

Politics, Elections and the “Reality” of Women’s Rights in Kuwait

Written by Richard Rousseau, Contributor | 08 April 2013



Political authoritarianism has been constant feature in the Arab political systems, and despite the ongoing “Arab Spring,” there is a continuing tendency to prevent women from freely participating in political processes. Recently, a handful of Arab countries have consented to slightly alter their political systems so as to allow women and opposition groups to have a greater say on political issues. Nevertheless, the Arab Middle East as a whole is still a long way from being a region where women are engaged in political life. Politics in the Gulf monarchies or states making up the Fertile Crescent still remains a male-dominated profession. The ratio of female to male politicians is significantly small in comparison to other regions of the world.

Some positive changes have been made in Bahrain (women have the right to vote since 2002, but none have ever been elected to parliament so far) and Morocco where more women are now included in politics and government. In 2003 Egypt appointed the first women judge, and Qatar saw the appointment of the first woman to the cabinet of ministers.

Kuwait, however, is a ‘special case’ in the Arab Middle East. Until 2005, the all-male Kuwaiti parliament excluded women from all political processes. In fact, only about 15 percent of Kuwaiti citizens had the right to vote. However, on May 16, 1999 the first steps towards electoral change were taken. Emir Jaber, who reigned from 1977 to 2006, unpredictably issued a decree allowing women the right to vote and hold public office; however, the Kuwaiti parliament rejected the decree on the ground that it was legislated by decree. Then, on May 16, 2004 the Cabinet of Ministers approved a new women’s suffrage bill, but a year later, on May 3, 2005, the Islamist and conservative elements in parliament abstained from voting on the bill, and therefore the parliament postponed the vote on women’s suffrage bill. It was not until May 17th of the same year that the parliament finally passed the law, giving women the right to vote and hold public office.

Between the establishment of the parliament in 1963 as part of the country’s first post-independence constitution and the passage of the women’s suffrage bill, Kuwait’s parliament had been the sole preserve of men. Among the most activist groups for the recognition of fundamental political and social rights to women are the Kuwait Federation of Women’s Association and the Women’s Cultural and Social Society, both accredited by the government as representatives of Kuwaiti women. They are also authorized by the central government to hold meetings and organize events against the exclusion of women from the political scene.

Kuwaiti politics has featured constant clashes between the government and the elected MPs during the past decade. On March 19, 2008, Emir Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah dissolved the National Assembly and announced that a parliamentary election would be held on May 17, 2008. A total of 361,685 Kuwaitis turned out to vote, 57 percent of them women. While 27 of the 275 election candidates were women, none of the female candidates won. Kuwait's voters handed a slight victory to reformists who formed a loose alliance with Islamists in order to control two thirds of the seats.

Emir al-Sabah once again dissolved the parliament on March 18 2009, due to an unresolved conflict between some members of the government and the Assembly, and called for another poll two months later.

The May 16-17, 2009 parliamentary election marked a breakthrough in Kuwaiti politics. More than 195,000 women voted, and of the twenty-eight who ran for seats in the parliament four emerged winners. Massouma al-Mubarak, a cabinet minister in 2005, Salwa al-Jassar and Aseel al-Awadhi, both U.S.-educated professors, and Rola Dashti, an economist, were the first women to obtain seats in the Kuwaiti parliament or anywhere in the Gulf.

Their victories were an achievement for Kuwait and a beckon of hope for the whole region; they were also personal triumphs since they came out victorious without organized political parties to support them or a quota system. Most analysts construed the election of woman MPs and female suffrage as huge leaps forward for Kuwait's democracy.

The 1990 occupation of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein's Iraq proved instrumental in liberalizing the country and granting women political and social rights. Between August 2, 1990 and February 25, 1991, the period of the occupation, thousands of Kuwaiti women took on important responsibilities: running hospitals to compensate for the lack of trained medical staff, or risking their lives by engaging in smuggling food, money, and weapons across military Iraqi checkpoints.

Another cycle of tensions and deadlocks between the Kuwaiti government and parliament unfolded in 2011 in the midst of the Arab Spring. Amid opposition-led rallies and protests in many Islamic countries, including Kuwait, numerous corruption claims were levied in the Kuwaiti parliament. This forced the Prime Minister and his cabinet to resign in November 2011. The Emir again called for early elections in February 2012.

The opposition scored a massive victory in the February 2012 parliamentary elections. The elections produced a National Assembly with an unprecedented majority of opposition groups in an alliance between Islamists and tribes controlling 35 of the 50 seats. The election saw a decline in the weight and presence of the liberal movements, including women's movements, and those representing the Shiite sect.

Throughout the last decade there were repeated hopes that changes of MPs would bring about a more constructive and consensual parliament. Such hopes came to fruition, especially in 2009, when, among other changes, four women were elected to parliament for the first time. Yet in practice, the elected candidates who battled for a more cooperative relationship with the government, including the four women, were defeated at the polls in the next election in February 2012. This result suggested that the public was not convinced that a consensual parliament was the right approach, or that women could make a significant difference.

Kuwaiti politics took another strange turn when in June 2012 the constitutional court nullified the election and scrapped parliament, and the judges ruled for the reinstatement of the 2009 assembly in July. But the 2009 pro-government assembly was again dissolved by the Emir in December 2012 following a cabinet request and protests by the opposition amid allegations of corruption against some cabinet members and former Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser Mohammad al-Ahmad Al-Sabah. The December 2012 polls were the second of the year and the fifth since June 2006.

In the December 1, 2012 election, turnout was 40.3 percent, the lowest in Kuwaiti election history. The boycott of the election by tens of thousands of people can easily explain this low participation; consequently, the opposition, composed of Islamists and liberals, has no representatives in the 50-seat Kuwaiti Parliament. The widespread boycott was a major blow to Kuwait's efforts to represent itself as more democratic than its neighbors, especially to the international community.

For the first time the Shiite minority gained more than one third of the seats, with 17 out of 50 seats in the parliament. Compared to the previous 2009 election, Sunni Islamists were reduced to a minority status, and only three women managed to win a majority of votes in their districts. It became clear that the right to vote and hold public offices, given by the Emir's decree, will not be enough to discuss and solve Kuwaiti women's issues, including forced early marriage and a lack of professional opportunities for young women.

Efforts to democratize and enfranchise Kuwaiti society, and the Arab Middle East, are ongoing. The political competition between the head of state, parliament, and various opposition Kuwaiti groups defending diverse ideologies and platforms has been fierce, and more recently turned violent. In such circumstances, women's rights and empowerment issues are marginalized by the male elite. The task of reforming women's human rights issues and gender and social roles is then incumbent on individual activists and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), along with occasional external pressures. As long as Kuwaiti women's issues remain out of public view and the number of female deputies does not increase, the parliament, dominated by men, will continue with business as usual.

Richard Rousseau is Associate Professor and Chairman of the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Khazar University in Baku, Azerbaijan.