

Kurdish Politicians Accused of Exploiting Saddam Victims

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Campaigners in Iraqi Kurdistan urged to produce practical help instead of political slogans as election nears.

Relatives of victims of a bloody campaign by Saddam Hussein against the Kurds in 1988 are urging politicians standing in Kurdistan's forthcoming elections to stop exploiting the issue.

The Relatives' Committee for the Defence of Anfal Victims also called on political parties not to visit the graves of Anfal victims in their campaign.

The Anfal (Spoils of War) operation was part of a campaign by the regime of Saddam Hussein in 1988 against mainly Kurdish areas of northern Iraq. The campaign group Human Rights Watch estimated that up to 100,000 people perished in a systematic programme of genocide.

The operation was led by Saddam Hussein's cousin Ali Hassan al-Majid, widely known as "Chemical Ali", who was head of the Northern Bureau of the ruling Baath Party.

He and two other former top Baath officials were sentenced to death for their part in the campaign in 2007, nearly six months after Saddam was executed, but the sentences have not been carried out.

Omar Muhammad, an Anfal activist and editor-in-chief of a newspaper called Anfalistan, says Anfal is a great national symbol, "Ethically and legally it is not appropriate to use it as a tool for the election campaign."

Muhammad called on the parties to stop exploiting Anfal, saying, "It is the duty of civil society organisations, media outlets and relatives of Anfal victims not to allow the use of Anfal in the election campaigns."

Iraqi president Jalal Talabani campaigned this week for the powerful incumbent Kurdistan List in Kalar, an area devastated by the Anfal campaign. Talabani, who leads the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, PUK, gave relatives of Anfal victims 36,000 US dollars from party funds during his visit and pledged to develop the area, according to the PUK newspaper Kurdistan Nwe.

Aska Ali, whose husband, son and many family members died in Anfal operations, asked the Kurdistan region's president, Masoud Barzani, who is standing for re-election, for her picture to be taken off material used by his Kurdistan List.

The list has used a picture of Barzani kissing the hand of a woman during ceremonies held for the remains of some Anfal victims. Television channels that it controls daily trumpet projects carried out for the relatives of Anfal operations victims.

The poll on July 25 will elect the parliament for the northern Iraqi region as well as the president. Voters in the assembly election choose from lists of candidates produced by the political parties, not for individual

candidates.

The opposition Change List in its campaign and its media outlets is highlighting the miseries of Anfal victims. It has criticised Talabani for not pressing for those convicted of the massacre to be executed, though many Kurds have argued that the perpetrators should be kept alive and tried for other crimes. Talabani has not signed off on any execution since becoming president of Iraq in 2005.

Muhammad said that by highlighting the projects carried out and the miseries of relatives of Anfal victims, the parties are exploiting the issue, "Making use of the toil, struggle and dignity of Anfal victims for a certain political system is not acceptable."

Allegations of exploitation by politicians are not new. In 2006, on the anniversary of the poison gas attack on the town of Halabja that killed 5,000 people during the Anfal campaign, local people staged a major demonstration to embarrass dignitaries and stop them marking the occasion. A boy was killed when the crowd clashed with security forces.

Muhammad Tofiq, a member of the board of Wisha Company, which is close to the Change List, denied in a statement that it uses the miseries of Anfal victims in the election campaign, "Showing the picture of Anfal victims' relatives is not a form of campaigning. We in the Change List are against the use of the Anfal issue for the election."

Sardar Abdul-Karim, a member of the Independent High Electoral Commission, IHEC, said it had issued guidelines on the use of Anfal in the election campaign, "But if any political entity thinks that the use of Anfal in the election campaign will harm the process, it can file an appeal with the IHEC."

Anfal victims' advocate organisations say the parties have failed to submit specific projects or plans for compensating the relatives of Anfal victims but simply exploit the issue for electoral purposes.

Ahmad Majid, an official in charge of the Garmyan branch of the organisation Kurdocide Watch, said it has made a declaration and asked all the lists to produce plans to help the relatives of Anfal victims, "but up to now, no list has responded to our statement".

Anwar Hamalaw, who lost his parents and six siblings and a number of other relatives in Anfal operations, said, "Sadly, those in power have used Anfal as a tool to retain power."

Kurdistani List spokeswoman Sozan Shahab denied in a statement that the Kurdistani List has used the Anfal issue for the election campaign, but she said, "We have to remind people of the projects we have done for them."

She also said its members had helped Anfal victims' relatives practically, "During Dr Barham [Saleh's] term of office [as Iraqi Kurdistan prime minister], the most service was rendered to the relatives of Anfal victims. Salaries were allocated for them in addition to many other privileges."

Hamalaw called for Anfal not to be used for narrow partisan interests in election campaigns, "For the last 18 years, the parties have been using the miseries and tragedies of the past to attract people's sympathy. Now it is time to put forward their future plans and projects."

Campaigners ask that Anfal should be viewed as a national symbol, not a subject of partisan activity.

Sherzad Daudi, a member of the advocacy committee, said, "Before election time, no one pays any attention to the relatives of Anfal victims, but as the elections draw closer, they start to shout slogans in their favour.

"Instead of using Anfal in the campaign, it would be better to get them to carry out the death sentences issued against criminals indicted in the Anfal case."

Majid agreed with Daudi that Anfal should not be dealt with as a partisan subject, "The Baathist regime launched the Anfal campaign against us just because we were Kurds. It did not ask the victims which party they belonged to, so Anfal and chemical weapons should not be used for partisan interests.

"The relatives of Anfal victims have to be helped, not used as a tool to arouse the people's sympathy during elections."

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