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Kuwait Parliamentary Elections: Women Making History

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On May 16, 2009, Kuwaitis went to the polls for the third time in the last three years. A continuing political crisis between the government and parliament had resulted in repeated dissolutions of the parliament by the Amir, Shaikh Sabah al-Ahmad. Despite this recent record, Kuwait has had the most influential parliament among Arabian Peninsula states during the last half-century, and it rates high in comparison to other parliaments in the Middle East as a whole.

Harsh criticism of the government by Islamists is generally cited as the cause of the recent repeated dissolutions of the Kuwaiti parliament . But there was also another, less apparent reason. In 2006, a power struggle among factions of the Sabah ruling family resulted in the unprecedented removal of the Amir, Sa'ad Abdullah al-Sabah, on health grounds. More importantly his family branch, known from the beginning of the 20th century as the "Salemiyya", was totally excluded from the line of succession. This dramatic move, resembling the usurpation of the throne by Mubarak al-Sabah in 1896, was reportedly accepted peacefully but in fact

impelled "Salemiyya" supporters, many of them Islamists but also some liberals, to do their utmost to undermine parliamentary and governmental stability.

The atmosphere surrounding last month's elections was extremely tense: for the first time, the military supervised the 94 polling stations (47 for men and 47 for women). A month before the elections, three candidates were arrested and detained for publicly criticizing the ruling family. One of them decided to withdraw his candidacy before the election but the others were elected in spite of, or probably because of their arrest.

The country's financial crisis was generally deemed to be the main issue during the campaign. The country's current economic forecast is sobering. The Kuwaiti stock exchange lost about half of its value over the past year. The frequent dissolutions of the parliament had aggravated the economic difficulties, causing a proposed stimulus package of five billion dollars to be placed on hold. The Cabinet recently had been forced to cancel a 14 billion dollar project after a parliamentary investigation found that the state-owned company in charge of the project had not followed correct procedures in awarding contracts.

Whatever the effect of the economy on the elections, the big surprise, internationally and domestically alike, was the first-ever election of four women to the fifty-member parliament. Women had obtained the right to vote and be elected only in 2005. After two failed attempts in the 2006 and 2008 elections, women activists were hoping this time to attain at least one seat. Some optimistically talked about two seats, but almost no one imagined winning four. Many Kuwaiti commentators believed that it was just too soon for women. Abd al-Rahman Alyan, the editor-in-chief of the English-language daily *Kuwaiti Times* declared just a day before the vote

that "it will take them [the women] another two or three elections to get into parliament." No less surprising was the fact that two of the four women won first and second places, respectively, in their constituencies (each of the five constituencies elects ten representatives).

The four victorious women, Ma'asuma al-Mubarak, Asil al-Awadhi, Rola Dashti and Salwa al-Jassar all hold doctoral degrees from US universities. Al-Mubarak was the first woman nominated to be minister in 2005 but had to resign last year; al-Awadhi came in 11th in her constituency in 2008, missing being the first woman elected to parliament by only a few votes; Dashti, who had been a candidate in both in 2006 and 2008, is considered one of the leading human rights activists in Kuwait; al-Jassar is an education professor and was relatively unknown in the public sphere.

There are several explanations for this surprise result. In light of the economic crisis and continuing political instability, these elections could be called the "elections of despair." Only 58% of the 384,790 registered voters actually voted (around 225,000), down from 65% in 2008 and more than 75% in 2006. 211 candidates (16 women) ran for the 50 seats, down from 249 candidates (27 women) in 2006 and 275 candidates (27 women) in 2008. Given the prevailing gloomy atmosphere, women candidates rightly focused on the need for change, while refraining from elaborating upon their ideas in order not to alienate potential voters. Dashti used the Obama-like slogan "I Can" to encourage voters to consider voting for a woman, a concept which may have seemed impossible just a few years earlier. In contrast, Islamists called upon voters to refrain entirely from voting for women, a strategy which turned out to be counterproductive. The low turnout apparently assisted the women candidates, and probably benefited other minority groups as well, at the expense of more established organized factions. Islamist groups in particular lost much ground. The hardline

"Hadas" faction (*al-Haraka al-Dusturiyya al-Islamiyya*; "Islamic Constitutional Movement") declined from three seats to just one and the traditional Salafis lost two of their four seats. More interestingly, even the winners attained only the bottom places in their constituencies, in contrast to previous elections. The Shi'i community scored the biggest win, attaining nine seats, up from five from last year, including two of the victorious women (Mubarak and Dashti). Tribes remained totally in control of two of the five constituencies (the 4th and 5th), so they again attained about half of the seats in parliament. Among them, it can be seen that hardliner Islamists lost some ground, but on the whole most of those elected can be classified as conservative/traditionalist.

A few days after the elections, the Amir decided to reappoint Prime Minister Shaikh Nasir al-Muhammad, his nephew. Attacks on the PM had been the immediate cause for the previous dissolutions of parliament. So the answer to the main question in Kuwait – will the political instability and parliament dissolutions continue – is probably yes. Will this harm the ruling family and undermine the regime? Probably not. It should be remembered that the Kuwaiti parliament system has existed for almost 50 years, but Kuwait's dominant families have been ensconced for over 250 years. For the newly elected women representatives, this means that they probably soon will have to battle again for their seats, leaving them limited opportunities to first prove their abilities in the new parliament.

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