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Social Activism and Political Change in Kuwait Since 2006

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From 2006 to 2012, Kuwait had three major social movements calling for reforms: Nabiha Khamsa (We Want It Five) in 2006; Irhal (Leave) in 2009; and Karamat Watan (Dignity of the Nation) in 2012. This brief examines the causes underlying these movements. I argue that while each movement emerged as a result of certain sociopolitical pressures in Kuwait, there is a larger institutional setting that facilitates their emergence. Understanding the rise of these social movements is critical to understanding the nature of the Kuwaiti political system, how the pluralist dynamics of Kuwaiti politics operate, and how Kuwait's political system differs from its counterparts in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

This brief is divided into three sections. First, I offer a brief overview of the nature of the Kuwaiti political system to account for its role in the emergence of social movements. Then, I examine each of the three recent social movements with respect to how the Kuwaiti political system was conducive to their rise and their pluralistic characters. Lastly, I analyze the process that leads to successive social protest movements, especially in the case of Karamat Watan and the regime's response to it.

THE KUWAITI POLITICAL SYSTEM

The political system in Kuwait is a semi-democratic constitutional monarchy ("partly free," according to Freedom House's latest report).¹ The country has parliamentary

elections, limited freedom of expression, and more permitted political activities in comparison to other countries in the GCC. However, the ruling regime has a tight grip on the political structure, preventing any major changes to the system and limiting the ability of the people to check the government. Therefore, this political and institutional context encourages Kuwaitis to form social movements in order to check the government and push for reforms.

Kuwaitis participate in parliamentary elections to choose their representatives in the National Assembly, yet they do not have the right to choose the prime minister, who is appointed by the emir according to Article 56 of the constitution. The emir similarly appoints cabinet ministers upon the recommendation of the prime minister. At least one of the appointed ministers must be an elected legislator, while others can be appointed from outside parliament. Once appointed by the emir, the prime minister and his cabinet ministers become part of the National Assembly and are referred to as "the government."

As a result, opposition factions are not included in the formation of the cabinet, which carries key implications for how the political system functions. Opposition political factions may manage to win seats in parliament, but these are weak positions compared to the government, which constitutes the largest bloc with 16 members including the prime minister. In addition, the government also has



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supporters among the elected legislators. Therefore, the cabinet is the most influential political body in parliament.²

The opposition, by contrast, suffers from structural weakness. It is highly factionalized, and its members hail from various social, economic, and political backgrounds. Despite having several tools at its disposal to provide checks on the government, such as questioning the ministers, impeaching them, or requesting a vote of no confidence, no minister has been held accountable and lost the confidence of parliament since 1963, showing the limitations of parliamentary oversight to counter corruption, for example.

Another feature of the Kuwaiti political system is its nonpartisan nature, which means that the relationship between the executive and legislative powers is not based on partisan affiliation, but rather on individualism. This feature allows legislators to switch alliances between the opposition and the government depending on electoral prospects. Therefore, whenever there are changes in alliances within parliament, when it is believed that a minister cannot survive a vote of no confidence, or when legislation cannot be blocked, the regime dissolves parliament and calls for new elections. Parliament has been dissolved eight times since 1976, which demonstrates the weakness of the opposition vis-à-vis the government. When elections are organized and a new cabinet is formed, the country goes through the same process of having a weak parliament and a government that resists the reformation of the system and avoids serious allegations of corruption made against its members.

This inability of parliament, and more specifically of the opposition, thus underlies the episodic political activism of Kuwaiti society. When citizens see the National Assembly fail to solve a particular problem or fulfill its obligation to check the government and its performance, social movements emerge.

SOCIAL MOVEMENTS IN KUWAIT SINCE 2006

1. Nabiha Khamsa

Nabiha Khamsa emerged in 2006 with a platform to reduce the number of electoral districts in the country. Kuwait had been divided into 10 districts in 1961. However, the authorities changed the electoral system and increased the number of districts to 25 in 1981. This change meant more districts with fewer constituents. Smaller district sizes provided the regime with a better chance of interfering in elections to influence results. For example, one particular way of interference is buying votes to increase the chances of winning an election in a district with a smaller constituency. The Nabiha Khamsa movement called for a reduction in the number of electoral districts, claiming that the change would help reduce corruption and limit the government's ability to interfere in elections. The government responded by delaying the reduction of electoral districts. In turn, some members of parliament attempted to impeach the prime minister, Nasir al-Muhammad. This attempt was the first in the history of Kuwaiti politics. However, al-Muhammad was not impeached because the regime dissolved the National Assembly on May 21, 2006 and called for new elections.

Nabiha Khamsa emerged in response to the failure to achieve progress on electoral law reform. The movement consisted primarily of Kuwaiti youth. Some movement activists were independent, whereas others belonged to political groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), the Shiite Islamic National Coalition (INC), and the liberal National Democratic Coalition (NDC). Other independent politicians and legislators supported Nabiha Khamsa as well.

When the National Assembly was dissolved and new elections were called in 2006, the youth activists in Nabiha Khamsa decided to support those candidates who were in favor of changing the electoral system. These young activists were successful in their efforts. Many candidates supported by the movement made it to the National Assembly, forcing the regime

to retreat from its previous position on electoral reform, ultimately revising the electoral law to reduce the number of districts to five, with 10 legislators per district. In the new electoral system, voters had the right to vote for four candidates in their districts.

2. Irhal

Irhal, the second social movement in recent years, emerged on the heels of corruption allegations against then Prime Minister Nasir al-Muhammad in 2009. He was accused of financial mismanagement in 2008, and a year later he was accused of bribing legislators. As a result, there were attempts to impeach him, but the National Assembly was not able to hold him accountable. Therefore, the Irhal movement rose in response to both the corruption and poor performance on the part of the prime minister and the government.

Prior to these events, a 2003 change in the institutional structure of the Kuwaiti political system facilitated this kind of social activism. Historically, the crown prince was always appointed as the prime minister in Kuwait. Although there was no legal impediment to the impeachment of a crown prince acting as prime minister, legislators were careful not to damage the reputation and image of the future emir. Hence, a prime minister was not cross-examined in parliament prior to 2003, when the positions of crown prince and prime minister were separated. When Sabah al-Ahmad, the current emir, came to power in 2006, Nawwaf al-Ahmad became the crown prince, and their nephew Nasir al-Muhammad was appointed as the prime minister.

Following this change, legislators were free to challenge the prime minister or impeach him.³ Twelve requests were made to impeach Nasir al-Muhammad in the period between 2006 and 2011. Six of these attempts were made between 2006 and November 15, 2009, one day before the emergence of Irhal. Not only does this pattern show the tense nature of the relations between al-Muhammad and the opposition in parliament, but it also shows the inability of the opposition to

hold al-Muhammad accountable despite numerous attempts. Thus, the failure of parliament and the opposition paved the way for another social movement. Like Nabiha Khamsa, Irhal found parliamentary support but this time without the main Shiite political group (INC), which shifted its alliance in 2008 and began supporting the government.⁴ Irhal increasingly gained traction in 2011 after the emergence of another scandal when al-Muhammad was accused of bribing legislators for the second time. As a reaction, Irhal mobilized tens of thousands of people in front of parliament on November 27, 2011. In response to protests, al-Muhammad resigned the next day. These events coincided with the Arab Spring and might have ended up strengthening the movement.

3. Karamat Watan

Following the Irhal movement, a period of political instability ensued with the resignation of Prime Minister al-Muhammad, dissolution of parliament, and holding of new elections. The atmosphere in the country was tense, and emotions associated with the Arab Spring were strong. The opposition managed to win 35 out of 50 elected seats in parliament, overtaking the parliamentary majority for the first time since 1963. However, parliament was dissolved by the Constitutional Court because of irregularities in the dissolution of the previous parliament. In anticipation of another opposition-dominated parliament, the emir decided to change the electoral law again. In October 2012, he issued a decree that reduced the number of votes each citizen cast from four to one.

The stated goal of this change to the electoral system was reducing social and sectarian tensions within society. However, this change weakened the ability of the opposition to form alliances across different political and ideological groups to support their candidates. Therefore, it reduced the chances of the opposition to gain more seats in the National Assembly. Karamat Watan first emerged as a blog on October 11, 2012 in response to rumors about the emir's

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intention to change the electoral system, just a few days before the emir's official decree on this issue. The blog announced that it would organize a rally in protest of the decree. A few days later, Karamat Watan launched its account on Twitter. While the movement's initial platform revolved around a return to the previous electoral system, it evolved into a demand for a full parliamentary system.

Importantly, Karamat Watan was overwhelmingly dominated by Kuwaitis with tribal backgrounds, who are known as the Bedouins. This portion of society had a positive relationship with the government for many decades. However, this changed in the 1990s, when some legislators with tribal backgrounds became leaders of the opposition in parliament. The relationship between the Bedouins and the authorities has also deteriorated in recent years with the emergence of government-supported politicians who attacked the Bedouins and questioned their loyalty. In response, the Bedouins supported Karamat Watan in great numbers. Urban (Hadaris) and Shiite Kuwaitis,⁵ however, sided with the government.

Various political groups joined Karamat Watan, the most important of which were the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated ICM, the Popular Bloc, and the Progressive Movement. Other independent politicians joined Karamat Watan as well. They were not able to force the emir to withdraw his decree, and the government called for new parliamentary elections in December 2012 that were boycotted by the above-mentioned political groups and other politicians in order to delegitimize any elections based on the emir's decree. The new parliament was dissolved again by the Constitutional Court in 2013, and a new election was organized in the same year, which was also boycotted by the same opposition political groups.

THE REGIME'S RESPONSE AND THE AFTERMATH OF KARAMAT WATAN

The government's response to these three social movements differed significantly. The authorities' reaction to Karamat Watan in 2012 was harsh in comparison to their

response to Nabiha Khamsa and Irhal in previous years. First, the government suppressed Karamat Watan rallies harshly, frequently resorting to excessive force to disperse protestors. Second, many protestors were arrested as part of the crackdown on Karamat Watan. Lastly, the government withdrew citizenship from members of the opposition, such as Abdallah al-Barghash, Saad al-Ajmi, and Ahmed al-Jabir.

There are a number of reasons why the government's crackdown on Karamat Watan was more severe than other episodes of protests. First, Karamat Watan was a direct challenge to the authority of the emir because he issued the decree that changed the electoral system, while other movements were seen as political disputes with the government and prime minister. Second, the movement demanded the reformation of the political system into a parliamentary one, which threatened the power of the ruling family, and ultimately the emir, who has the right to choose the prime minister. Finally, Karamat Watan's deep reach into Kuwaiti society became a concern. Karamat Watan organized rallies in different parts of the country, while the other two movements' reach remained constrained to rallies in front of parliament. The government suppression proved to be detrimental to Karamat Watan, which failed to achieve a return to the previous electoral system or instigate reforms.⁶

As stated, political groups that were part of Karamat Watan boycotted the elections of 2012 and 2013. However, the 2016 election marked the end of electoral boycotts by the ICM and other groups. The eventual return of some political groups to parliament carries several implications. Any political reform effort requires the presence of opposition groups in parliament; without parliamentary representation, the opposition groups are unlikely to effect change in the country. Furthermore, Kuwait is unique among the GCC countries in how it deals with political groups within the country. Despite the suppression of Karamat Watan, the regime did not limit the political space available to opposition groups, and it did not exclude any of them from the political scene in the country. For example, despite its connection to the

Muslim Brotherhood and its role in Karamat Watan, the ICM is active in society and has representatives in the National Assembly.

The political institutional structure—in particular, the parliamentary opposition—in Kuwait has failed to meet reformist demands in society. The unique institutional structure of the country necessitates social activism to spur political reform and to fight corruption. However, as the case of Karamat Watan clearly shows, social activism is not sufficient on its own; it needs to be complemented with parliamentary opposition groups' initiatives to influence decision-making mechanisms. In addition, government response also shapes the success of social movements. The case of Karamat Watan demonstrates that the government's harsh response limits the ability of activists and politicians to push for change.

ENDNOTES

1. "Kuwait Profile," Freedom House, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2018/kuwait>.
2. It is important to note that the constitution neither bans nor allows the creation of political parties. Different political groups emerged in the country before independence in 1961. These groups took different names and came from different social and political orientations. The regime has been realistic in dealing with them and allows them to operate and compete in elections as long as they do not endanger national security. These political groups have not been able to win a majority in the National Assembly, but they have formed different blocs in order to balance the government.
3. During the period between 2006 and 2018, there were 20 attempts to impeach the prime minister.

4. It is important to note that the Shia had been supportive of the authorities for decades. However, when Ayatollah Khomeini came to power in Iran in 1979, a section of the Kuwaiti Shia was in favor of him, and their positive relationship with the Kuwaiti government was damaged. This section of the Shia was in favor of the opposition in the 1980s, and

when Kuwait was liberated, they founded the INC, which continued to support the opposition. The group disassociated itself from the opposition after the assassination of Emad Mughniyyah, a Lebanese leader of Hezbollah. Because the group was influenced by the Iranian revolution and its ideological roots, the INC organized a mourning event to pay him respect. The reaction of the public was negative toward the event and its organizers because Mughniyyah had been accused of stealing a Kuwaiti airplane in 1988. The group was attacked from members of the opposition as well. Since then, the INC has aligned with the authorities in confronting the opposition. For more about the Shia and their position toward the opposition, see Hamad H. Albloshi, "Sectarianism and the Arab Spring: The Case of the Kuwaiti Shi'a," *Muslim World* 106, no. 1 (2016): 109–126.

5. Kuwaitis belong to different social groups. In terms of religion, most belong to one of two groups: Sunnis or Shia. They are also divided into two major ethnic groups: Arabs and non-Arabs. Most of the non-Arabs come from Iran. Sunnis and Shia can be Arabs or Persians. Among the Arabs, there are divisions between those who have an urban background, known as the Hadar, and those who have tribal backgrounds, known as Bedouins.

6. For more information about the movement, see Hamad H. Albloshi and Michael Herb, "Karamat Watan: An Unsuccessful Non-Violent Movement," *Middle East Journal*, forthcoming.

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