

Kuwait's Elections: It's Not What Happens Now, but What Happens Next

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Brief Analysis

Tomorrow's parliamentary vote is unlikely to calm the country's domestic scene, and special interest groups outside the legislature may take up more air in Kuwait's political life for the time being.

Kuwait is set to hold national parliamentary elections on Saturday, July 27. Unlike in other Persian Gulf oil states, Kuwait's legislature holds real powers: it can pass or reject laws and grill cabinet ministers, who are often members of the ruling al-Sabah family. The country's political groups span a wide spectrum and include Sunni Islamists, Shiites, Arab nationalists, liberals, populists, and tribes. And while the government has cracked down unusually hard in recent months on those perceived to be insulting the emir (which is against the law) or inciting threats to security, Kuwaitis enjoy rich public political debate unlike anywhere else in the Gulf monarchies.

Yet domestic politics have been particularly turbulent since 2006, with the passing of longtime ruler Emir Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah and the separation of the role of crown prince and prime minister, which left the latter subject to more criticism than before. Tomorrow's parliamentary elections will be the sixth in seven years -- a period in which executive decrees and Constitutional Court findings have led to the dissolution of each elected parliament prior to the completion of its term.

A CALMING EFFECT?

One of the most important issues surrounding the elections is whether they will calm, worsen, or essentially maintain Kuwait's unsettled domestic political life. Two indicators suggest that the vote will not resolve the current predicament.

First, a majority of political groups plan to boycott the elections in protest against the government's unilateral amendment of the electoral law. That ruling, approved by the Constitutional Court in mid-June, changed the number of votes Kuwaitis can cast from four to one. (The parliament has five constituencies of ten seats each and, as before,

the top ten vote-getters in each constituency win.) Some see the change as a means of hindering opposition groups and boosting the chances of candidates who are more amenable to the government. The boycott includes Sunni Islamists, a Shiite alliance, populists, and liberals, though some members of the groups in question do plan to run. As in the December 2012 elections, Shiites will likely benefit from the boycott, with the government partly relying on them to balance others at a time of considerable Shiite-Sunni tension across the region.

A second factor is voter apathy. This election is the third in eighteen months, and the lack of enthusiasm surrounding it is palpable. Turnout for the December elections dipped to 40 percent, a low figure that was attributed to the boycott. Tomorrow's turnout is expected to be only slightly higher. This is a significant departure from Kuwait's typical turnout rates, including 60 percent in the February 2012 elections, 59 percent in 2009 and 2008, and over 90 percent in 2006. Holding the elections during the summer heat (when many Kuwaitis leave the country) and more than two weeks into Ramadan (when daytime activity decreases) could also depress turnout.

Kuwaitis were highly disappointed in the previous parliament, which was elected by relatively few voters, included only a minority of political groups, and in general operated as a rubber-stamp body for the government. Given the boycott and other factors, the new parliament may share those problems.

EVOLVING OPPOSITION TACTICS

Groups allied in the boycott have not presented the same kind of front that they did immediately preceding the December elections. During that period, Kuwait witnessed some of the largest demonstrations in its history, as opposition forces partnered to protest the ruler's decree regarding the number of votes an individual could cast -- the same issue under contention today. Reasons for the current lackluster protest movement include the Constitutional Court's support for the decree, public disillusionment and lack of interest regarding parliamentary politics, and the Gulf's hot summer temperatures, which can soar to 120 degrees.

Another factor is that the boycotting groups have been plagued by their differences and have little interest in cooperating, including over a basic opposition platform. Kuwaitis eager for change and poised for political action have grown further disillusioned with traditional modes of protest under the direction of politicians. As a result, special interest groups have emerged as an alternative route for political work. In a sense, this is a continuation of the country's trend toward unaligned youth movements.

One such group is the National Committee for Monitoring Violations. In announcing its formation in March 2013, the group explicitly maintained that it does not seek to challenge the Kuwaiti leadership or security authorities. Instead, its goals include tracking arrests and helping detained activists by connecting them with lawyers. The movement is reminiscent of grassroots efforts in Saudi Arabia, where some citizens have sought to spur political action through campaigns to release the kingdom's tens of thousands of political prisoners, many of whom were arrested on terrorism charges after 2003. The Saudi experience teaches that this kind of interest-group campaign can attract significant public and government attention.

ISLAMIST PROSPECTS

A major issue of interest for Kuwait and the rest of the region is the performance of Islamist groups following the ouster of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood-led government. Yet the Brotherhood and many hardline Salafists are boycotting tomorrow's elections, so much of their performance will have to be measured outside vote tallies and parliamentary activity.

Kuwait provides a broad and open political space for these Islamist factions to voice their views. In the Gulf, Bahraini groups also have opportunities to advocate their interests, but only because it is understood that they will cooperate with the government in parliament against majority Shiite groups.

The political group linked to the well-organized Kuwaiti Brotherhood -- the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), also known by the Arabic acronym Hadas -- has decried Muhammad Morsi's ouster just like other Brothers across the region. On July 6, three days after Morsi's fall, the ICM condemned the "coup on the constitution, democracy, and the gains of the popular revolution of January 25," denouncing "the role of all internal and external parties" in supporting the action. And after Kuwait pledged \$4 billion in aid to Egypt on July 10 (alongside Saudi and Emirati billions), the group argued that the money should be used toward domestic concerns. Several hundred ICM members participated in a rally denouncing the aid pledges.

Since its establishment following Kuwait's 1991 liberation from Iraq, the ICM has won only a handful of seats in parliamentary elections. Yet the group's current activities suggest that members feel emboldened by being "wronged" in Egypt, and that events in Cairo have galvanized them to make their voice heard on the issue. These sentiments may continue to evolve for as long as there are aftershocks in the region's most populous and, arguably, most influential country -- that is to say, probably for many months.

WIDER IMPLICATIONS

The election of a parliament that many Kuwaitis believe is not representative will have only a limited impact on the country's overall security dynamic. Yet Kuwait's continuing political paralysis tarnishes the image of parliamentary democracy in the eyes of many in the Gulf. Friends of democracy can only hope that Kuwaitis across the political spectrum find a way to work together more effectively through compromise and common dedication to the national interest.

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