGHDAD — Amal Kibash, a candidate for the Baghdad provincial council, is running a bold and even feverish campaign by most standards. With elections coming on Saturday, she is trolling for every vote she can muster.

“You are going to vote for me, right?” she quizzed passers-by on a stroll recently through her neighborhood of Sadr City, which was until May a battleground for Shiite militias. Giant posters of her veil-framed face were draped on several buildings, some of which still bore the marks of recent fighting.

In Basra, where until a year ago banners warned women that they would be shot if they wore too much makeup or ventured out of their homes without a veil, another female candidate, Ibtihal Abdul-Rahman, put up posters of herself last month. Encouraged by security improvements throughout the country, thousands of women are running for council seats in the provincial elections.

Of the estimated 14,400 candidates, close to 4,000 are women. Some female candidates have had their posters splattered with mud, defaced with beards or torn up, but most have been spared the violence that has claimed the lives of two male candidates and a coalition leader since the start of the year. But on Wednesday, a woman working for the Iraqi Islamic Party was killed when gunmen burst into her house in Baghdad and shot her 10 times in the chest, according to an Interior Ministry official.

For many of the female candidates, the elections offer a chance to inject some much needed fresh air into councils that are plagued by deep corruption and dominated by men and big political parties that are often ultraconservative.

But even if they win, they face numerous hurdles, particularly the entrenched attitudes of most Iraqi men, who view women as either sex objects or child bearers who have no place in the rough-and-tumble arena of politics. “This is the mentality,” said Safia Taleb al-Suhail, a member of Parliament and the daughter of a prominent Shiite tribal leader assassinated by [Saddam Hussein](#)’s henchmen in Lebanon in 1994. “We have to change it. How can we change it? By fighting.”

She is leading a group of female Parliament members who are lobbying to make sure that the same constitutional provision that mandates that 25 percent of all seats in Parliament go to women is applied to provincial councils as well. Currently, it is not.

While [Iraq](#) in the 1950s was the first Arab country to name a female minister and adopt a progressive family law, the leadership aspirations of women were mostly quashed under Mr. Hussein’s macho government. The situation became further complicated for women after 2003, with the ascendance of religious parties.

Ms. Suhail and others were instrumental in lobbying Iraq's American administrator at the time, [L. Paul Bremer III](#), to include the quota for women in the country's first transitional constitution. It was preserved in the current Constitution because many felt that it was the only way to ensure the participation of women in a male-dominated culture.

When it was published in October, the law regulating the provincial elections omitted the quota for women; it remains unclear whether the omission was deliberate or just an oversight. The electoral commission has ruled that the law as written is acceptable, saying that women are ensured of adequate representation by the requirement that a woman be chosen after every three men in any winning slate.

But Ms. Suhail said that many of the candidate slates did not have enough women in them to meet that requirement, while other slates were made up of fewer than four candidates, all of whom are male.

Mahdiya Abed-Hassan al-Lami, a women's rights advocate, and candidate in Baghdad running on the slate of a former prime minister, [Ibrahim Jaafari](#), said that while she supported the quota system, it has been manipulated by the major political parties, both secular and religious, to marginalize women. Most of the women chosen for the large candidate slates are there for their family and tribal connections and loyalty to the sect or party, she said, rather than for their qualifications.

"If women are simply followers they cannot fulfill their roles properly," said Ms. Lami, who is a teacher and a practicing Shiite. Her campaign has focused on reaching out to her network of women, particularly in some of the most destitute slums of Baghdad.

Ms. Kibash, another female candidate who is running on Mr. Jaafari's list, is currently a member of the Sadr City municipal council, but she and other women on the council are prevented by the men from sitting on the crucial and financially important Services Committee. She said the council was mired in corruption.

Despite the recent gains in security, some women continue to face threats, while others say the whole thing is a charade and not worth the effort.

Liza Hido sat on a municipal council but was forced to quit in 2006 after receiving threatening e-mail and [text messages](#) on her cellphone.

She is running again this year but, still concerned for her safety, she is keeping her campaigning discreet, putting up no posters and making no public appearances. Instead, she restricts herself to private gatherings.

Her friend Bushra al-Obeidi, a law professor at Baghdad University, has rebuffed all efforts to persuade her to become a candidate. She feels the odds are stacked against women, starting with laws she views as discriminatory and derogatory toward women — one allows a rapist to largely escape punishment if he marries his victim. Ms. Obeidi also has little faith in the commitment to gender equality among the current political leadership, which is dominated by religious parties.

"I assure you," she said, "they are against women. They are lying to us."

Ms. Suhail, the lawmaker, admitted that Iraqi women had failed so far to break into the top levels of the political power structure but said that this was no reason to give up.

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