

Women in Gulf Politics:

A Progress Report

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On June 20, 2005, Kuwait's first female cabinet minister, Massouma al-Mubarak, was sworn in, taking responsibility for the planning portfolio. Six months earlier, a woman was appointed minister of economy and planning in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Women have assumed ministerial posts in Bahrain and Oman as well. And in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman, women now have the right to vote. Indeed, women's political rights, previously nonexistent in the conservative Arab Gulf states, have undergone extraordinary growth in recent years. Yet, how much progress has there really been, given that women's representation in this region is still poor even compared with the rest of the Arab world? In particular, can the United States, which actively encourages enhanced rights for women, do anything about Saudi Arabia's anomalous lack of such progress?

Setting the U.S. Agenda

By coincidence, June 20 was also the day that Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice gave a major address at the American University in Cairo, reversing sixty years of U.S. policy that had "pursued stability at the expense of democracy" in the Middle East and "achieved neither." Washington is now "taking a different course," she asserted, "supporting the democratic aspirations of all people." A month earlier, at an Arab businesswomen's summit in Tunis, Undersecretary of State for Global Issues Paula Dobrianski had stated, "Women's rights are not a 'women's issue.' They are a fundamental building block for democracy, prosperity, and stability." Both speeches built on President George W. Bush's November 2003 address to the National Endowment for Democracy, in which he stated, "The future of Muslim nations will be better for all with the full participation of women."

Disparity between the Arab and Wider Muslim Worlds

In general, Muslim-majority states, as opposed to just Arab states, have respectable credentials when it comes to women in political leadership. Benazir Bhutto served twice as prime minister of Pakistan. Khaleda Zia is currently serving her second term as prime minister of Bangladesh; Sheikh Hasina has also held that position. And Megawatti Sukarnoputri recently served as president of Indonesia

Yet, the UN-sponsored 2003 Arab Human Development Report highlighted a deficit in women's empowerment in the

Arab world. This deficit was confirmed by April 2005 statistics from the Interparliamentary Union, which ranked Arab states last with regard to women's representation in national legislatures. The conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf had the poorest figures of all, even after the advances of recent years. Oman, the highest-ranked of these states, was 123rd. (For comparison, the United States was ranked 61st, with 15.2 percent of Congress composed of women members, while Israel was ranked 62nd, with 15 percent female representation in the Knesset.)

Within this group, advances in political rights vary from country to country. Kuwait's new planning minister, Massouma al-Mubarak, won her position despite opposition by tribal representatives and Islamists in the Kuwaiti national assembly. Moreover, the national assembly approved suffrage for women in May 2005 with the backing of the ruling al-Sabah family. A 1999 attempt to give women the right to vote had been blocked by the procedural maneuvers of conservative assembly members. (Ironically, al-Mubarak herself was unable to vote in the municipal elections held earlier in June despite the assembly's approval of suffrage. Citizens can only register to vote each February; consequently, Kuwaiti women will not get a chance to vote until the next parliamentary elections, scheduled for 2007.)

Qatar pioneered women's political rights in the Gulf, permitting women to vote in municipal elections as early as 1999. They were also permitted to stand as candidates; several ran, but none were elected. In 2003, Qatari voters, including women, approved a new constitution. Sheikha Mouza, the principal wife of ruler Sheikh Hamad al-Thani, has been particularly influential, calling for improved educational opportunities and encouraging American universities to establish campuses in Qatar.

Bahrain, Qatar's neighbor and rival, followed a different route, initially appointing four women (one a Christian) to the ruler's consultative council in 2000. The following year, both men and women voted in a referendum on a new constitution, establishing a bicameral parliament and making the ruler a king. In 2004, King Hamad al-Khalifa made Nada Hafadh, a doctor and (appointed) member of the upper house, the minister of health. And in January 2005, Fatima al-Balooshi was appointed minister of social affairs.

The UAE does not have any elected bodies. Its Federal Supreme Council consists of the rulers (all men) of the country's seven emirates, who in turn choose the forty members of the all-male Federal National Council for two-year terms. In 2002, Sheikha Fatima, the most visible wife of the late UAE president Sheikh Zayed al-Nahyan, declared that women would soon be appointed to the latter council, but nothing came of her announcement. Following municipal elections in Saudi Arabia in early 2005, two UAE university professors were quoted as saying that members of the FNC should be elected. Meanwhile, in December 2004, Sheikh Khalifa, Zayed's son and successor, appointed Sheikha Lubna al-Qasimi as minister of economy and planning. An American-educated information technology specialist, she had previously run the "e-government" project for Dubai.

Oman announced in 1997 that women could stand for election in the lower chamber of the country's consultative council, and two women were in fact elected. It was not until 2002, however, that Sultan Qaboos gave all citizens over twenty-one the right to vote. In 2003, Qaboos gave Sheikha Aisha al-Siyabiah the status of minister in her role as president of the craft industries authority. Since then, two other women have been appointed as government ministers, with responsibility for tourism and higher education.

Saudi Inertia

Secretary Rice referred to Saudi Arabia with "promise" in her Cairo speech because she recalled seeing "the image of a father who went to vote with his daughter" in the recent municipal elections. Yet, the reality in the kingdom is bleak: standing alongside Rice the next day, Foreign Minister Prince Saud al-Faisal, considered a modernist in local terms, told reporters that he had not read her speech. Although government officials have indicated that women will be permitted to vote in municipal elections in another five years, many conservative princes and religious leaders

oppose such a measure. In fact, Interior Minister Prince Nayef, widely perceived as an opponent to reform, even criticized suggestions that women be permitted to drive, arguing, “We should avoid being an echo of what is proposed in other countries.”

Recommendations

In addition to advancing suffrage, political reforms aimed at increasing women’s participation also force societies to tackle issues that might otherwise cause domestic friction or even interstate conflict and terrorism. Although the oil-rich economies of the conservative Arab Gulf states provide a cushion of often-generous subsidies that blunt political problems, the growth of al-Qaeda cells, particularly in Saudi Arabia, demonstrates the perils of political stagnation.

The gains made by women in Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Indonesia reflect not only their political heritage, but also the past educational opportunities of the individual women who have attained leadership positions. Similarly, female politicians in Arab Gulf states have usually benefited from foreign education; the new Kuwaiti minister has a doctorate and two master’s degrees from the United States. This suggests that reviving U.S.-based educational opportunities for foreigners (hampered by post–September 11 visa hurdles) is a key element in facilitating democratic progress, even if the pace of change is slow.

Simon Henderson is a London-based senior fellow of The Washington Institute and author of [The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy \(templateC04.php?CID=33\)](#) (2003). ❖

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