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## **Kuwait Holds Elections Amid Opposition Gains: Leading The Way For Democracy In The Persian Gulf**

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Kuwait's new National Assembly met for the first time on Sunday. Almost half of the victors in the November 26 election are members of the opposition. Many of them are religious conservatives who might like to take the country in a less-free direction. Kuwait's last three years of relative political peace may be about to end.

Ironically, concern over the fate of Kuwait, America's best friend in the Persian Gulf, reflects the impact of democracy. The elective National Assembly matters. While the monarchy controls the government, legislators pass laws and can force the resignation of cabinet members.

Moreover, election results are not preordained. An opposition boycott in the last two votes led to more pliant legislative bodies. This time the Kuwaiti people chose members more likely to challenge the monarchy. Disputes are real and sometimes deep, though they occur within certain boundaries.

Americans would find such limits uncomfortable. I once was chided by a Kuwaiti professional for calling her country liberal. Wasn't "liberalish" more accurate, she asked, and I had to agree. But everything is relative, especially in the Gulf. Kuwait still offers a positive model for neighboring nations which too often suffer from autocracy, civil strife, or both.

The latest campaign began on October 16, when the Emir dissolved the previous body, citing regional concerns and security issues. Campaigns run a maximum of 60 days; in this case the vote came less than six weeks later. The government invited journalists from across the world to view the contest.

It's an intimate process. There are five constituencies with ten members each. With less than a half million potential voters, the electorate is smaller than one U.S. congressional district. Nearly 300 candidates competed for the 50 seats. In the smallest district not even 2000 votes were needed for election.

Candidates mixed social media with traditional ads to reach a relatively youthful population. Still, elections are family and tribal as well as political affairs. In an attempt to inhibit deals between tribes the Emir four years ago changed the electoral rules to allow only one vote, down from four per person, triggering public protests and an opposition boycott. The Constitutional Court tossed out one elected body because, it ruled, the dissolution decree had been defective, and annulled another poll because of improper changes in electoral districts. (Not since 2003 has a National Assembly lasted its entire four-year term.)

By July 2013, when the third election in 17 months was held, popular fervor had cooled. The government had toughened its response to critics while more voters hoped for political stability. With the Middle East aflame, demands for radical change ebbed. The opposition boycott ensured a friendlier parliament for the government.

Although the latest race was not without controversy—the Constitutional Court rejected challenges to the election—it came off smoothly. Indeed, polling places in Kuwait have a festive air missing in the U.S. Supporters set up tables with refreshments, campaign literature, and political tchotchke, lining the road to the voting location.

Men and women vote separately, and the latter only gained the suffrage in 2005. But today more women than men are registered to vote, and candidates make forthright appeals based on “women’s issues.” Women also can run for the National Assembly, though this time only one was elected.

In politics as elsewhere, Kuwait faces the tensions of a conservative society reaching toward modernity. There are no restrictions on women voting, driving, shopping, and most everything else, but their dress ranges from full covering to Western style. Women fill important professional positions but admit to being treated differently by coworkers. Change remains a challenge for a society which remains rooted in time and place. Nevertheless, in the voting place women count as much as any man.

There are none of the fraud concerns evident in so many nominal democracies. But that doesn’t mean there are no controversies. A number of candidates were barred from running for alleged offenses and went to court. One who won the right to run, over the government’s objection, was Safaa Abdurrahman al-Hashem, the sole female victor.

When we talked she took great pride in having previously helped bring down government ministers. Last term she had resigned from office “in protest,” she explained. I asked how this time would be different: “This is my country. I can’t give up. I will keep working for it.” She was particularly concerned about Kuwait’s economic management. Her objective this time, she added, is “not to stay in” her district but “to go all over the country, especially to the women” to push reform.

Reform is a constant refrain, especially to ensure that members are not acting corruptly and under the government’s influence. Much of the political turmoil in 2012 and 2013, during which three elections were held during 17 months, focused on cleaning up the legislature while holding the government accountable.

Nor have these issues disappeared. Some nonvoters doubt any candidates will act on their promises and serve the public rather than themselves. One 20-something complained that Assembly members “do small stuff, like fix your street or park,” but do “nothing big for the country.” Still, turnout was about 70 percent, up sharply from 2013.

The result was what political analyst Salah al-Fadhli described as a “tsunami of change.” Only 20 of the 42 running for reelection won. Among the defeated were former ministers, a former deputy speaker, and prominent former MPs. Fewer Shiites and pro-government (religiously conservative) Salafists won; the representation of different tribes changed significantly.

Most important, Kuwaitis gave a dramatic boost to the opposition. Political observer Dahem al-Qahtani told Agence France-Presse: “Kuwaiti voters have punished those who let them down.” There are no parties per se. The pro-government bloc is figured at about 16. The opposition is thought to number 24, though a couple of other members indicated their interest in cooperating with that bloc.

The increased number of religious members brings to mind the February 2012 election, which produced a radical, though short-lived, social agenda. However, more mundane issues were the focus of the latest campaign. Some of the issues would be familiar to Americans: education, health, housing, jobs, and traffic. Rising prices and unproductive government were other complaints. One of the victorious MPs, Youssef Saleh al-Fedhalah, told me that he was “focusing on youth problems,” particularly the lack of employment. He planned to push for government support to help Kuwaitis start businesses.

But Kuwait has unique concerns. Perhaps the most divisive issue is the future of the country’s generous oil-based welfare state. Government officials with whom I’ve talked over the years have routinely decried the debilitating drain on national resources and impact on individual productivity. Too often government jobs are viewed as an entitlement rather than a responsibility and subsidies are expected for life’s luxuries as well as necessities.

Information Minister Sheikh Salman Sabah al-Salem al-Homoud al-Sabah told me that “some people are using the social mechanism for their own benefit,” so “Kuwait is trying to move away from a welfare state to a state of responsibility with the participation of its citizens.” He admitted that “we cannot completely do away with the welfare state, but we have to work towards creating awareness in the population to take more responsibility.” The Emir had cut his own spending to set an example, said Minister al-Sabah.

People commonly talk about restoring Kuwait as the “Pearl of the Gulf.” In principle, that shouldn’t be hard: Kuwait is freer and a better friend to America, and should be a regional catalyst for economic growth as well. However, the welfare system has sapped the Kuwaiti people’s productivity, allowing other Gulf nations to race ahead of Kuwait economically.

While the government hopes to get more young people into private and small businesses, a younger official complained that “Kuwaitis don’t want to work for private companies. They view that as insulting.” The government has been trimming a range of subsidies. Privately one even cited the need for people to move into smaller homes, a tough objective when expansive luxury houses are a ubiquitous part of Kuwait City’s landscape. One frustrated government aide declared simply: “We need to reduce the welfare state.”

Pressure for reform has risen as oil prices have fallen. Stated the forecasting firm Stratfor: Kuwait “has built an economic model completely funded by oil and natural gas revenue to support its workforce,” yet revenues have dropped 60 percent over the last two years. The government is running its first deficit in 17 years and the International Monetary Fund has urged additional subsidy reform. A Finance Ministry committee has proposed phasing out all the subsidies, estimated to cost about \$3 billion annually, by 2020.

In recent years the government made cuts in electricity, gasoline, and water subsidies and public sector employment costs. But no one likes to give up such benefits. One official admitted to me

in frustration: “More people need to get behind the government. A lot of our problems are they are not supporting its policies.”

The National Assembly is the fount of resistance. Stratfor noted that Kuwait’s elected legislature made it harder for the government to trim spending, in contrast to other, less free Gulf countries. Some in the opposition “play on emotions, and say it is your right,” complained one frustrated government representative. Indeed, Kuwait’s lack of political parties and party programs means the best way for individual candidates to get noticed and elected is to play the populist card.

Popular frustration is palpable and seems to grow each time I visit. “There is so much the government could be doing,” complained one Kuwaiti in his 20’s. “But nothing is being done” on the economy. However, while support for economic “reform” and criticism of government “waste” were widespread during the recent campaign, candidates argued that subsidies were not “waste” and cutting subsidies was not “reform.” Many voters interviewed by the media complained about reduced benefits and higher prices. al-Qahtani declared that voters had “rejected the austerity measures,” especially gasoline price hikes. Indeed, MP Abdullah Fahhad al-Enezi was quoted in the *Kuwait Times* as vowing to “stop government attempts for economic reforms at [the people’s] expense.”

The revived opposition also could spark resurgent interest in political reform. Rated “partly free” by Freedom House, Kuwait always has better respected human rights than its neighbors. But liberties have suffered amid the recent turmoil, during which the government stripped 33 activists of their citizenship, charged even more with insulting the Emir or constitution, and canceled newspaper and television licenses for coverage of internal royal disputes. The Assembly also approved a law penalizing online criticism.

Many candidates criticized these restrictive practices and laws, and especially the government’s treatment of critics. The most celebrated case is Musallam al-Barrak, a long-serving MP who had received the most votes in Kuwaiti history. He was a protest leader very popular among the young during recent political turbulence. When I interviewed him in December 2012 he affirmed his loyalty to the monarchy but sharply criticized the government.

Last year he was sentenced to two years in prison for insulting the Emir. His jailing set off public protests, his popularity undimmed by his social conservatism (he had opposed women’s suffrage). One young Kuwaiti in government told me that al-Barrak was the “light of the parliament” who would have been elected in any of the constituencies had he been allowed to run this time. Although he will be barred from running after his release next year, no one expects him to retire from politics.

Still, the political temperature has dropped. The disparate opposition found it harder to unify for something than against government policies. And the monarchy recognized that it risked losing popular support, especially within the large youth population, and began a concerted program of consultation and outreach. While dissatisfaction remains—evidenced by the opposition’s strong showing in the latest vote—the degree of antagonism appears to have moderated.

Moreover, the opposition is hampered by its divisions: it ranges from Islamist (Salafist and Muslim Brotherhood) to liberal to nationalist. Indeed, that disunity was evident Sunday when the 15<sup>th</sup> session convened and reelected the previous speaker, Marzouq Al-Ghanem, by a larger

margin than in the previous session. Also, with government support Essa Al-Kandari was elected deputy speaker by one vote over his Islamist rival.

The incoming Assembly is likely to prove difficult for the government nonetheless. Economic reform will top the agenda. The Emir opened the session with a warning that spending cuts are “inevitable” and that the fall in oil revenue required “sacrifices.” Minister Al-Sabah told me that the “government will present its view and will work with the National Assembly to implement economic and social reform to diversify” Kuwait’s economy, but acknowledged that “many of the economic rules and regulations will be reviewed by the new” members. In fact, a majority of those elected promised to oppose further austerity.

The new MPs will feel pressure to justify their election. Many had pressed, unsuccessfully, for a renewed and younger cabinet. They also promised to use their power to monitor—“grill” is one of their favorite terms—and even oust ministers. More radical ideas lurk in the background. al-Barrak was not alone in pressing for a government responsible to a National Assembly majority. Three and four years ago I talked with Islamists and liberals who alike shared such a dream.

As a result, some MPs expect continuing political conflict. Islamist Hamdan al-Azemi predicted that the new body would not last and the Emir would end up dissolving the assembly by late next year. However, al-Azemi told the *Kuwait Times* that MPs no longer feared dissolution of the body, so the government had lost its leverage.

Yet no one really wants to return to the instability of a few years ago. Kuwaitis merely need look around the region. Syria is a bloody wreck. Iraq, Libya, and Yemen are ravaged by sectarian strife and war. Iran and Saudi Arabia differ in their variant of Islam but together rule with brutal repression. No wonder 62 percent of those Gulf residents questioned in the latest Arab Youth Survey prioritized stability before democracy.

Indeed, the Iraqi invasion of 1990 isn’t forgotten. Even younger Kuwaitis have stories of how it affected their families. The “martyrs” who died defending their country and during the occupation—hundreds were arrested and disappeared—are commemorated by a monument and museum in al-Shaheed Park, an attractive oasis in an otherwise sterile urban landscape. One of the Kuwaitis who accompanied me to the park said that he couldn’t “bear to go down” to the wall which pictured those killed.

Minister al-Sabah said “We are very proud of what we have, with the long experience and practice in democracy.” And Kuwaitis are right to be pleased. Despite some notable and disappointing lapses, which the new National Assembly should address, the country remains significantly freer than other Gulf States. As such, Kuwait is an important Arab model of “liberalish” if not liberal governance, religious tolerance, and sectarian coexistence.

But maintaining that balance won’t be easy. The monarchy, newly appointed cabinet, and newly elected National Assembly all bear important responsibilities in ensuring that Kuwait continues to prosper as a shrimp amid several dangerous whales. Kuwaitis could use an abundance of good will and some extra good luck as they peer into an uncertain future.

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