

Women's Rights Candidate Keen to Make Impact

Founder of first all-female party wants to press for more women legislators.

The founder of Iraq's first all-female political party says she has a dream: that women's representation in parliament should be equal to that of men.

Jenan Mubarak says she is opposed to the current Iraqi constitution which mandates that women hold 25 per cent of the 325 seats in parliament.

"I want much more than a women's quota," she said. Only then, she added, can the problems of Iraqi women be properly addressed.

Born in Baghdad in 1961, Mubarak says that her eponymously-named party "represents a special community in Iraq. It came about from a need, from a faith, that I embraced inside myself".

Now, as Mubarak and roughly 6,500 other candidates prepare to stand in parliamentary elections on March 7, her goals are more specific: the Jenan Mubarak party, founded in 2008, is running on a platform of youth programmes, jobs, security and aid for Iraq's widows and divorced women.

"I want to tell women, 'You can do a lot.' I want them to know they have choices; that they can be whatever they want. 'Your achievements are who you are.' That's my message to women," she said.

"She is our leader and the woman who inspired us," said Rana Ahmed, 23, a Mubarak supporter who works as a camera operator. "She has taught many women how to earn a living by designing clothes, photography and using computers."

Mubarak, who has three children, has also called for a law that allocates ten per cent of all jobs in the public and private sector to qualified widows, divorced women and their relatives.

The Jenan Mubarak party claims to have 3,000 supporters, both men and women. In these elections, the party has sought to strengthen its cause by joining the Unity Alliance of Iraq, a coalition headed by Minister of Interior Jawad al-Bolani.

"To take the first step into politics takes courage. To take the second step you need protection from a big, independent bloc. I learned this lesson when we lost in the 2009 provincial elections as a single party," Mubarak said.

Mubarak graduated in geology from the University of Baghdad in 1981, and earned a degree in fashion design from Beirut University in 1996. Until 2003, she ran a clothes boutique.

After the toppling of Saddam Hussein, Mubarak founded the Iraqi Centre for Women's Rehabilitation and Employment, and later established the Iraqi Network for Peace, a grouping of NGOs that deal primarily with

women's issues and legal affairs. She has worked with the United Nations and other international organisations to help Iraq's internal refugees, displaced by years of conflict.

Women have borne the brunt of Iraq's many wars. Widows are struggling to make ends meet, while violence and conservatism are driving girls out of school.

Despite the quota system in parliament, women parliamentarians are often regarded as ineffective.

"Only a few women have been active in decision making during the former legislatures because they are members of political parties run by others and they can't express their own opinion," Mubarak said. "We need a strong woman's voice that has the ability to convince others in parliament."

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