Kuwait's Elections Exacerbate Differences between Ruler and Parliament

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Brief Analysis

The June 29 parliamentary elections in Kuwait achieved international media coverage because women were allowed to stand for office and vote for the first time in the sheikhdom. Less well reported were the local political divisions that had brought about elections a year earlier than expected. The results of the balloting -- in which, incidentally, none of the women candidates won office -- worsened the divisions between the Kuwaiti government and the National Assembly and could lead to greater public disagreement about the character of the country's alliance with the United States.

The Role of Elections in Kuwait

Kuwaitis are proud of their active political heritage -- elections were first held in 1963. The National Assembly building became an icon for Kuwaiti independence after the invasion by Saddam Hussein in 1990, when it was trashed by Iraqi troops. But democracy has not come without setbacks. The emir suspended parliament from 1976 to 1981 because he judged it was not acting in the country's interests (it had been delaying legislation). It was dissolved again in 1986. New elections were only held in 1992, months after the liberation from Iraqi occupation -- and then only after international pressure on the emir. The Assembly was suspended again in 1999 after a row over misprints in copies of the Quran published by the state.

No political parties are allowed in Kuwait, but candidates usually belong to ideological groupings with a range of labels -- (Sunni) Islamic fundamentalists, conservative tribal leaders, Shiite Islamists, liberal technocrats, radical Arab nationalists -- as well as hard to categorize individuals simply called independents. There are fifty elected seats in the National Assembly; an additional fifteen seats are given to the appointed members of the cabinet, which is dominated by the ruling al-Sabah family. Controversy over the number of electoral constituencies prompted the June elections. There had been twenty-five voting districts, each electing two representatives, but opposition members, angered by vote-buying, wanted the number reduced to just five constituencies electing ten members each. Many felt that larger constituencies would reduce the influence of tribal leaders, who are generally progovernment, while facilitating the election of more ideological candidates -- both Islamists and liberals -- and more candidates from outside the power elite, such as Shiites and possibly women. The government was prepared to

compromise on ten five-seat constituencies. When there was no agreement, the Assembly was dissolved in May and elections announced on the basis of the old twenty-five constituency formula.

The Assembly's growing power was demonstrated earlier in the year when the long-serving emir, Sheikh Jaber, died and was replaced by his cousin, Crown Prince Sheikh Saad. But the new emir was already physically and mentally incapacitated, as well as older than his predecessor, and within ten days the National Assembly invoked a previously unused constitutional right and voted to oust him. He was replaced by Sheikh Sabah, who had been the prime minister. If Sheikh Sabah was humbled by the method of his succession, his humility was fleeting. He promptly defied convention by appointing his younger brother as crown prince and his nephew as prime minister instead of following the precedent of alternating succession between two branches of the al-Sabah family, with a concomitant sharing of the top jobs. Not only was the al-Sabah family offended, but ordinary Kuwaitis were reported to have seen the move as arrogant, increasing a popular sense of futility.

Government Opponents Win Majority

During the recent campaign, an "Orange movement" was formed with the aim of shaking young Kuwaitis from political apathy. As many as twenty-nine of the outgoing Assembly members supported the movement. In the event, campaigning was also enlivened by the participation of women.

Local analysts say that thirty-six seats in the new National Assembly are held by candidates who campaigned publicly for changing the electoral system to five constituencies, compared with twenty-nine in the outgoing parliament. Assuming that this alliance holds together, the group has a slim majority of the sixty-five seats. The first legislative skirmish is likely to come over members of the cabinet, who must be approved by the National Assembly. Sheikh Sabah has reappointed his nephew Sheikh Nasser as prime minister and asked him to choose a cabinet. Several of the newly elected representatives have predicted trouble if two particular ministers and another minister of state, whom they regard as corrupt, are appointed.

The advocates of the electoral change rejected by the government are often described as "reformists." This is probably a misnomer. (It is certainly confusing, as the government has presented itself as "reformist" as well.) The largest contingent of this bloc is made up of Islamists. They gained three seats, giving them a total of twenty-one. Yet it was the Islamists, as well as the tribal leaders, who had been against government proposals allowing women to participate politically in 1999. The measure was passed only last year. Ironically, some of the success of the Islamists in the polls is now credited to the women's organization of the Muslim Brotherhood -- candidates identified with the group increased their seats from two to six.

One policy likely to suffer further delays is the government proposal to invite foreign oil companies to operate in some of the sheikhdom's aging fields, potentially raising production from 2.5 million barrels per day to 4 million. But this goes against the nationalist sentiments of the opposition Assembly members. Chevron and ExxonMobil lead two of the three consortia bidding for the project.

Generally speaking, the opposition parliamentarians are critical of the closeness of the relationship between Washington and the al-Sabah family, which remains hugely grateful that U.S.-led forces liberated Kuwait from Saddam in 1991 and restored its rule. The opposition would prefer to see a gradual reduction in the U.S. military presence in Kuwait -- an estimated 20,000 troops are very visible in such a small country, and there is resentment that large areas of desert have been handed over for use by U.S. troops. This could affect the crucial role that Kuwait plays in the logistical support for U.S. forces in Iraq. The bulk of the resupply for forces in Iraq comes by ship to Kuwaiti ports and then moves by road into Iraq.

The next few weeks will be challenging for Kuwaiti politics. Emir Sheikh Sabah and his prime minister, Sheikh Nasser, will face pressures from the newly invigorated parliament, but they could split the opposition bloc,

especially if the Islamists follow a partisan agenda that alienates them from other groupings. Although Kuwaiti politics are parochial, the close proximity of both Iran and Iraq mean the sheikhdom is vulnerable to destabilization by regional events or subversion.

The June elections are also a reminder of the lesson already learned in Egypt, Iraq, and the West Bank and Gaza that encouraging elections and a broader franchise does not necessarily lead to wider acceptance of the value of close relations with the United States.

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