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PROFILE: October/November 2006

PAYING THE PRICE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS



Mishkat al-Moumin fought for human rights under Saddam Hussein, and survived assassination attempts as Minister of the Environment in Iraq's interim government. She talks to *Bob Webb*.

The morning of August 24, 2004, was like any other in the Baghdad summer: hot, sunny and dry. Dr Mishkat al-Moumin was reviewing her paperwork in the back seat of her chauffeured automobile en route to her office as Minister of the Environment in Iraq's interim government. It was an ordinary car, made for security purposes to look

like a taxi.

Suddenly her world changed forever. 'My driver/bodyguard turned to the right, the car went over the sidewalk and then there was a huge explosion,' she recalled. She was covered with shattered glass, but unhurt.

'Minutes later someone started shouting at us as I got out of the car, and saw what had happened,' al-Moumin told me in Washington DC. 'The car behind us that had my four bodyguards and served as a backup was completely burned, and I saw their flesh all over the place.' A suicide car-bomber, aiming for her, had instead killed her bodyguards. Her driver's quick swerve to the right may have saved her life.

Guards protecting the nearby headquarters of a political party heard the blast, she said, and thought someone was trying to attack them. Chinadaily.com quoted a local resident, Ali al-Tai, who was standing outside his home near the site of the explosion: 'I opened the door to leave for work, and the blast knocked me over.'

'Serving the Iraqi people is not a crime that deserves this,' she told Reuters at the time. Half an hour after her escape a similar attack elsewhere in Baghdad targeted Education Minister Sami al-Mudhaffar's convoy, missing him but killing one of his bodyguards. In both attacks, people in the vicinity were injured.

Devastated, al-Moumin nevertheless went on to her office that day.

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'I went to the Ministry to be among my employees,' she said. 'I did not want them to feel that I was afraid.' But ahead lay sleepless nights. Even her eating habits changed. 'The first time I was served meat after that I could not eat it,' she said. 'I became a vegetarian. It was an experience I don't think I will ever get over.'

She knew her bodyguards and their families well: one was taking care of his parents, another newly married, another newly engaged. For fear of being the target of new violence, she couldn't attend their funerals. 'I felt part of me was killed in that event,' she said.

Women's rights

As a lawyer, al-Moumin had fought for women's rights under Saddam Hussein, when few existed. After the war of 2003, she had succeeded in having 25 per cent of seats reserved for women in Iraq's new 275-seat parliament. (In the first election, in January 2005, women gained a third of the seats.) But her activism angered Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the al-Qaeda-linked commander in Iraq, who described her as 'leader of the infidels'. After the failed assassination in August 2004, he sent word that 'we'll get her next time'.

A second attempt also failed when, defying a warning from Iraqi Intelligence, she went to work on a day she and the other ministers were told to stay away. 'I had an appointment with the Danish ambassador,' she said. 'So we arranged for me to travel to our meeting lying down, completely covered with a blanket, in the back seat of a car.'

Determined to elude al-Zarqawi, she changed her routines—going to work at 5.30 am, walking rather than being chauffeured, altering her hairstyle, wearing a head scarf, changing attire frequently and taking different routes to work. She declined the 'safe house' offered her as a Cabinet Minister and instead rented a small home not far from her office.

She feared more for the safety of her family, especially her son (now aged 11), than for herself. The thought was always there: will my son be in danger of being kidnapped or, worse, killed? Will other family members be targeted? Such thoughts, preying on her continuously, led her to make the painful decision to move, with her family, to the US, where she took up a scholarship to do a master's degree in public policy at Harvard's John F Kennedy School of Government. Her father, who had been a lecturer at Baghdad's Institute of Fine Art, is a book collector and had a huge library. 'We had to get rid of 5,000 books of his,' she said. 'We didn't want to sell them. Instead, they were given to the University of Baghdad and to the National Library.' He could only take a treasured few.

After completing her master's earlier this year, she became Visiting Scholar at the Environmental Law Institute in Washington DC and looks forward to lecturing at George Mason University in Northern Virginia on 'The Environmental Challenges in Post Conflict Countries'.

Environmental issues

Was she able to achieve anything in her Ministry? 'Yes, I structured the Ministry, and got it to function since Iraq did not have a Ministry of Environment before. I developed local projects, training courses and awareness campaigns. I also developed 15 projects with the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Bank. The Ministry issued the first report on the environmental status in Iraq in our history.' She refused to tolerate corruption, as two of her staff

found when they were fired.

The Environmental Law Institute website shows more: 'She also developed new environmental law, led campaigns to support Iraqi people living in environmentally dangerous areas, and initiated awareness and cleaning projects.' She lectured at the University of Baghdad College of Law on 'human rights, fundamental rights, international and constitutional law,' and facilitated conferences on women's issues. Today she continues to help communities worldwide improve the health of their citizens.

Al-Moumin was born in Beirut to parents who took her to Iraq as a child. Her father, she says, taught her to read and her mother, who has a diploma in child-rearing, taught her to respect all people regardless of their religious or cultural background.

She describes Islam as a peaceful religion that has long summoned Muslims to protect their environment. 'Islam was founded in an area of desert, that is why Islam has an environmental component,' she said. 'Otherwise Muslim people would be in danger.' She is developing a project with the Environmental Law Institute and US Environmental Protection Agency, highlighting this.

Third generation

'I started my career as a lecturer in Baghdad University's College of Law,' she said. 'I chose to lecture on human rights in a country that does not respect human rights. I wanted to give my students hope for a better future if the present is not working. When I first stepped into the classroom I asked, what are human rights? A class of 500 students kept silent. In the next session, I asked the same question. I saw five hands go up, with a little bit of encouragement the hands became 10, then 20. I described what was happening in Iraq.' When she felt she was getting near the limits of what it was safe to say, she used to talk about what happened in South Africa under apartheid. 'I lectured on human rights, and I kept my head on my shoulders.'

She describes the environment as the 'third generation' of human rights. 'In my work in the Ministry, I asked my employees what do you think environment is all about? They kept silent as my students did.... We concluded that environment is about protecting people's lives; it is about the right to a healthy and clean environment; it is about a better future.' Her vision is of a healthy, clean and war-free environment in Iraq, and that is what she is committed to building.

'I hope Iraq will progress and recover soon,' she said. 'Iraq can be a successful story, and there will always be a chance to build a nation. I hope there will be a time when all Iraqis can walk safely near the Tigris's shores, when all Iraqis can have basic services, water and electricity.'

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