

Women's Groups Seek Constitution Delay

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Iraqi women urge lawmakers to ensure their rights are protected.

Women's rights activists opposed to an Islamic-style government are lobbying for a postponement of the August 15 deadline for drafting a new Iraqi constitution, saying more public input is needed on the contentious question of what role religion should play in politics.

Prominent women including Azhar al-Shaikhali, the women's affairs minister, and Iraq's ambassador to Egypt, Safiyah Suhail, are alarmed that some members from the Shia group which dominates the National Assembly are pushing for Islam to be cited as "the main source of legislation" in the constitution. The women say the wording should instead say that Islam is "a main source" of legislation, the principle currently in effect in the Transitional Administrative Law.

Under Islamic law as commonly interpreted in Iraq, women are worth only half as much as men in matters such as marriage, divorce, child custody and inheritance. For example, when family members die, women are eligible for only half the inheritance that their male relatives receive, according to this legal tradition.

The women, who have won the support of former prime minister Ayad Allawi, plan to write to Iraq's political leaders as well as the United States to ask for their support in ensuring that laws passed in 1959 guaranteeing civil rights be maintained.

Suhail said they have chosen blue as their symbolic colour.

"Blue is the colour of heaven and water, which are the basic sources of life - and women too are the basic source of life," said Suhail, whose group includes Hamid Majid Musa, the (male) head of the Iraqi Communist Party, as well as female parliamentarians.

Under Saddam Hussein, Iraq was largely a secular society. But since he was ousted, the country has become more religious and insurgents have targeted women, particularly those who don't wear a headscarf.

It remains unclear what the final constitution will say, but Suhail's group along with various politicians and more than 50 civil society organisations have drafted a memo outlining principles that they think should be included.

Among their demands are equal rights clauses that would outlaw discrimination and guarantee rights for women.

The groups also want 40 per cent of government decision-makers to be female. Currently, there is a National Assembly quota of 25 per cent, but some lawmakers want a time limit on even this level to be written into the constitution - something the activists of course oppose.

Many of these issues were discussed last week during the National Conference for Iraqi Women, sponsored by the women's affairs ministry.

One of the most contentious issues was the role of religion in the state.

Faezah Baba-Khan, a Kurdish parliamentarian, said lawmakers should look at the freedom enjoyed by women in Iraqi Kurdistan, which is more secular than the rest of Iraq.

“It is important to have a constitution that separates religion from political power,” she said.

Hanaa Edward, head of the al-Amal humanitarian organisation, said that without progress on women’s issues there can be no democracy in Iraq. She also criticised politicians who were trying to manipulate the women’s agenda, saying, “there are some who are trying to use us as an instrument of the ambitions of their sects, which threatens to disunite Iraq”.

Amar al-Sharaa, a journalist from the independent Radio Dijla, was pessimistic that the pressure would have any effect.

“Those women who are decision makers belong to some party or bloc, while those who are independent won’t be given an opportunity to have power,” he said. “Those who are struggling for the rights of their daughters are regarded as outlaws.”

Raghad Ali is an IWPR trainee in Iraq.

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