

Kuwaiti Elections: Democracy in Action, or Inaction?

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Brief Analysis

Tomorrow, Kuwait's nearly 400,000 voters -- more than half of them women -- will go to the polls to elect a new parliament. The incoming body will replace the 2006 parliament that was dissolved by the ruling emir, Sheikh Sabah al-Sabah, for failing to work together with the cabinet. Kuwait's parliament is relatively powerful compared to others in the region, but tension with the royal family has often produced only deadlock. Still, the elections are an important and interesting exercise in Arab democracy and may even produce a more constructive political environment.

Debut of New Electoral System

This election is the first under a new districting system designed to reduce the influence of tribal politics, vote buying, and other antidemocratic abuses. Instead of twenty-five small districts -- where personal ties and influence inevitably loom large -- with two elected officials each, there will be five large (presumably more difficult to buy or control) districts with ten representatives each. Each voter will be able to select four from the approximately fifty-five candidates in each district, and the ten with the most votes will win parliamentary seats.

Under the old system, there was lively but highly fragmented competition for votes among different personalities and political tendencies, yielding a divided parliament that was often at odds with itself and the country's cabinet. Political paralysis was often the outcome, particularly when the development of Kuwait's oil and gas fields by foreign companies was up for debate.

This frustrating situation led many Kuwaitis to wonder if the price of democracy would be slow economic and social development, in contrast to neighboring Dubai, Abu Dhabi, Bahrain, or Qatar. Kuwait's new electoral system intends to promote more coherent and cooperative legislative activity, but electoral reforms often have unintended

consequences or no consequences at all.

Looking Ahead

Evaluating the election's outcome is not a straightforward enterprise. There will be many new faces since nearly one-third of the previous legislators are not in the running. At the same time, there will be a significant number of tribal representatives who will differ little in outlook from their predecessors.

Women may be elected to parliament for the first time in the country's history. They were given the right to vote and run for public office last election, but none were elected then, and it is unclear whether the new electoral system will help change the gender makeup. If such change does unfold, it would be a welcome symbolic milestone. Yet, since no more than one or two of the twenty-seven female candidates are likely to be elected, they will probably have little impact on the legislative process.

The most important change could take place in the proportion of Islamist (Sunni) members, previously the largest single bloc with seventeen seats. Most expect the number of Islamists and other traditionalists to decline slightly. If this occurs, there could be significant movement on reform and social issues such as gender segregation in school, which have caused heated debate during the campaign.

Equally important, especially for economic and energy policies, will be the new balance between pragmatists, who often support government initiatives, and the populist or nationalist opposition blocs, who often vote against them.

Overall Prospects

In addition to informal polling results and anecdotal reports, a recent semiofficial projection (which mysteriously appeared in the Kuwaiti press) suggests that the overall makeup of the incoming parliament will be similar to the 2006 body. This means the Islamist and tribal blocs would each control about one-third of the seats, with the remaining third split among populist, liberal, and Shiite groups.

Like before, this would leave the parliament short of a working majority and lead to continued policy gridlock and political confrontation, though not enough to cause political instability. In other words, the most plausible scenario is more of the same, despite the new districting system and the likely appearance of many new faces in parliament. But the balance of contending political forces is close enough that just a few small shifts could create a cooperative relationship between the royal family and the cabinet on the one hand, and the legislative branch on the other.

The Shiite Factor

Kuwait has long enjoyed relative harmony between its Sunni majority and Shiite minority communities. Earlier this year, however, Shiite Hizballah supporters in Kuwait gained temporary popularity after the cabinet harshly criticized the mourners of Imad Mughniyeh, the terrorist mastermind killed by a car bomb in Damascus in February, and arrested several of them during the mourning ceremony. When Hizballah stands against an external "enemy" such as Israel, the organization's popularity outside Lebanon swells. In contrast, when the group induces civil war -- much like the recent tension it caused with Lebanese government forces and Sunni militias -- its regional support is undermined significantly.

The Lebanese crisis has made it difficult for Hizballah supporters elsewhere to advocate the organization's cause explicitly or publicly raise its flag. In the run-up to the election, Kuwaiti newspapers have published articles about Hizballah's negative role in Lebanon and blamed Iran for supporting the group. A few additional voices extended this cautionary note to fundamentalists of every stripe, whether Shiite or Sunni. Some prominent liberal democrats warned Kuwaitis not to vote for Islamist candidates in order to prevent their country from suffering Lebanon's fate.

The main adversaries of Shiite candidates are Salafists and other Sunni fundamentalists, as was the case in the 2006 election. At that time, a former oil minister told a reporter that Shiites wanted to be represented by their sectarian

brethren, but if that was not possible, "they would prefer to be represented by liberal Sunnis and not fundamentalists." There will certainly be at least a handful of prominent Shiites elected, but due to voter fragmentation, they will probably make up no more than about 10 percent of parliament, even though they represent nearly 30 percent of the population. By informally allying with the liberals, however, Kuwaiti Shiites will hope to preserve the nation's historical sectarian coexistence, despite resurgent internal conflicts in other regional countries.

U.S. Policy

For the United States, the Kuwaiti elections coincide neatly with President Bush's Middle East visit, highlighting his policy of encouraging democracy in the region, which has otherwise had mixed results. Kuwait, liberated by U.S.-led forces following Saddam Hussein's 1990 invasion, is an Islamic but pro-American country. Although dissonance between Kuwait's government and parliament is likely to remain, this exercise in Arab democracy is a cause for at least modest celebration.

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