



REUTERS

Iraqi woman defies threats, bullets to seek election

By Gideon Long

BAGHDAD, Jan 27 (Reuters) - Salama al-Khafaji's son was killed by Iraqi gunmen last year and she herself has survived several assassination attempts.

This month she was shot at in Baghdad and only this week militants sent a note to her sister threatening to hack off the heads of her children if Khafaji continued to stand as a candidate in Iraq's first postwar election on Sunday.

Khafaji is still standing.

"They gave me 72 hours to quit and told my sister they would kill her children if I didn't," she said. "I told her to leave her city immediately and go into hiding, which is what she did.

"I'm not backing down. For years we have been prevented from tasting what democracy is and it's important we go through with these elections."

Khafaji is one of Iraq's most prominent women politicians and a candidate on the main electoral list of Iraq's majority Shi'ite community, expected to do well in the vote.

An independent, she is campaigning for the rights of Iraq's many orphans, widows and detainees - the legacy of decades of war, repression and bloodshed.

Even when speaking to reporters inside the relative safety of the British ambassador's residence - a former palace of Saddam Hussein's son Uday inside Baghdad's heavily fortified Green Zone - Khafaji is shadowed by a bodyguard.

She says she has more than 25 bodyguards, most of them volunteers who

support her campaign.

Since the latest attempt on her life, when gunmen in police uniforms fired on her car as she drove to work on Jan. 16, Khafaji has not been out campaigning.

Instead, she and her assistants sit in her Baghdad office, drumming up support by e-mailing activists around the country, asking them to spread her message and woo voters.

On election day, she says she will disguise herself before she goes to vote. But, she insists, she will go, and expects millions of Iraqis to do the same.

"A recent poll suggested 82 percent of Iraqis want to vote," she said. "I don't think turnout will be that high because I think fear will keep many away, but if 50 percent vote, that will be a good result."

Dressed head-to-toe in a black Islamic robe, the 46-year-old plays down Iraq's sectarian divisions, saying that despite being a Shi'ite, she shares the same ideals as Sunni candidates on the United Iraqi Alliance list.

She cites security and reconstruction as priorities for Iraq and wants a timetable for the withdrawal of U.S.-led troops.

She is also conscious of the role women will play in the government which will emerge from this weekend's vote.

Under Iraq's complex electoral rules, a third of all candidates on election lists must be women, which should guarantee that around 25 percent of the members of the 275-strong National Assembly are women.

That is a higher percentage than in the U.S. Congress or the British parliament.

"Maybe a lot of these women don't have much experience," Khafaji said. "But we have to give them a chance."

© Reuters 2005