Kuwait's Snap Election Revives Parliamentary Opposition, But Not Reform

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Brief Analysis

While the new legislature is hardly a harbinger of deep reform, broader inclusiveness, or greater personal freedoms, it should be considered another welcome exception to the 'rule' that Arab democracy tends to produce instability, Islamist control, or sectarian oppression.

Kuwait held a snap parliamentary election on November 26, for the seventh time in just the past decade. This small but strategic, oil-rich hereditary emirate at the head of the Persian Gulf, sandwiched between Iran and Iraq, has the only fully functional parliament among the six Arab monarchies in the Gulf Cooperation Council. In this respect it roughly resembles the two other, non-oil-rich Arab monarchies of Jordan and Morocco, where elected parliaments also provide some outlets for popular sentiment and checks on the broad authority of the palace. The result in all cases has been political stability, but bordering on stagnation. True to form, Kuwait's election, while seemingly boosting the country's opposition forces, will likely prolong this trend.

More specifically, this latest Kuwaiti exercise in limited Arab democracy provides some intriguing lessons. The previous parliament was dismissed by the emir, as allowed by Kuwait's constitution, after deputies insisted on their right to grill cabinet ministers regarding controversial policy proposals. In this case those proposals were twofold: first, a cut in petrol subsidies and related forms of official largesse, to cope with the drastic decline in oil prices on which the government and the whole economy largely depend; and second, a further tightening of the ongoing security crackdown on free expression and association -- including an unprecedented requirement that every resident of the country submit a DNA sample for purposes of identification and possible investigation.

Both proposals were widely and understandably unpopular. But rather than confront and decide the issues directly, Kuwaiti officialdom took their typical "timeout" by calling an early election. Thus the first lesson of this episode is

really a reminder of previous ones: the parliamentary electoral maneuver usually works to defuse a political crisis, but at the price of postponing any serious policy departures, often indefinitely.

Second, the self-styled "opposition" abandoned the boycott approach it used during the two previous elections and was therefore able to score a dramatic comeback at the polls. These longstanding critics of Kuwaiti cabinets and policies are a mixed bunch, the more so as formal political parties are not allowed. Some are Sunni fundamentalists of the Muslim Brotherhood type, known locally as the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM); others are more traditional Salafis; and still others emphasize populist, nationalist, or occasionally even liberal positions.

In this iteration, ICM candidates garnered an estimated four of the fifty seats in parliament, plus an equal number of seats that sympathize with their views. Salafis did approximately the same. An additional eight or so seats went to candidates vaguely identified with other currents in the "loyal opposition," mainly of the populist or nationalist sort. Altogether, about half the chamber can now be regarded as outside the pro-government camp. This stands in sharp contrast to the previous two parliaments, where boycotts guaranteed the government solid majority support.

Significantly, thirty of the previous fifty members were not returned to office. In this sense, at least, the election serves as a safety valve for accumulated frustrations that might otherwise have spilled over into serious protests, as occurred sporadically between elections in 2011-2013.

Even so, roughly half of the parliament will remain pro-government. This segment is also a motley crew: some hardcore royalists, some tribal followers, some "service deputies" associated with patronage or other royal family favors, and six deputies from the Shiite minority of this Sunni-majority society. The nearly even balance between opposition and pro-government camps practically ensures both continued controversy and continued policy paralysis. Thus the outlook: stability in the streets, but little real reform.

The Shiite factor deserves special mention in this context. No official statistics on it are publicly available, but a 2015 survey supervised by the author confirmed that Shiites represent nearly a third of Kuwaiti citizens. As is often (though certainly not always) the case with religious or sectarian minorities around the world, they tend to side with a relatively moderate government for protection against intolerant extremists among the majority religion or sect. In Kuwait, social tensions between Sunnis and Shiites have increased substantially in recent years, largely in response to wider regional conflicts in which Iran's Shiite proxies are usually implicated. But in Kuwait, these tensions almost never escalate to mass violence.

Now that the Sunni opposition is back in the game, the Shiites "lost" three seats compared to the previous parliament, and they will be way down from their seventeen seats in the 2011 parliament, which more nearly reflected their proportion in the electorate. Nevertheless, Shiites remain active, vocal, and lawful participants in Kuwaiti politics and the country's overall economic and public life. One could rightly say that in a region tragically replete with bloody religious conflict, Kuwait remains an admirable oasis of calm and coexistence. It represents a victory, however fragile, for democracy over demography, and a model of peaceful political intercourse between two branches of Islam.

More broadly, though, how representative will the new parliament be of the country's overall population? The answer is, not so much. Turnout has been estimated at 70 percent, considerably higher than in other recent contests, mainly because the opposition returned to the fray. And the fifty seats were fiercely contested, with over 400 candidates initially registering for a spot. Yet some three-quarters of Kuwait's 4.5 million residents consist of noncitizen expatriate workers and several hundred thousand *bedoon* (stateless) Arab tribal residents in the border areas, none of whom can vote. Female citizens, by contrast, are allowed to vote and run for office, and around 10 percent of the early candidates in this round were women. But only one was elected, similar to the other occasions since women were granted the franchise in practice a decade ago. This will not be a diverse parliament in that

respect, though it is a democratically elected one.

For U.S. policy, the election should be considered another welcome exception to the "rule" that Arab democracy tends to produce either instability or some form of Islamist or sectarian control. Kuwait, small and vulnerable to external threats as it is, is still an important regional U.S. military outpost, global energy partner, and geographic buffer against potential Iranian aggression in the vital Gulf arena. Even if the incoming U.S. administration cares less about democracy abroad, or perhaps even about the Middle East altogether, it would be well advised to breathe a sigh of relief that Kuwait's election probably makes it at least one strategic country that Washington need not worry much about in that volatile region.

David Pollock is the Kaufman Fellow at The Washington Institute and director of Fikra Forum. ❖

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