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Introduction

On September 29, 2022, Kuwait held its second parliamentary elections in less than two years. The Gulf country has held 18 parliamentary elections since 1962. The majority of these elections were prompted by dissolutions of the parliament due to the disagreements between the government and the elected representatives. For some, Kuwait's parliamentary politics is considered unstable and democratically weak. While for others, it is regarded as the dynamism of democracy, as the country houses the most powerful elected body in the Gulf region. Kuwait's constitution, the institution of an elected National Assembly and pluralistic political culture make the country stand apart from its neighbors.

The latest election saw a good voter turnout compared to previous years, which indicated the expectations pinned by Kuwaitis on the new parliament and their discomfort from the previous one. In this election, for the first time, a voting system based on national identity was adopted, meaning each voter can only go to the polling station in their own constituency. The election was described as the country's 'most inclusive' one in a decade due to several aspects. One aspect was the significant change in the composition of the candidates making their way to the parliament, as several opposition groups ended their boycott of the polls after Crown Prince Sheikh Meshal al-Ahmad al-Jaber Al-Sabah pledged there would be no interference by authorities in the election or the new parliament. Only 23 members of the previous parliament managed to keep their seats, while 27 members (17 new

and 10 from pre-2020 parliaments) secured a majority of the seats in the 50-seat National Assembly. In this regard, the defeat of the old faces, who were pro-government MPs, including three former ministers, was noteworthy.

Another aspect was the return of the women MPs to the parliament after two years of absence. This was a clear message that the Kuwaitis consider elections as a means of change and protest. Lastly, election of the younger figures in the parliament shows that the youth vote started to be more effective in election outcomes. According to government estimates, youth represent 72 percent of Kuwaiti society; therefore, it is likely that the new MPs would focus on the youth demands. Thus, the new parliament, with a strong presence of the opposition members, represents all segments of Kuwaiti society.

Opposition in Kuwaiti Politics

Kuwait's political system and parliamentary politics is complex. Due to the absence of political parties, the politics are shaped with a system based on socio-political groups in the country. In the Kuwaiti context, the term 'opposition' does not refer to a particular political party that runs in an election, rather it refers to individuals with different ideologies and agendas who seek to introduce change within a political system. Kuwait's vocal parliament is an amalgam of several figures, including liberals, tribal representatives, independents, and pro-Muslim Brotherhood MPs, with diverse demands and motivations. The issues on the agenda for these opposition members may differ, ranging

from amnesty law to economic problems, from corruption to electoral system, from women to bidoons.

One of the important aspects of these elections was that the opposition made a [strong comeback](#). Although the elections strengthened the position of the opposition, which now dominates the new parliament, its effectiveness, ability to unify and the collaboration among its members on the country's issues will be clear in the coming days. Kuwaiti politics give room for the opposition to challenge the government's policies; however, there is also a concern that the dominant presence of opposition voices in the assembly might lead to the return of uncertainties.

Historically, the opposition is known to be loyal to the ruling family, even at the times when they strongly criticize the government policies. During Kuwait's invasion in 1990-91, opposition figures played a [significant role](#) in pressuring the ruling family, which was in exile in Taif, Saudi Arabia, to make clear commitments to the restoration of the parliament and politics in the aftermath of the occupation. In fact, the Emir of Kuwait Sheikh Jaber's meeting with the opposition members in Jeddah in October 1990 bore fruits with the emergence of an inclusive constitution. As Michael Herb states in his [study](#), The Origins of Kuwait's National Assembly, "the Kuwaiti ruling family responded to the Iraqi threat by writing a liberal constitution." Thanks to that constitution, Kuwait now has an influential parliamentary institution; an open political system where there is a greater political participation compared to its neighbors, and most importantly, an effective opposition.

Women return to Parliament

Women returned to Kuwait's National Assembly as part of the opposition that won a majority in the parliament. Twenty-two out of 305 candidates were women, competing for the seats in five different constituencies. Only two women, namely, Alia al-Khaled (second district) and former minister Jenan Boushehri (third district), secured seats in parliament after an all-male assembly was elected in 2020.

Kuwaiti women [earned](#) the right to vote in 2005, more than four decades after Kuwait first gained independence. Although women have been active in both cabinet and parliament since then, throughout Kuwait's history, only five women have been elected to parliament, including four in 2009, and one in both 2012 and 2016. In December 2020 elections, twenty-nine female candidates ran for office, but none was elected in a [serious blow](#) to the advancement of women in Kuwaiti society. This was a clear reflection of the cultural disparity that exists to this day in Kuwait.

The debate on the political status of women has loomed since the 1970s on both political and societal level. Despite women making up the majority of the registered electorate and playing highly significant roles both in public and private sectors, representation of Kuwaiti women in the parliament has been poor due to both the patriarchal and polarized nature of politics, and the lack of organized political parties. Kuwait ranked 185th out of 193 countries for its low percentage of women representation in the parliament. Yet, the election of two women in the latest elections is certainly laudatory as it reflects a change in attitude of voters and raises hopes that the number of women rises in the upcoming cabinet.

Parliament's Shia, Muslim Brotherhood and Tribal Members

Kuwait's demographic composition varies along two main axes: Sunni-Shia, and Urban (hadhar)-Tribal (bedouin). Another significant divide is the one between Kuwaitis and stateless (bidoons), whose significant number of presence further adds to the complexity. These divisions do play a significant role at all levels of Kuwaiti society. On that account, the presence of Shia, tribal representatives, secular or conservative members in the parliament is highly crucial for Kuwait's socio-political stability.

In Thursday's election, the number of the representatives of the Shia bloc rose from six to nine, including two independents, Osama Al-Zayd and Jenan Boushehri, making a splashy and unprecedented gain. Unlike other Gulf countries, Shia are not perceived as a threat in Kuwait, which has a significant Shia population (about 30%), and they even occupy important positions in the state. Politically active Shia also constitute an important part of the commercial life of the country.

Again, unlike other Gulf countries, Kuwait does not perceive the Muslim Brotherhood as a threat because the movement members have been a part of Kuwaiti political culture for many years. In Thursday's election, pro-Muslim Brotherhood group in Kuwait, known as the Islamic Constitutional Movement (Hadas), has secured three seats, the same number as in the previous parliament. It is possible to see the effects of this pluralistic nature of Kuwaiti parliament in both the country's domestic and foreign policy towards other countries or political movements (for example, Iran, Israel, the Muslim Brotherhood).

Another important aspect of the election, which was a first for Kuwait,

was that two candidates won seats while they were in prison. Hamid Mehri al-Badhali and Marzouq al-Khalifa, who were charged for running illegal tribal primaries, were eligible to stand for election because their case did not affect honesty or honor, as per Kuwait law. Hamid Mehri al-Badhali was released from prison few days after the election.

Technically illegal – tribal primaries – are held in local diwaniyyahs to nominate candidates to run in the parliamentary elections. In these primaries, the candidate who receives the most votes stands for the parliamentary elections. In doing this, tribes avoid the dispersal of their votes and guarantee a seat for their candidate in the parliament. Tribes are policy-relevant actors in the Gulf states, which are often referred to as 'bedouinocracies.' The December 2020 parliamentary election saw good representation of large tribes. However, Thursday's election could be regarded as a loss of representation for tribal representatives, although all the four constituencies had tribal MPs.

Expectations from the new parliament

There have been some political reforms in Kuwait since the 1990s, but of course, they are not considered sufficient. As in every election, there are serious demands for reform. The issues that would be on the new parliament's agenda would range from electoral system reform to budget deficits, from rising prices to youth unemployment, from public sector jobs to fighting corruption, from women to Bidoons issue. Much of the demands are related to domestic political and economic issues, and the success in addressing these demands will depend on the opposition lawmakers' relationship with the new government.

About the author

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