

Kuwait Elections:

A Referendum on Reform?

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Brief Analysis

Kuwait is in a region characterized by contradictions and dichotomies between young and old, state and society, religion and politics, and national identity and globalization. The Kuwaiti experiment is part of a regional experiment, and what takes place there has an impact on the Arab world, particularly on the other countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

The fifty members of Kuwait's unicameral parliament, the National Assembly (Majlis al-Umma) are elected to four-year terms. Under the 1963 constitution, which was meant to balance the traditional and modern components of Kuwaiti society, parliament members enjoy strong rights. Not only does every bill require parliamentary approval to become a law, but the parliament can also veto a law proposed by the government or impose a law rejected by the government. Parliamentarians have a right to a vote of non-confidence in a minister. In addition, the Kuwaiti press is extremely free and open, particularly since 1992, when a seven-year censorship period came to an end.

The Recent Dissolution of the Parliament: The May 4 dissolution of parliament was the climax of growing tensions between parliament and the government. Since 1992, the Kuwaiti parliament had been dominated by two main forces: the Islamists and the old nationalist opposition, spearheaded by the Speaker of the House. Both forces came together and formed an agenda heavily tied to Islamic issues, including the segregation (by gender) of Kuwait University; criticism of the Kuwaiti minister of information for allowing banned books to be displayed and sold at an Arab book fair; and targeting of the minister of justice and Islamic affairs for allowing the circulation of copies of the Qur'an that contained typographical errors and accidental omissions. The crisis reached a boiling point, leading to the dissolution of parliament. For the first time, however, parliament was dissolved through entirely constitutional means, and new elections were scheduled for July 3, 1999.

In recent years, when crises occurred, the emir did not dissolve the parliament. Usually, the emir does not resort to such extreme measures. This suggests that the emir had a plan of reform in mind when he took this step, though he kept this plan from the government and his closest advisers.

Emiri Decrees: Within days of the dissolution, the government promulgated sixty laws dealing with women's suffrage, economic liberalization, and nationality.

Women's Suffrage: On May 16, the emir unexpectedly issued a decree allowing women the right to vote and to hold public office. Provided the new parliament approves this decree, women will be allowed to register to vote in

February 2000 and will be able to exercise their new political rights in the next parliamentary elections, which are scheduled for 2003. Women are a very productive and hard working group in Kuwait, constituting about 70 percent of university students and 65 percent of the faculty. It appears that the emir has recognized the role women play, and feels that it is time to expand their rights. It is possible that he took into account that such a move would stir the debate on the direction of the country. There is no doubt that once the door to women's rights is opened in Kuwait, it will affect the region as a whole.

Economic Reform: The emir approved several laws on economic liberalization, including one that allows for direct foreign investment in capital and technology without a Kuwaiti partner or guarantor; a law on intellectual property rights; a law allowing foreigners to trade on the Kuwait Stock Exchange and to own stocks in Kuwaiti holding companies; a law privatizing Kuwait Airways; and a law subsidizing the entry of Kuwaitis into the private sector.

Nationality: The cabinet has also addressed the issue of the so-called bidoons, or citizens without documents (stateless people). Kuwait has decided to use the 1965 census as the cutoff point for granting nationality to bidoons. The government will nationalize 1,000 to 6,000 persons by next year and will correct residency status for several thousand more.

Election Campaign: At first, there was wide criticism of the emir's decrees -- especially the women's suffrage proposal -- and they became heated issues in the election because parliament can amend these decrees. The government responded to this criticism with legal means. It threatened to close all associational groups, including the Islamist ones. It also acted to muzzle some eighty preachers who had attacked the emir's decision, on the grounds that they were subject to the Ministry of Religious Affairs. The government's actions, in the end, made the Islamists rethink their position.

Nearly 500 candidates initially announced their participation in the election campaign, yet the number dropped to 288 on the last day of registration. Most of the campaigning is done through the tradition of the diwaniyya -- an evening session held weekly by each family, where men get together and discuss issues of the day. During election campaigns, these gatherings are held in large open-air tents, which serve as campaign headquarters. Some candidates have women campaign managers and even invited women speakers and attendees.

A Referendum on the Kuwaiti Experiment: The Kuwaiti elections could be regarded as a referendum by all political forces in society on the sixty laws decided upon by the Kuwaiti government and on the Kuwaiti democratic experiment at large. It seems that there is a consensus on the need for a change of the position of the Speaker of the House -- a change that would alter the relations between the executive and the legislative. If relations between the legislative and the executive decline further, one might expect a new constitutional crisis that would lead to further stagnation. Kuwaitis do not want to see their country decline further. Their awareness that things need to change could be reflected in a moderate composition of parliament.

Kuwait today yearns for a stronger, more technically capable government. Kuwait enjoys a legacy of popular participation in decision making, which makes the Kuwaiti experiment one of the more advanced experiments in the Arab world today. This process, however, is far from complete.

Iraq, Iran, and the Peace Process: Kuwait feels that U.S. policy can and should do more to bring about a change of regime in Iraq. There is a feeling that U.S. policy was successful in Kosovo, and there are hopes that a similar U.S. resolve will be applied to Iraq.

Kuwait's relationship with Iran, which reached a low ebb in the 1980s, improved since 1990, when the Iranian position became more acceptable. Iran condemned the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and hosted Kuwaitis who sought refuge. Iran's current policy of de-escalation has had a positive impact and generated a positive feeling.

The 1991 Gulf War brought about a change of attitude vis-_-vis the Arab-Israeli peace process, with many Kuwaitis,

especially the youth, today supporting the notion of peace. Although Kuwait is ready for peace, were it to act on its own, it would strain its relations with the Arab countries.

Kuwait attended the Madrid Conference, subsequent donor conferences, and some multilateral meetings, but Kuwait has never hosted a multilateral session. Because of its precarious position on the frontline of Iraq, Kuwait seeks to avoid giving any extra provocation that might hurt its security. For Kuwait, relations with Syria are crucial, so it is waiting for significant progress in the Syrian-Israeli negotiations, so it can then take more public steps toward normalization.

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