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WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST



Women's Political Representation in Kuwait: An Untold Story

A Report by the Women's Rights in the Middle East Program
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Marwa Shalaby, Ph.D.

“Women’s Political Representation in Kuwait: An Untold Story”

“There are overwhelming levels of corruption within the Kuwaiti Parliament. I have never been able to exercise my legislative role. All we [MPs] have are God and His Highness [The Emir].” A statement by Safa al-Hashem upon her resignation from the Parliament in May 2014.¹

Introduction

May 16, 2015 marks the 10th anniversary of the enactment of women's political rights in Kuwait. The amendment of Election Law No. 35/1962 in 2005, which granted women the right to vote and run for office, opened the door for female candidates to participate in parliamentary and local elections for the first time. It was not until 2009 when women managed to make a historic victory in the electoral arena by winning 8 percent of the seats in a highly-contested election. However, women's presence in parliament continued to plunge as they secured only 6 percent of the seats in December 2012, and female candidates struggled to maintain this slim presence in the legislative arena. The current Kuwaiti Parliament—elected in July 2013—does not have a single female candidate; the sole elected female MP, Safa al-Hashem,² resigned in May 2014.

Despite being granted full political rights more than a decade ago, women in the decision-making process have encountered endless challenges, both within and outside the chamber. Prospects for women becoming an integral part of the legislative process are increasingly slim as a result of a myriad of cultural, institutional, and structural barriers. For women to make a real difference in the Kuwaiti electoral arena, far-reaching electoral reforms must be implemented to empower women politically, especially in the more conservative districts in Kuwait (mainly the fourth and fifth districts), in order to counter the dominant tribal culture and control over these areas. Furthermore, the government should take the necessary steps to establish strong political parties in the country instead of the dominant bloc/coalition system,³ and to ensure that women are adequately represented in these parties by means of quota adoption or by enforcing non-compliance sanctions. Finally, these aforementioned reforms should be supplemented by major transformation on the grassroots level to alter perceptions toward viewing female politicians as competent political leaders and capable decision-makers. Women's organizations across the country should play a more active role in educating women about their political rights and provide them with adequate resources to compete on equal footing with their male counterparts.

¹ Fadiyah al-Za'bi, “Two More MPs are Leaving the National Assembly,” *Elaf*, accessed August 25, 2015: <http://elaph.com/Web/News/2014/5/900885.html>.

² Safa al-Hashem was elected in July 2013. Representing the Third District, she succeeded to win 2,036 votes and became the only female MP in Kuwait's Fourteenth Legislative Chamber. She previously won a seat in the December 2012 elections that was shortly revoked and replaced by the current legislative session.

³ Since political parties are not allowed, there are unofficial opposition and pro-government blocs, as well as Islamic and liberal blocs that help campaign for different candidates (including women).

The first part of this report sheds light on the socio-political context and dynamics of power relations in post-independence Kuwait and their respective impact on shaping gender relations in the country. The second part of the analysis focuses on the development of Kuwait's electoral system and the ways these electoral arrangements have impacted women's political participation. The third part explicates women's efforts to gain political rights over the past few decades and highlights the various barriers female politicians have experienced that continue to hinder them from achieving full gender parity in the electoral sphere. The conclusion offers a set of policy implications and recommendations toward promoting women's presence in the electoral arena in Kuwait.

The Sociopolitical Context: The road to independence and the dynamics of tribal politics in Kuwait

Kuwait is one of the most influential Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries on both economic and sociopolitical levels. Unlike most of the GCC states, Kuwait's modern history has experienced consecutive waves of political liberalization since the country gained its independence from the British in June 1961 during the rule of the reformist Emir Abdullah al-Salim al-Sabah (1950–1965). The economy of pre-oil Kuwait depended mainly on pearl mining and trade, thanks to its strategic location. Following the discovery of oil in the 1920s, Kuwait soon became a case of extreme rentierism, i.e. oil abundance combined with high per capita exports (Herb 2014, 14). The country's economy depends heavily on oil revenues and significantly lacks the economic diversification evident in many other GCC countries,⁴ such as Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

Not only did the oil wealth transform the country, but most importantly, it redefined the power relations between the ruling family and the wealthy merchant class (al-Najjar 2000), which used to play an important role in the decision-making process during the early part of the century (the role of the merchant's class was clearly evident in the creation of the first Shura Council in 1921 and the Legislative Council of 1938). While the wealth accumulated from these discoveries has helped consolidate the power of the ruling family as the main controller of the oil revenues (Crystal 1990), these resources have also led to an unprecedented boom in infrastructure and social development across the country, which in turn had a tremendous impact on women's education and integration into the labor force (al-Mughni and Tetreault 2005). Since the 1950s, Kuwaiti women played a critical role in the public sphere, including outnumbering their male counterparts in schools and colleges, competing with them in the workforce, establishing hundreds of charitable and social welfare organizations, and playing a major role in liberating the country during the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Yet they were unable to participate in the decision-making process until a decade ago.

⁴ Oil exports constitute more than 95 percent of the country's export revenues and 60 percent of its GDP (OPEC 2015).

Alternatively, oil revenues have transformed gender relations in a less positive way, not only in Kuwait, but in most GCC countries. On the one hand, abundant oil wealth has led to lower rates of women's employment in the manufacturing and energy sectors (Ross 2008). On the other hand, soaring oil revenues distributed in the form of generous subsidies and family benefits have lowered the incentives for women to compete with males in the workplace, especially in the private sector (Shalaby 2014). These caveats have further deepened the patriarchal and traditional nature of Kuwaiti society, leading to little progress for women in these domains.

These aforementioned structural factors also were compounded by a number of demographic changes that resulted in unbalanced gender dynamics in the Kuwaiti context. As maintained by al-Kandari, Kuwait is a clear example of a "heterogeneous society that has divisions across tribal, as well as sectarian lines" (al-Kandari 2010, 268). He argues that while tribalism and sectarianism are *passive concepts*, they have a negative impact on social development (272). Women's rights in general, and political rights in particular, are integral parts of the social development process in Kuwait, which were negatively impacted by the lack of harmony between the different forces of modernization and tradition. This clash became even more obvious following the naturalization of thousands of Bedouins in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the ruling family's attempt to both widen their support base in the electoral arena, which was threatened by growing opposition forces, and build a solid demographic network capable of confronting possible Iraqi threat to Kuwait's internal security (Longva 2006). The desertization of politics in Kuwait (i.e. the integration of tribal and Bedouin populations in the society) brought a set of conservative norms and traditional values to the country (Ghabra 1997) that further contributed to the marginalization of women and to limiting their roles in the public sphere. This is clearly demonstrated in the inability of female politicians to penetrate districts dominated by tribal figures.

Remarkably, the impact of the Bedouin culture on Kuwait's socio-political landscape was also accompanied by a sharp rise in Islamist politics during the 1970s. Following the ebb of the nationalist and Pan-Arab waves during the 1970s, Kuwait— similar to most parts of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region—witnessed the surge of Islamist forces who were actively competing in the electoral arena. These forces assumed leadership positions and gained overwhelming grassroots support, aided by the ruling regime as it attempted to bolster its support base in the face of liberal and populist opposition. As maintained by Ghabra (1997), the Islamists were the only organized group in the 1980s, and they continued to shape the dynamics of the political arena until the Iraqi invasion. The official establishment of the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM)—the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood—in 1991 in the aftermath of Kuwait's liberation from the Iraqi invasion allowed them to compete more effectively in elections and make significant gains in the National Assembly (Brown 2007). For instance, Islamists occupied about 30 percent of the Seventh and Eighth assemblies, in 1992 and 1996, respectively. Interestingly, Islamist and tribal candidates managed to win more than two-thirds of the seats in the 2003 (i.e. Tenth) Assembly. Female candidates continued to struggle to gain the support of the

Islamist parties and to compete effectively with their male candidates. Islamist forces opposed women's political inclusion from the very beginning (as shown in the following sections) and they continued to place hurdles in their way over the past decade (i.e. women should run for office in accordance with Islamic Sharia)

Kuwaiti society has been rocked by escalating levels of corruption on the top levels since the advent of the century. For instance, the Orange Movement and the Alliance managed to make significant gains in the Eleventh Assembly due to their very successful campaigns geared toward eradicating corruption (Wills 2013). Kuwait's Twelfth Assembly (2009–2011) was one of the most corrupt in the country's history (Olimat 2012). Fueled by the Arab Spring, Kuwait experienced violent protests, sit-ins, and the storming of the National Assembly's headquarters over corruption allegations involving the prime minister and a number of government officials. The crisis ended with the resignation of a number of top officials in November 2011, followed by the Emir's dissolution of the parliament and call for new elections in February 2012. This abrupt dissolution of the Assembly had a negative impact on women's presence in the subsequent Assembly election, in which women failed to win a single seat due to the limited time and resources they had to organize electoral campaigns and mobilize voters.

Kuwait's Electoral System (1961-2013): Half A Century of Electoral Maneuvers and Legislative Deadlocks

Kuwait is a semi-constitutional monarchy with one of the longest histories of constitutionalism dating back to the 1920s.⁵ The Kuwaiti democratization experience is unique compared to most Arab countries. Kuwait continues to have one of the strongest legislative bodies not only in the GCC, but in the entire Arab world. The Kuwaiti Parliament (or National Assembly) consists of 50 directly elected members, plus 15 ministers appointed by the Emir⁶—who should not exceed one-third of the parliament (al-Remaidhi and Watt 2012)—and at least one minister directly elected in the Assembly. Members of the ruling family are not allowed to run for local and parliamentary elections, but they occupy most cabinet positions (Brown 2007).

There are no political parties in Kuwait, but there are currently a number of political blocs with distinct demographic characteristics and ideological orientations.⁷ The Kuwaiti parliament is a powerful tool for curbing the powers of the monarchy and the appointed cabinet through its legislative authorities (i.e. mainly the ability to vote “no confidence” on

⁵ The first Kuwaiti legislative council was established in 1938 following a massive campaign spearheaded by the wealthy merchants across the country. The council only lasted for six months, dissolving after disputes between the ruler and the merchants (Crystal 1990).

⁶ Cabinet members sit in as ex officio members and have the same voting rights as elected members.

⁷ There are currently four main Islamist streams in the Assembly: the Social Reform, Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), the Islamic Popular Alliance (IPA), and the Shi'a Islamic National Alliance. There is also the National Democratic Alliance that constitutes one of the liberal opposition force in the Assembly.

individual members of cabinet, the right to overturn the Emir's decrees, and the right to interpellate ministers). However, it has faced repeated crises and legislative deadlocks resulting from frequent dissolution and prolonged paralysis of the legislative life in the country. As stated in a recent Chatham House report: "Kuwait's parliament has an adversarial relationship with the government." (Kinninmont 2012, 7). Not to mention, the Kuwaiti parliament has been dissolved six times since 2006, while more than a dozen governments have assumed power.

The revival of the parliamentary life in Kuwait took place in 1962 under the reign of Emir Abdullah al-Salim al-Sabah (1950–65). Prior to gaining independence from British rule, two legislative councils were dissolved⁸—mainly due to conflicts between the merchant class and the ruling family, as well as external threats posed by the ruler of Iraq (Herb 2014). But the parliamentary life was finally restored in the country in 1961 with the ratification of Kuwait's first post-independence constitution. The electoral law was later discussed on May 22, 1962 during the seventh meeting of the Constitutional Committee of the Constituent Assembly (an elected assembly charged with writing the constitution) and was approved within six months. According to the newly-enacted law (No. 35/1962), the country was divided into 10 districts and each eligible voter was required to vote for five different candidates (a total of 50 MPs) in his or her respective district.⁹ It is worth noting that this electoral arrangement was implemented during the country's first post-independence elections in 1963 and lasted until 1975. Despite the fact that Kuwait's 1962 constitution established unprecedented civil liberties for all Kuwaiti citizens, including the principle of equality among all citizens, it did not grant women the right to vote or participate in the political process in the executive and legislative branches.

A major political crisis took place in 1976, leading to the unilateral dissolution of the 1975 assembly (Fourth Legislative Assembly) as well as the suspension of several articles of the 1962 constitution by Emir Sabah al-Salim al-Sabah (1965–77). While this move was justified by the Emir as being a reaction to the lack of cooperation between the executive and legislative branches, evident in the constant conflict between the cabinet members and the MPs, the dissolution of the Assembly was mainly fueled by the rise of opposition voices in the parliament that started to pose a direct threat to the monarchy (Tetreault 2001). A myriad of other external factors also existed, such as mounting pressure from other GCC countries to abort the parliamentary experience in Kuwait, the Lebanese civil war (Ghabra 1997a), and the regional turmoil following the 1973 war with Israel.

⁸ Kuwait's first legislative council was elected by a restricted electorate in 1938. This council was dissolved within five months and was soon replaced by another legislative body. The 1939 Assembly lasted only for few months as a result of legislative deadlock that occurred between the Emir and the wealthy merchants/council members (Dashti and Salama 2004).

⁹ Simple majority vote required; if two candidates receive an equal number of valid votes, the polling committee draws lots and the winner is declared.

During this period of dissolution—which lasted until 1981—the Emir took a series of significant steps to consolidate his power and further fragment the opposition front in the National Assembly. Most significantly, this era witnessed the Islamist movement's development in Kuwait.¹⁰ The Sabah family, hoping to curb the opposition and silence the liberal voices in the Assembly, closely supported the Islamists in the 1970s and facilitated their ascendancy to power in both the National Assembly and across different financial and leadership positions (Ghabra 1997). Meanwhile, the Emir sought to further weaken the opposition by enfranchising the Bedouin and tribal populations, granting them Kuwaiti citizenship—and thus voting and political rights—prior to the 1981 elections, a phenomenon that is widely known among scholars as the “desertization” of the Kuwaiti society (Ghabra 1997, 61-62). By the mid-1980s, the Islamist political actors joined forces with the tribal/Bedouin voices in Kuwaiti society and created a close alliance between the two groups—an issue that continues to impact the electoral politics in the country today.

In addition, major changes were introduced to the electoral system during that period of dissolution as the Emir issued decree No. 99/1980, which stipulated the re-drawing of the constituencies' boundaries. According to the amended law, the country was divided into 25 districts instead of 10 and all eligible voters were required to vote for two different candidates,¹¹ a step deemed as a direct violation of Article 80 of the Kuwaiti constitution,¹² which stipulates that the size and boundaries of the electoral districts should be solely determined by the legislative branch. To overcome this constitutional hiccup, the Emir's decree soon was submitted to the newly-elected parliament for approval. Kuwait's Fifth Legislative Assembly—elected in 1981 and predominantly made of Islamist, tribal, and pro-government members—promptly ratified the royal decree and enforced a flawed electoral system¹³ that lasted for more than two decades until it was finally amended in 2006.¹⁴

¹⁰The political arena is dominated by four main political streams: the Islamists–Muslim Brotherhood (Sunni mainstream), the Sunni Salafi Islamic groups and the Cultural Committee established to represent the interests of the Shia population; the liberals; the tribalists and finally the independents.

¹¹As a result of the disproportionate re-drawing of the electoral districts, many districts carried more electoral weight compared to others and the government was later accused of fragmenting the opposition's support base to empower the pro-government and tribal candidates in the newly-elected parliament.

¹²Kuwaiti's Constitution can be viewed at:

http://www.kuwaitinfo.com/a_state_system/state_system_articles1.asp.

¹³There were many other drawbacks for this electoral system that continued to mar the electoral process in the country for decades. For example, the 25-district system facilitated the process of vote transfer and vote buying, given the considerably smaller district magnitude (al-Remaidhi and Watt 2012). It gave the tribal primaries the power to determine who would represent the districts and control almost half of the 25 districts (al-Najjar 2000). Moreover, candidates were chosen based on family ties and name recognition rather than on merit and competence (Kinninmont 2012). Finally, as a result of the small district magnitudes and the relatively small number of voters per district, the country witnessed the rise of the phenomenon of “service deputies”—deputies who were mainly concerned with providing services to their constituents to guarantee re-election even if against the public good (Dashti and Salama 2004).

¹⁴This electoral system was implemented in the 1981, 1985, 1992, 1996, 1999, 2003, and 2006 elections (Table 1).

Table 1: History of the Kuwaiti National Assembly (1963-2015)

Years	Legislative Assembly	Head of Assembly	Dissolved	Number of Electoral Districts	Number of Votes per citizen
1963-1967	1st	Abd al-'Aziz H. al-Saqr	No	10	Five
		Sa'ud A. al-'Abd al-Razaq		10	Five
1967-1970	2nd	Ahmad Z. al-Sarhan	No	10	Five
1971-1975	3rd	Khalid S. al-Ghanim	No	10	Five
1976-1981	4th	Khalid S. al-Ghanim	Yes	10	Five
1981-1985	5th	Muhammad Y. al-'Adsani	No	25	Two
1985-1986	6th	Ahmad A. al-Sa'dun	Yes	25	Two
1992-1996	7th	Ahmad A. al-Sa'dun	No	25	Two
1996-1999	8th	Ahmad A. al-Sa'dun	No	25	Two
1999-2003	9th	Jasim M. al-Kharafi	Yes	25	Two
2003-2006	10th	Jasim M. al-Kharafi	Yes	25	Two
2006-2008	11th	Jasim M. al-Kharafi	Yes	25	Two
2008-2009	12th	Jasim M. al-Kharafi	Yes	5	Four
2009-2011	13th	Jasim M. al-Kharafi	Yes	5	Four
February 2012	NA	Marzuq A. al-Ghanim	Cancelled	5	Four
December 2012	NA	Marzuq A. al-Ghanim	Cancelled	5	One
2013-Present	14th	Marzuq A. al-Ghanim	No	5	One

Sources: Kuwait National Assembly: <http://kna.kw/clt/run.asp?id=258 - sthash.5z6aCoZ4.dpbs>; Minister Office of the State for the National Assembly: http://www.mona.gov.kw:90/pr_opendata/GeneralSearch.aspx?dId=8

Another crisis rocked the parliamentary life in Kuwait in 1986, ending with Emir Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah's (1977–2006) dissolution of the parliament for the second time in a decade. This second unconstitutional dissolution¹⁵ occurred amidst a tense political landscape on the regional level due to the Iran-Iraq war (1980–1988) and its implications for Kuwait's security (Olimat 2011). On the domestic level, the country was facing an escalating political crisis as many of the opposition figures who failed to join the Assembly in 1981 returned to the political arena in 1985, quickly forming an imminent threat to the government and even the ruling family. The country faced another legislative gridlock with the mass resignation of a number of ministers due to a series of interpellations initiated by some MPs, which led to the dissolution of the Assembly in 1986.

Following the end of the Iraqi invasion, the parliament was restored in 1992 (Seventh National Assembly) under law No. 99/1980 in accordance with an agreement brokered between opposition forces and the Emir while he was in exile. Both parties agreed to reinstate parliamentary life in the country once the war ended as long as the pre-occupation electoral law remained intact (Tetreault 2000). What was truly remarkable about Kuwait's post-war assemblies (especially the Seventh and Eighth assemblies) was the re-emergence of the Islamist and tribal figures. Later, amid mounting tension between the liberals and the Islamist forces in 1999, the Eighth National Assembly was dissolved for the third time in the country's history, and elections were scheduled within two months (al-Najjar 2000). In contrast to the previous post-war Assemblies, the Ninth Assembly (1999–2003) witnessed the rise of liberal forces in the political arena with the victories of 16 liberal candidates for the first time. In 2003, Islamist and tribal candidates managed to dominate the Tenth Assembly once again by winning 17 seats each, while the liberals and independent candidates won seven and nine seats, respectively¹⁶ (Gharaibeh and al-Eida 2006).

Overwhelming discontent concerning the 25-district law (footnote 10) continued to mar the electoral process. Following a fierce disagreement between the opposition and the government on the proposed number of constituencies, the Tenth Assembly was dissolved in May 2006 and a new Assembly (2006–2008) was elected in June, still under the 25-district electoral law (al-Remaidhi and Watt 2012). Shortly afterward, a new electoral law (No. 42/2006) passed to divide the electoral districts into five constituencies with 10 seats each: first, second, third, fourth, and fifth districts. Each voter, however, was required to vote for four different candidates in their respective districts instead of two. The 2008 elections for the Twelfth Assembly took place under this new electoral arrangement.

¹⁵ According to the Constitution of Kuwait, the Legislative Assembly can be only dissolved by either the Emir or the Supreme Court. However, new elections must be called within two months of the dissolution, otherwise the dissolution would be deemed unconstitutional (1976 and 1986).

¹⁶ "Reformists Suffer Election Defeat," *MEED: Middle East Economic Digest* 47, 28(2003): 2-3.

The newly-introduced electoral change did little to balance the overwhelming levels of ideological and political polarization in the Assembly.¹⁷ In contrast, the new system reinforced the existing sectarian and tribal allegiances,¹⁸ which were worsened by the persistent geographical imbalance of the electoral districts. For the fourth time in less than a decade, the Emir ordered the dissolution of the opposition-dominated National Assembly, a move that followed a heightened political crisis between the government (mainly the prime minister) and the opposition on corruption allegations. The Emir called for new elections in 2009 that opened the door for more moderate and pro-government voices as well as the election of four women in the Thirteenth National Assembly.¹⁹

Conflicts continued, with friction between the secular voices and the tribal and Islamist forces on one hand, and disputes between the government and the opposition on the other. It led to significant turmoil in the legislative arena and the dissolution of four parliaments within a five-year period (2006–2012). Following the dissolution of the Thirteenth Assembly (2009–2011), a new round of elections in February 2012 resulted in yet another opposition-dominated National Assembly (35 out of the 50 members were opposition). The 2012 Assembly was revoked in July following a historic ruling by the Constitutional Court, which determined that the Emir's dissolution of the Thirteenth Assembly was unconstitutional (Kinnimont 2012).

A new royal decree was promulgated during an October 2012 legislative recess (law No. 20/2012) to keep the number of electoral districts at five while reducing the number of votes from four to only one. It mainly changed the election process to a single non-transferrable vote system (SNTV) in an attempt to limit voting based on blocs and weaken the opposition (Herb 2014). This Emiri decree sparked a massive outcry from the opposition: Islamists, liberals, and populists all vowed to boycott the elections, both as voters and candidates. Nevertheless, the government called for elections in December 2012 amidst protests and sit-ins. In response, both liberal and Islamist opposition members boycotted the elections, leading to a legislature that had none of the traditional opposition figures (Wills 2013). In response to an appeal against the decree, the Constitutional Court on June 16, 2013 invalidated the December 2012 elections on a technicality but maintained the electoral amendment of one vote per citizen. On July 27, 2013, new elections were held with feeble opposition presence that benefitted the liberals, who managed to achieve some electoral gains.

¹⁷ Given the absence of structured political parties, the larger districts under the new electoral law had many negative consequences that impacted the chances of candidates who were not part of a renowned tribe or the considerably organized Islamist blocs. As a result, large tribes currently control two out of the five districts that had also drastically reduced female candidates' chances of winning (mainly the fourth and fifth districts).

¹⁸ Despite the fact that tribal primaries were prohibited under Act No. 9/1998 and No. 5/2005 (Article 31), they continued to be widely practiced under the new electoral law as tribes managed to control at least two of the five national districts.

¹⁹ Corey Flintoff, "Women Take Their Place In Kuwait's Parliament," *NPR*, May 20, 2009, accessed August 25, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104340287>.

Women's Political Representation in Kuwait: A History of Political Activism

Despite the fact that Kuwaiti women were denied their political rights until 2005, women have often played substantive roles in other segments of society. Currently, women constitute 59 percent of the labor force in Kuwait and occupy 64 percent of the educational sector.²⁰ Since the 1960s, Kuwaiti women have founded an array of non-governmental and charity organizations, served in important leadership positions, and assisted political parties in their campaigns and mobilization efforts (al-Mughni and Tetreault 2005).

The struggle for women's political rights started decades prior to the momentous 2005 decree that allowed women to vote and run for office. Significant efforts to grant Kuwaiti women their political rights have been launched since the 1970s, including 12 different requests presented by male MPs and repeated attempts from the ruling family to open discussion on the issue on both societal and legislative levels. One of these early efforts was spearheaded by the head of the Women's Cultural and Social Identity Society (WCSS), Nouria al-Sadani, who submitted a bill proposal to the head of the third legislative council in 1973 (i.e. Equal Rights Bill) requesting guaranteed political rights for all Kuwaiti women (Dashti 2005). The proposal was fiercely discussed in the Assembly and rejected following a number of heated sessions. In response, WCSS and the Girls' Club led a far-reaching campaign protesting the bill's dismissal. These calls to reform law No. 35/1962²¹ culminated in 1981²²—after the revival of the parliamentary life in the country—when a number of women's organizations initiated massive campaigns to push for Kuwaiti women's political rights (al-Mughni 2001).

As previously mentioned, this era in Kuwait's politics witnessed the rise of Islamist movements that challenged and even replaced the former Pan-Arabism discourse that had played a substantive role in shaping Kuwaiti politics since the country's independence from the British. As maintained by al-Sabah (2013, 4), "The quest for emancipation was ensnared in this political vortex and became part of the ideological battle between secularism, Pan-Arab nationalism, and traditional Islam." Despite their dire efforts, these endeavors soon came to an end with the dissolution of the parliament in 1986 and the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990.

²⁰ "The Participants Confirmed that Society Sees Women as the Weakest Link Despite Obtaining Political Rights and her Presence in the Government and Municipal and Parliamentary Councils," *Alanba*, January 5, 2014, accessed August 25, 2015, <http://www.alanba.com.kw/ar/kuwait-news/434865/05-01-2014>.

²¹ Particularly, Article 1 states: "Every Kuwaiti male of 21 years of age is eligible to vote." Until 2005, only 15 percent of the Kuwaiti population was allowed to vote.

²² Similar bill proposals to grant women their political rights submitted by four MPs in 1975 were soon rejected by the majority of the Assembly. MP Ahmed al-Takheem, also submitted a bill proposal in 1981 and MP Abdulrahman al-Ghanim submitted a similar one in 1985 that were both rejected and dismissed. In addition, the Ministry of Islamic Endowments and Islamic Affairs in 1985 issued a statement against women's exercise of political rights, stating that "the nature of the political process only befits men and it is not permissible for women to participate in politics" (Olimat 2009).

The invasion opened the door for a new era for women in the political sphere. Kuwaiti women played a major role in liberating their country, such as joining the military ranks and advocating fiercely on behalf of Kuwait, both domestically and internationally (Tetreault 2001). Over a short period of time, Kuwaiti women shattered persistent stereotypes of passivity and incompetence and rose to the forefront as a result of their incredible acts of heroism and sacrifice during the war (al-Mughni 2010). The post-war government promised Kuwaiti women more substantive roles in the political sphere and a wider range of political rights as a result of their achievements. However, the rising tide of Islamism coupled with the government's preoccupation with the emotional and economic burdens of the country's post-war reconstruction stalled the issue of women's political rights for another decade. Interestingly, the diminishing levels of support for women's political rights across Kuwaiti society were clearly demonstrated in a study conducted between 1994 and 1998 that analyzed public opinion on women's participation in formal politics (Meyer, Rizzo, and Ali 2005). A similar study has also shown substantive variations in support for women's political rights among religious groups and sects (Meyer, Rizzo, and Ali 1998).

The issue of women's legal enfranchisement re-surfaced when the Emir issued a decree in May 1999 granting women the right to vote and run for office.²³ The Emir promulgated this controversial legislation, along with 62 other decrees, during parliamentary recess—only two weeks after the dissolution of the Assembly.²⁴ However, according to Article 71 of Kuwait's constitution, a majority of the National Assembly must approve all royal decrees within 15 days of convening (Tetreault 2001). The women's suffrage decree was intensely debated and eventually rejected twice in the Ninth National Assembly—mainly by tribal and Islamist MPs based on unfounded religious justifications (Wills 2013). The decree also was rejected by many liberal MPs who questioned its constitutionality and feared for their own prospects of winning seats once women were allowed to participate in politics, both as voters and candidates.

But the liberal forces soon revised their stance toward women's suffrage, a change prompted by the government's desire to put an end to the issue of women's enfranchisement. Liberals joined with the Shi'a leaders and several women's organizations that fell under the umbrella of WCSS and the Kuwait Women Union (KWU) to initiate a wide-scale campaign promoting women's political rights. The cabinet passed a new suffrage bill²⁵ on May 16, 2004 that was referred to the Assembly for approval,²⁶ but it was

²³ Several bill proposals to grant women voting rights were fiercely rejected by the Islamist and tribal forces in the Assembly in 1992, 1996, and 1997.

²⁴ "Kuwait emir opens parliament with pledge for women," *CNN*, October 28, 2000, accessed October 14, 2014.

²⁵ Richard Rousseau, "Politics, Elections And The 'Reality' Of Women's Rights In Kuwait," *Diplomatic Courier*, April 8, 2013, accessed August 25, 2015, <http://www.diplomaticcourier.com/news/regions/middle-east/355-politics-elections-and-the-reality-of-women-s-rights-in-kuwait>.

not approved until exactly a year later by a margin of 35 to 23 (Olimat 2009). The passing of the women's suffrage bill came as a surprise since a similar bill granting women the right to participate in city council elections was rejected on May 4, 2006 by a margin of 29 to 4 and with abstentions by 29 MPs. However, the amendment of Article 1 of electoral law No. 35/1962 also included a vague clause introduced by the Islamist MPs stipulating that, "Women's political participation should abide by Islamic Laws".

According to the new law, Kuwaiti women were granted the right to vote and stand for parliamentary and municipal elections beginning in 2006—a move that doubled the electorate from merely 145,000 eligible voters to 350,000 (about 57 percent of the electorate).²⁷ While women were first franchised in June 2006, female candidates were unable to win any seats in the Eleventh and Twelfth assemblies. Despite the fact that many female candidates ran for elections in both the 2006 and 2008 elections (See Table 1), none were elected in either assembly. Undoubtedly, the 2005 appointment of Massouma al-Mubarak²⁸ as the first female cabinet member paved the way for women's participation in the 2006 elections, notwithstanding the myriad of challenges Kuwaiti women continued to face in playing an active role on the legislative level (to be discussed later in this report). Over the last decade, seven female ministers have assumed 18 different cabinet positions, though the percentage of women in leadership positions remains considerably low at only 12 percent.²⁹ Currently, there is only one female Cabinet member, Hind al-Sabeeh, who is the minister of planning and labor.

²⁶ The debate on women's enfranchisement was escalated when a renowned women's activist, al-Awadi, along with other activists, referred the issue to the Supreme Constitutional Court in 2000 based on the premise that banning women from voting is unconstitutional. The court shortly dismissed the case.

²⁷ Hassan Fatah, "First Time Out, Kuwaiti Women Become a Political Force," *The New York Times*, June 26, 2006: Print.

²⁸ Mubarak was technically the first woman to serve in parliament, since cabinet members are ex officio voting members of parliament.

²⁹ "The Participants Confirmed that Society Sees Women as the Weakest Link Despite Obtaining Political Rights and her Presence in the Government and Municipal and Parliamentary Councils," *Alanba*, January 5, 2014, accessed August 25, 2015, <http://www.alanba.com.kw/ar/kuwait-news/434865/05-01-2014>.

Table 2: History of Women in Parliament in Kuwait (2005–2015)

Election Year	Total Seats	Total Women	Women Elected	Percent Elected	Women Candidates	Women Candidate %
July 2013	65	1	1	2%	8/ 308	2.5%
Dec 2012	65	4	3	6%	15/ 387	3.8%
Feb 2012	65	0	0	0	23/ 286	8%
2009	65	5	4	8%	16/ 210	7.6%
2008	65	0	0	0	27/ 275	9.9%
2006	65	1	0	0	28/ 252	11.1%

Sources: Inter-Parliamentary Union. IPU Parline Database: Kuwait (Majles Al-Ommah), General information: http://www.ipu.org/parline-e/reports/2171_A.htm; Kuwait National Assemble: [http://kna.kw/clt/run.asp?id=258 - sthash.5z6aCoZ4.dpbs](http://kna.kw/clt/run.asp?id=258-sthash.5z6aCoZ4.dpbs)

In 2009, four women were elected to the Thirteenth National Assembly for the first time in Kuwait's history: Massouma al-Mubarak (1st district), Salwa al-Jassar (2nd district), Aseel al-Awadhi (3rd district), and Rola Dashti (3rd district). Despite the fact that there were fewer female candidates in these elections compared to the previous elections (See Table 2), women managed to accomplish a historic victory given the limited time they had to prepare for elections, which took place only a few weeks after the abrupt dissolution of the Twelfth Assembly.³⁰

Women were unable to win any seats in the February 2012 elections even though 23 female candidates ran for office, encouraged by women's 2009 victory.³¹ Furthermore, the four women who won seats in the Thirteenth Assembly were unable to secure their seats. Later on, women managed to win three seats in the December 2012 elections (See Table 2) despite a staggering decline in voter turnout and the opposition's boycott of the elections. Those three winners were: Massouma al-Mubarak, who won 2,317 votes in the first district; Safa al-Hashem, who won 2,622 votes in the third district; and Dhikra al-Rashidi, who won a seat as the minister of social affairs and labor.³²

³⁰ Peter Kenyon, "Kuwaiti Women Vote, and Run, in Elections," *NPR*, June 29, 2006, accessed August 25, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5521917>.

³¹ "Woman elected in Kuwait says gender in politics is 'history.'" *CNN*, May 17, 2009.

³² The National Democratic Institute, "Four Kuwaiti Women Become First To Win Seats In Parliament." *The National Democratic Institute*, May 22, 2009.

Following the cancellation of the December 2012 elections (as detailed in the previous section of this report), the Emir called for a new round of elections in July 2013. Six female candidates ran for office, but only Safa al-Hashem managed to keep her seat, winning 2,036 votes in the third district. Massouma al-Mubarak also won a seat in the first district but lost it after the constitutional court approved a vote re-count in her district. In May 2014, al-Hashem—the sole female MP in the Assembly at the time—resigned along with four other MPs following the rejection of their request to question Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber al-Mubarak al-Hamad al-Sabah, a senior member of the ruling family, over corruption allegations. By-elections to replace the five resigned MPs were held on June 2014, and while five female candidates ran for the open seats, they all lost.³³

Women's marginal presence in the Kuwaiti electoral arena is commonly attributed to *cultural*, *institutional*, and *structural* factors. As maintained by former MP Rola Dashti: "There is a conflict between a modernizing and development-oriented perspective and a religious-tribal perspective." (Dunne 2008). In regard to the *cultural* factors, scholars argue that low levels of confidence in women's abilities as political leaders (Sarhrouny 2007) and women's lack of confidence in their own abilities—combined with the prevailing attitudes concerning the role of women in the public sphere and patriarchy-enforcing norms—have immensely contributed to women's political underrepresentation (IDEA 2007).³⁴ However, recent data from the Arab Barometer provides little support for the cultural explanations of women's low levels of participation in the decision-making arena, particularly in relation to mass levels of trust in women as political leaders. In fact, only about 12 percent of Kuwaiti respondents agreed that men are better political leaders, compared, for instance, to respondents in Tunisia (30 percent) or Lebanon (20 percent).³⁵ This shows that more critical factors than cultural beliefs and gender-related attitudes impact women's political participation in the Kuwaiti context.

Institutional factors also play a major role in limiting women's prospects in the Kuwaiti political arena. The continuous struggle for power and political polarization over the past century further weakened and fragmented marginalized groups, including women. Moreover, the lack of organized political party systems with clear agendas, coupled with the dominant tribal structure of the Kuwaiti electoral landscape, has complicated women's ascendancy to leadership positions (Olimat 2009, 2011, 2012). This is clearly manifested in female candidates' inability to win a single seat in the fourth and the fifth districts over the past decade despite the myriad of electoral laws introduced. Furthermore, female politicians' lack of political expertise and financial resources, along with little coordination among women's organizations and other female politicians, have negatively impacted their ability to play a more substantive role in the legislative arena. Most importantly, the

³³ "Kuwait By-Elections Boost Government Grip on Assembly," *Naharnet*, June 27, 2014, accessed August 25, 2015, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/136639>.

³⁴ "The Arab Quota Report: Selected Case Studies," *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance*, 2007, accessed August 25, 2015, http://www.quotaproject.org/publications/Arab_Quota_Report.pdf.

³⁵ <http://www.arabbarometer.org/instruments-and-data-files>.

prevailing levels of corruption in the Kuwaiti electoral arena are crippling women's ability to compete effectively and fairly in elections. Although women in Kuwait are now able to exercise their political rights, there are other impediments hindering women from playing a pivotal role in the decision-making process.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

This report aimed to offer a comprehensive analysis on the status of women in politics in Kuwait. Kuwait's democratization experience is unique and offers scholars a distinctive opportunity to study the dynamics of power relations and how it impacted, and even shaped, gender relations in such semi-authoritarian settings. Despite the fact that Kuwait has one of the most powerful elected legislative bodies in the region, the parliament continues to have a hostile relationship with the government, leading to frequent dissolution as well as immense political instability and gridlocks. Undoubtedly, the prevailing political polarization coupled with the power struggle has immensely impacted women's ability to play a substantive role in the legislative arena. The absence of structured political parties representing the interests of the Kuwaiti electorate has largely contributed to the current fragmentation of the political arena and limited women's opportunities to compete in elections, even after being granted their full political rights in 2005.

The following section offers a number of recommendations to further empower women in the political arena that can be applied not only in Kuwait, but also in most parts of the MENA region.

On the grassroots level, there is a strong need to initiate genuine reform and push for broader inclusion of different societal actors in the decision-making process. It is also imperative to promote the role of youth and women, and the media has a very crucial part to play in promulgating the importance of these initiatives. As maintained by a Kuwaiti scholar, "Currently, government appointments of top positions are based more on high profile. It does mean government neutrality in its appointments, which should be based on merit and an ability to halt corruption and favoritism" (Ghabra 1997, 71).

Efforts should be geared toward building confidence in women's abilities to hold leadership positions. As shown in the report, women continue to face rigid cultural preconceptions in regard to their roles in the political sphere. It is critical to combine government-led initiatives with grassroots efforts to promote the role of women in politics, both as voters and candidates. Presently, women constitute about 60 percent of the Kuwaiti electorate, and they can significantly aid in reshaping the entire electoral arena. Women's grassroots organizations should be more involved in promoting women's political roles, especially given the fact that recent research has shown that Kuwaitis have high levels of trust in women NGOs (Meyer, Rizzo, and Ali 2005).

Furthermore, women's success in the legislative arena is tightly linked to the presence of a strong political party system in the country. Most of the success stories across the MENA region emanated from countries with either established party systems (Morocco) or strong quota mechanisms (i.e. Tunisia and Jordan), and neither of these conditions exists in Kuwait. While enforcing a female quota system continues to stir heated debates in the Kuwaiti context, establishing a strong party system in the country is attainable given the fact that political parties are not legally prohibited by the Kuwaiti constitution (al-Najjar 2000). Meanwhile, the Assembly is currently delineated across ideological and sectarian lines, allowing a smooth transition to political party system.

Finally, eradicating corruption and patronage in the political system and reinstating confidence in the parliament and political parties in Kuwait must be among the top priorities for the Kuwaiti government over the next few years. The rise of patronage as well as personalistic and tribal politics in the electoral arena is closely related to the widespread corruption and general lack of confidence in political institutions and agencies—a statement that can be safely applied to many parts of the MENA region.

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Appendix — Kuwaiti Female MPs

*Massouma al-Mubarak*³⁶

1st District, first place, 14,247 votes

Massouma al-Mubarak holds a Ph.D. in the philosophy of international relations from the University of Denver (Colorado) as well as master's degrees in international relations and political science, a diploma in planning, and a bachelor's degree in political sciences. She has been a lecturer at Kuwait University since 1982 as well as a visiting professor at both the University of Denver (1986–1988) and the University of Bahrain (1990–1991). She became Kuwait's first female minister when she was appointed minister of planning and state minister for administrative development affairs in 2005. She was appointed minister of communications in 2006 and minister of health in 2007.

Salwa al-Jassar

2nd District, 10th place, 4,776 votes

Salwa al-Jassar holds a Ph.D. in philosophy from the University of Pittsburgh as well as a master's degree in education from the University of Michigan and a bachelor's in geography from Kuwait University. She is an assistant professor at Kuwait University's College of Education. She recently served as an adviser to the United Nations Development Programme office in Kuwait. She is also a member of the Board of Education–Faculty of Education at Kuwait University, as well as a board member of the Kuwait Transparency Society and president of the Women's Empowerment Center.

Aseel al-Awadhi

3rd District, second place, 11,860 votes

Aseel al-Awadhi holds a Ph.D. in political philosophy from the University of Texas and a bachelor's degree with a minor in political science from Kuwait University. She was a member of Amnesty International from 1988 to 1991 and a volunteer at the Kuwaiti Society for Victims of War from 1991 to 1993. She has been lecturer at Kuwait University's Arts College since 2006.

Rola Dashti

3rd District, seventh place, 7,666 votes

Rola Dashti holds a Ph.D. in population economy from Johns Hopkins University in the United States. She held a number of consulting positions and is chairperson of the Kuwait Economic Society, the first woman to hold that post since the society was founded in 1970. She was the 2005 winner of the King Hussein Humanitarian Award, and she has been involved in several volunteer activities since her undergraduate years, including working with the International Red Cross in Lebanon to assist refugee families in 1982. She was listed among the world's 100 most influential Arabs in 2007 and 2008.

³⁶ "New Members of the Kuwaiti Parliament," *The National Democratic Institute*, May 22, 2009. <https://www.ndi.org/node/15508>.

Safa al-Hashem

3rd District, fifth place, 2036 votes

Safa al-Hashem is a liberal politician who holds a degree in English literature from Kuwait University and an MBA from Pennsylvania State University. She also was awarded an honorary Ph.D. by the American University of Technology. Al-Hashem has worked for the Ministry of Higher Education since 1994 and started Advantage Consulting. She has won several awards, including the 2009 Business Woman of the Year and Female CEO of the Year – CEO Middle East in 2007. In the 2012 Assembly, she played the role of rapporteur for the economic and financial affairs committee. She is the only female MP to be re-elected in consecutive sessions, as a member of the parliament after the December 2012 elections and within the Fourteenth Legislative Chamber.

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