

The Changing Nature of the Parliamentary System in Kuwait: Islamists, Tribes, and Women in Recent Elections

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I. Introduction

On 16 May 2009, the 13th general election for the National Assembly (Majlis al-Umma) was held in Kuwait. Over the past three years, the Assemblies were dismissed and the general elections were held three times in 2006, 2008, and 2009, although the term of office of the Assembly is four years. The 2006 election was the first election conducted under the new system in terms of change in the electoral districts and the enfranchisement of women. The electoral and the nationality laws, which affect the definition of constituencies, have frequently been altered throughout the history of Kuwaiti politics. Although the government initiated some alterations to the electoral systems and the Assembly led others.

A comparative political analysis of the outcomes regarding changes to the political system, the other factors should be constant; in other words, in an examination on changes to the political balance caused by changes to the parliamentary system in Kuwait, at least the political forces are required to be defined. In recent studies, some researchers have argued that virtual party politics has developed in Kuwait, although the formation of any political party is formally forbidden [Brown 2007; Ishiguro 2008]. Political groups in Kuwait, however, are not defined well enough to be analyzed through comparative politics. Therefore, this paper examines the changing parliamentary system and its outcomes by focusing on the characteristics of the political actors involved in Kuwaiti politics.

The purposes of this paper are as follows. First, we aim to analyze the frequent changes in the electoral system and the intentions and strategies of the political actors, such as the ruling family and the members of parliament, and the outcome of the change to the system. An analysis of these attributes leads to the second section that focuses on three case studies.

- (1) The re-drawings of the electoral districts, first redrawing in 1981 was initiated by the government and the second one in 2006 was initiated by the National Assembly.
- (2) The suspension of the Assembly as a measure of the government to control the society and the change of it occurred between the period before 1990 when Iraq invaded and occupied Kuwait and the period following its liberation.
- (3) The endowment of women's suffrage and the changing attitudes of the political actors toward women's political participation.

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Second, we examine the actual make-up of the political groups on which parliament is based. These groups comprise social, economic, and religious institutions such as the Islamic groups, the “tribes,” and other groups based on the traditional merchant class. Although the formation of a political party is prohibited in Kuwait, these institutions are often referred to as “quasi-parties” [Tétreault 2000]. These social groups, however, are frequently reconstituted at almost every election. The third section deals with the following two points.

- (1) The formation of the civil society and political groups
- (2) Issues concerning the legalization of a political party and its impact on the elections

By examining the alterations to the parliamentary system and the resultant consequences, as well as the real make-up of the political actors in parliament, this paper attempts to clarify the characteristics of Kuwaiti parliamentarianism in the final section.

II. Revisions in the Parliamentary System

1. The Changes to the Electoral Districts and the Enfranchisement of Political Rights

In the general elections, fifty candidates are elected to the National Assembly. Fifty members had been chosen from ten districts since 1963 when the first general election was held until it was altered by the government in 1981. In the 1960s–1970s, the Arab nationalists, who comprised the Sunni-merchant class living in the urban areas, took up a large portion of the assembly and often opposed the government. The “tribes,” which had settled down in the suburban areas, and the Shi‘a, however, had been supportive of the government before Kuwait’s independence in 1961. In the 1970s, the government aligned itself with the moderate Islamists in order to contain the power of the nationalists [Ghabra 1997].

The government, however, shifted its position in response to the Islamic Revolution that occurred in Iran in 1979. In this respect, the government arbitrarily altered the electoral districts from ten to twenty five in 1981. The urban areas where most of the Shi‘a and the nationalists lived were integrated within large districts, while the suburban areas, where the “tribes” lived, were divided into many small districts. Moreover, the government had granted nationality and political rights to the “tribes” who had, up until recently, been nomads. Due to the gerrymandering on the part of the government, the “tribes” from the 1980s onwards, came to occupy a significant number of seats in the National Assembly.

The argument regarding the revision of the electoral districts discussed in 2006 began with the criticism relating to the arbitrary redrawing of the districts in 1981 that resulted

in an attempt to reintroduce the previous ten districts. The assembly was divided into two groups—those who agreed with the restoration of the old system and those who were willing to maintain the existing system. Since the confrontation became serious, the assembly was dismissed in 2006 and a General Election was held for the eleventh assembly. The new assembly discussed this issue again, but this time, alternatives were put forward. The members agreed with the reform and insisted on a five-district system, with some members even suggesting a one-district system. This new assembly finally adopted the five-district system, even though the government was opposed to this reform.

Once this was decided, the parliament and government began focusing on how the new districts should be redrawn. In the first instance, those members in favor of the reform were liberal, but the Islamic groups and the “tribes” were opposed to such a reform. The new system, however, was not necessarily beneficial for the reformers. Two districts from five of the revised districts corresponded with the area where the “tribes” resided. This ensured that at least 40% of the seats could potentially be occupied by the “tribes,” and in fact, they won 25 seats in the 2006 election, 23 seats in the 2008 election, and 22 seats in the 2009 election.

2. Suspension of Parliament

One of the most important differences that took place in parliamentary politics, beginning from the period before the Iraqi invasion in 1990 up until after the liberation, was the suspension of parliament which, in effect, represented a governmental measure to control the National Assembly. Prior to the Iraqi invasion, the Amir suspended the National Assembly twice, from 1976 to 1981, and also from 1986 to 1992. In other words, the government dismissed the parliament and did not hold a general election for the new assembly, though it violated the constitution.¹ From the end of the 1980s, demands from the citizens’ political movement for the restoration of the National Assembly gradually increased, and on the eve of the Iraqi invasion, the Amir declared the general election for the consultative assembly (Majlis al-Waṭan) as a compromise. Since this body did not have legislative power as was the case with the National Assembly, some of the former members of the 1985 assembly and their supporters continued to demand the resumption of the legislative body.

Before the Iraqi invasion in August 1990, the suspension was a meaningful measure that allowed the government to control both parliament and Kuwaiti society. However, the “abrupt” invasion by Iraq led the government and the consultative body to escape from Kuwait to Saudi Arabia. Because the government needed the support of the Kuwaiti people to restore sovereignty, the government in exile then held a meeting with a former member

¹ According to Article 107 of the constitution, “In the event of dissolution, elections for the new Assembly shall be held within a period not exceeding two months from the date of dissolution.” (Cited from the English version of the Constitution of the State of Kuwait (Dustūr Dawla al-Kuwayt), issued at the Seif palace in Kuwait.)

of the 1985 assembly and one of their supporter both had demanded the resumption of the National Assembly. The government and the people arrived at an agreement where the Amir promised the resumption of the constitution and the National Assembly on the condition that the opponents accepted and supported the status of the Amir as the ruler of Kuwait.

After liberation from Iraq, the government declared the restoration of the Assembly, and the general election for the seventh National Assembly was held in 1992. The restored parliament has not since been suspended, unlike the situation before 1990. Because protests from the citizens against the government and the accompanying political instability on the eve of the Iraqi invasion partly led to the Iraqi invasion where the political instability was exploited as a reason for justifying the occupation. In addition, the United States, which had become one of the most important countries for ensuring Kuwait's national security, pressurized the government for the democratization of the domestic political system.

The opening of the National Assembly turned out to be vital not only for the domestic legitimatization of the ruling family but also for ensuring the international support to the regime [Tétreault 2006: 38–39]. As a result, the suspension of parliament became an unrealistic measure for the government to manage the country. However, instead of attempting to follow this strategy, the government has recently adopted an alternative option. Namely, the Amir has proceeded to frequently dismiss parliament, a situation that occurred in 1999, 2006, 2008, and 2009 with the last three elections all being snap general elections. Although actual suspension has not recurred, the current political situation seems not to be so stable.

3. Women's Participation in the General Elections

The bill granting women's suffrage was passed by parliament in 2005. The enfranchisement of the political rights for women had not only been a long-cherished aim of feminists since the 1970s onwards but also a policy promoted by the Amir, especially since the 1990s.

It was during the 1970s that the feminists began their activities aiming for equality in political rights for men and women through organizing lobbying campaigns and petition drives [Crystal 1996: 271]. The government's attitude to women's suffrage, however, was not very positive during this period, for example, the ministry of *Islām* and *Awqāf* issued a *fatwā* in 1985 that clearly said that women's participation in the National Assembly does not conform to Islamic law.

After the Iraqi invasion, the situation surrounding women's rights changed in the following three aspects. First, it was asserted that women should be endowed with equal citizenship status as that given to men because female citizens had made significant contributions in resistance to the Iraqi occupation and the war of liberation. Second, as a result of the international movement toward democratization that had occurred after the end

of the Cold War, Middle Eastern countries were regarded as delayed in riding this tide of democratization. Moreover, Kuwait was also criticized in the Arab Human Development Report with reference to human rights, where it was pointed out that women continued to be without suffrage [Fergany 2002]. Third, many other Gulf countries had already reformed their political systems since the 1990s onwards, especially, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman, which had introduced women's political participation prior to Kuwait, where people regarded themselves as being the most democratic in the Arabian Peninsula [Tétreault 2006: 38].

In response to such events, both liberals and the ruling family appeared to move toward the granting of women's suffrage, while the Islamists and "tribes" continued to be opposed. However, we noted that the situation was further complicated when the Amiri decree granting women's suffrage was rejected by the National Assembly—an Assembly that was elected by the citizens in 1999. Some studies explain the intention of the Amir that the government considered women as more conservative and a pro-government force [al-Mughni 2004: 10–11]. Whether this was true or not, the government's position on women's issues at the time was sufficiently obvious.

Although the liberal members seemed to be in favor of the political participation of female citizens, in reality, some liberal members of the 1999 assembly also voted against the Amiri decree. One explanation is that the Amir simultaneously issued many decrees, including one on an important economic issue, during which parliament was dismissed and the candidates were obliged to campaign for the upcoming general election. Therefore, the new members of parliament may have been voicing their displeasure through their opposition to the decree. Tétreault and al-Mughni explained that this was not gender politics but interclass politics. According to their study, to men in power, upper class women are threatener than middle and lower class men. Regardless they were belong to liberal groups, they felt pressurized in that their positions would be put at risk by prominent women in society, including the position they held in companies, educational institutions, social organizations, and even government ministries [Tétreault and al-Mugni 2005: 206].

Although the Islamists were regarded as opponents to the political participation of women in Kuwait [Barakat 1993; Sharabi 1988], they did not have a common view concerning this issue. Before 2005, the women's committee of the "Social Reform Society (Jam'īya al-Iṣlāḥ al-Ijtimā'ī)"——the influential Islamic group in Kuwait——had regarded women's political rights positively [Rizzo 2005]. Their ultimate goal is the realization of an ideal society based on Islamic values, and the women's participation in parliament is regarded as helpful for achieving this purpose. Therefore, demanding equal status for men and women is not the locus of their activities, but it is not incompatible with their ideology. The Shi'a Islamists as well as the "Social Reform Society" had agreed to women's suffrage before 2005. The draft law granting full political rights to women was passed by the Assembly in 2005

owing to the favorable votes coming from and including the Shi‘a Islamists and members of “the Islamic Constitutional Movement (al-Ḥaraka al-Dustūrīya al-Islāmīya)” which is the political branch of the “Social Reform Society.”

The first general election in which women participated was held in 2006. Women now occupied 56.8% of the total the number of the constituency in the election. It meant that the nature of the constituency was altered. This change in the electoral system forced all the political groups, regardless whether they were favorable to women’s participation or not, to appeal to female voters. As a result, each group established women’s branches or reformed their institutions. For example, “the Islamic Constitutional Movement” established a women’s office in 2007, whose activities mainly concentrated on political affairs. In an interview with the leader of the women’s office, she stated that the office’s role is to connect female citizens with “the Islamic Constitutional Movement”, and to assist those male candidates supported by the head office. The reason for the women’s office only supporting men, the leader went on to say, lay in the fact that women with the required skills to both win elections and deal with policies in parliament were not yet available. She also referred to the diverse attitudes towards women’s participation at the head office but stated that she intended to promote female candidates in the future.

Three years after the 2006 election, four female candidates became the first female winners in the National Election in Kuwait with one coming first in one of the districts, and another finishing in second place in a further district. Who would have anticipated such an unexpected result when the issue was debated in parliament in 2005? Interestingly, none of the female members who had run for office belonged to any existing political group. In the 2009 election, the seats of all political groups suffered a reduction, whereas the number of independent winners increased. In this regard, liberal candidates had not campaigned as a liberal block as was the case during the previous 2008 and 2006 elections. The Islamists groups, which constituted the largest portion in the former assembly, also lost their seats.

In this section describes each political actors’ political strategies in relation to the changes to the parliamentary system and its impact on the political balance both at the level of the relationship between the government and the National Assembly and inside the National Assembly.

III. Flexibility of the Political Actors in Kuwaiti Politics

In this section, we examine the political actors that make up the National Assembly. Although the formation of a political party is not permitted in Kuwait, previous studies on Kuwaiti politics have often regarded the various social groups as “quasi-parties” [Tétreault 2000]

and showed that virtual party politics have grown up in Kuwait instead [Brown 2007]. Such political entities are not well-defined, however, and seem to change in every election. In this section, the historical formation of these political actors is initially described, after which the issue of the legalization of political parties and the impact of this on the outcomes of recent elections will be assessed.

1. The Formation of the Civil Society and Political Groups in Kuwait

In Kuwait, the modernization of the state's apparatus since the late 1930s and the exporting of oil led to the creation of an extremely powerful modern state during the mid-twentieth century. As a result, the state began to play a larger role in the lives of citizens by providing jobs, education, medical care, and so on. Thus, a society that had been largely autonomous during the pre-modern era and mainly controlled by merchants came to experience a distinct change;² this, however, did not lead to a weakening of society but rather a reorganization of its structures in keeping with the contemporary situation. In fact, many social organizations that constitute civil society were established or underwent reorganization during the 1940s–1960s.

These social organizations developed as political actors and continue to exert influence in the National Assembly today. They fall into three categories. The first is composed of the Islamist groups that comprise the following groups: “the Islamic Constitutional Movement” —a political branch of the “Social Reform Society,” “the Society for the Preservation of Islamic Heritage (Jam‘īya Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-Islāmī),” “Scientific Salafī Movement (al-Ḥaraka al-Salafīya al-‘Ilmīya),” and a Shiite Islamic organization, “the National Islamic Association (al-Tajammu‘ al-Waṭanī al-Islāmī).”

The predecessor of the “Social Reform Society” was established in 1947 [al-Mudayris 1992: 12]. It started as a Kuwaiti branch of the “the Muslim Brotherhood (al-Iḥwān al-Muslimūn)” located in Egypt. The activities of the group mainly concerned grass-root movements such as the organizing of a reading circle for Qur’ān, Arabic lessons, and sports events. These Islamic groups became particularly active in politics after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Such groups include, “The Society for the Preservation of Islamic Heritage”, known as “*Salafīs*” that became independent from the “Social Reform Society” in 1981, and “Scientific Salafī Movement” that separated from “The Society for the Preservation of Islamic Heritage” in 2004. The two *Salafī* social groups are, however, likely to form an alliance in the recent elections and are not well-defined as political groups.³

2 In the pre-oil era, especially before the 1930s when the pearl industry suffered severe damage, the merchant class possessed the crucial power in the economic, social, and political spheres in Kuwaiti society [Crystal 1990; Hosaka 1998; 2008; Shamlan et al. 2001].

3 In the 2006 election, “the Scientific *Salafī* Movement” did not support the candidates as a group, and in the 2008 and 2009 elections, formed an alliance, known as “the Salafī Alliance.”

The second category is composed of tribal interests that led a nomadic life until the early twentieth century but began to settle during the process of modernization. Such “tribal” interests are largely composed of several large families⁴ and they resident collectively in suburban areas, mainly in the fourth and fifth districts. Even though the life style of this group has changed in the modern state, especially as regards the existing settled life and the provision of social services, education, jobs, and housing by the government [Crystal 1990; al-Dekhayel 2000; Ismael 1993], tribal ties continue to be strong with respect to various aspects of the lives of such groups, even after settlement.

The third category comprises organizations representing the classical merchant class. “The Democratic Forum (al-Minbal al-Dīmuqrāṭī)” is a nationalists group which had been the most influential force in the National Assembly during the 1960s and the 1970s, but which has lost its ability to win seats during recent elections. The alternative group, which represents the classical merchant class, is a liberal group. Although in the 2008 election, the liberals campaigned as “the National Liberal Alliance (al-Taḥāluf al-Lībrārīya al-Waṭanī),” this was not a solid group and in 2009 did not campaign as one organized group.⁵

The merchant class during the pre-modern era had possessed significant powers in the economic, social, and political spheres and had put pressure on the ruling family to open the assembly in 1921 and 1938–1939. Their authority, however, was weakened somewhat by the decline of the pearl industry in which the merchants possessed the crucial power, and the exportation of oil to which revenue became payable to the ruling family. The conventional merchant class, however, reconstituted themselves and kept up a presence in the National Assembly.

2. The Argument regarding the Legalization of Political Parties and the Impact in the Elections

In recent years, the argument has appeared, in which it is claimed that the process of party politics has already developed or exists in Kuwait [Brown 2007; Ishiguro 2008]. For example, “the Islamic Constitutional Movement” calls itself a political party,⁶ and Brown described this organization as a virtual political party [Brown 2007].

The government’s attitude to the legalization of political parties was similar to the academic trend mentioned above, despite the fact that the “Umma Party (Ḥizb al-Umma),” which declared its own establishment in 2005, was immediately banned by the government. Moreover, the government severely regulated the “tribal primary election”⁷ and on March

4 Al-Muṭayrī, al-‘Āzmī, al-‘Anzī, al-‘Ajmī, al-Rashīdī, and al-‘Utaybī are representative of big families in Kuwait.

5 They campaigned in the 1990s under various and different names, such as the “the Democratic Bloc (al-Tajammu‘ al-Dīmuqrāṭī)” or “the National Democratic Alliance (al-Tajammu‘ al-Waṭanī al-Dīmuqrāṭī).”

6 In the interview with the spokesman of “the Islamic Constitutional Movement” conducted in July 2008.

7 “Tribal” members win elections by gathering votes from their own extended families, and they are elected by “primary” elections held in advance of the general elections. The “primary” was illegalized in

26 and April 11, some tribal leaders responsible for holding the “primary” were arrested.⁸ A consequence of this was that the “tribal” constituency, who were mainly resident in the fourth and fifth districts, violently resisted the government.

“The Islamic Constitutional Movement”, which had been the most influential political power until 2006, also criticized the “tribal primary.” “The Islamic Constitutional Movement” was also accused by the constituency in the both fourth and fifth districts,⁹ as a result, the seats were reduced from six in the 2006 election to three in the 2008 election, and only two in the 2009 election. In contrast, in the 2008 election, the Salafī alliance increased their share of seats from four to seven through cooperating with the “tribal” candidates.

The liberal group is also difficult to align as an organization. In addition to the fact that they are conventionally divided into Arab nationalists having a socialist tendency and liberals without such an inclination, they also comprise Sunni and Shī‘a groups, and they tend to work as a unit within each sect in parliament.

IV. Conclusion

The aims of this paper centered on clarifying the following points: first, to analyze each political faction’s political strategy with regard to changes to the parliamentary system and its impact on the political balance, both at the level of the relationship between the government and the National Assembly and within the National Assembly. Thanks to this assessment, the following three points were identified:

- (1) The government cannot exert absolute control over the National Assembly, as it did before the Iraqi occupation. The re-drawing of the electoral districts in 2006 was led by parliament, whereas the former change to the districts of 1981 represented an arbitrary gerrymandering by the government that sought to contain anti-government influences.
- (2) The government becomes unable to choose to suspend the National Assembly as a political strategy following the liberation of 1991, because the opening of the Assembly can be considered to be assurance of the legitimacy of the ruling family both inside and outside of Kuwait. This case as well as granting women’s suffrage shows that each political functions’ strategies were often influenced by the

1998; however, this practice has openly continued.

8 Kuwaiti Times (<http://www.kuwaittimes.net/index.php>) and al-Qabas (<http://www.alqabas.com.kw/>)

9 Mainly in the fourth and fifth districts, the mail which writes that do not vote for the candidates of “the Islamic Constitutional Movement” (Interview conducted in July 2008 to the associated professor of the Kuwait University and the political activist).

international situation, including political pressure from international society.

- (3) No political group has sufficient power to overwhelm others. As the case study on the manipulation of the parliamentary system shows, each group maneuvered the parliamentary system. The outcomes, however, were not necessarily what was anticipated. The strength of the “tribal” interests in recent elections and the unexpected victory of the women candidates in 2009 stand as excellent examples in this respect.

The second purpose was to examine the actual shape of the political groups that constitute parliament. The third section describes the difficulties to regard the social groups in Kuwait to be constant and well-defined political organizations.

- (1) These groups are primary social institutions that take on roles not only in the political arena, but also in various aspects within the society. These groups, therefore, are considered as actors constituting civil society, rather than “quasi-political parties.”
- (2) The legalization of a political party is not acceptable in Kuwait, since “tribal” influence continues to be extremely powerful in Kuwaiti politics. This result, unexpectedly, is somehow the outcome of the second re-drawing of the electoral districts with which “tribal” member did not agree.
- (3) In the recent elections, we find that the conventional political groups faced difficulties in organizing themselves as a group, with an increasing tendency for independents to become winners in terms of those who ran for office outside the conventional groups. The liberal group, regardless they seems the most likely to form a political party, is also not united enough to form a stable group.

The parliamentary system in Kuwait has been subject to frequent changes, as a result of intervention by the ruling family, social entities, and the international situation. An interesting attribute of parliamentarianism in Kuwait relates to the perpetual manipulation of the parliamentary system and a persistent reshuffling of the political actors involved. Furthermore, the manoeuvre of the political system and the flexibility of political groups affected each other. Consequently, the outcome is difficult to expect both for the observers and the Kuwaiti political actors. In this sense, the results of the recent elections, especially those of 2006, 2008, and 2009 shows us this changing nature that continue to typify Kuwaiti politics.

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