
PROSPECTS FOR DEMOCRACY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: THE CASE OF KUWAIT

————— JAMES YAHYA SADOWSKI —————

Two standard approaches dominate discussion of prospects for democracy in the Middle East. The first is that democracy in the Middle East is impossible—that there is no way the Middle East will ever democratize as long as it remains loyal to its current cultural values and institutions. This theory holds that Islam is inherently and intrinsically a religion that promotes submission and totalitarianism, and so long as the majority of the people follow Islam, they can't have democratic government.

The alternative argument holds just as emphatically that democratization in the Middle East is inevitable—this is the sort of argument that is made by people like Francis Fukuyama. We live in an age of globalization, with everybody listening to their Walkmen and watching their VCRs. Western values are being propagated all over the globe. That means that sooner or later the rage for democracy will catch on just like the rage for Madonna. People in the Middle East, no matter what their culture is, will soon be wearing Nike shoes and dancing to rap.

There is something to be said for both positions—there is no question that both cultural values and globalization will influence the prospects for democracy in the Middle East. But, if your only options are that democracy is either inevitable or impossible, this discussion very quickly comes to a halt, because people begin to talk past each other.

There are a host of factors that will determine which countries in the Middle East are democratized and how quickly they democratize. What institutions they democratize are probably not obvious to us yet. But, both of the approaches assume the countries are prisoners of the past; they are either condemned and blocked into an Islamic path in which democracy is impossible or are 30 feet behind repeating the pattern of the West and retracing its steps along the road toward democratization. Those metaphors are wrong;

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both claim the past will determine the future. Neither of them improves our understanding of the Middle East in the present or accounts for some of the unprecedented, unusual, peculiar and sometimes outright odd chains of events that are actually creating both initiative toward, and in some cases opposition to, democratization. By exploring the case of Kuwait in detail, we can consider features that may influence democracy's progress. I will give one concrete example of what some types of forces and events are that may lead to democratization in this country which have not been anticipated or well understood and which are not prominent in the existing literature about democracy.

The common American perception is that there actually aren't prospects for democracy in Kuwait and that the elections they have and recently had there aren't particularly democratic. *The New York Times* ran nothing on the recent Kuwaiti elections. *The Washington Post* ran a small column and got the results of the elections completely wrong. Twenty days ago I was visiting the press center in the Sheraton in Kuwait City and asked, Who is covering the election? I discovered there were no American reporters represented there. There was virtually no attention being paid to the Kuwait election. So, Americans don't actually know what happened there. A common idea is that Kuwaiti elections don't actually matter. I asked a reporter for the *Washington Times*, for example, "Why aren't you sending correspondents out to cover the Kuwaiti elections?" He told me, "Kuwait is not really a democratic society. Just because they are having elections doesn't really mean they are a democracy."

It is true that the franchise in Kuwait is very limited. One hundred seven thousand people vote in the Kuwait election for 50 delegates to the national assembly. Now, those 107,000 people are all male, of course. Women do not have the right to vote in Kuwait. Additionally, voters must be Kuwaiti citizens of at least 20 years standing. Several categories of citizens are not allowed to vote even though they are full citizens. Palestinians, for example, who have Kuwaiti citizenship have a kind of second-class citizenship, which will never let them vote. There are about 100,000 people inside Kuwait who, in fact, meet most of the criteria for Kuwaiti citizenship but who have not had their paperwork processed yet. These are the people that make up the bulk of the troops inside the military and the police force. They don't have citizenship, which means they can't vote. Of course, many of them are employees in the military and in the police force—they couldn't vote anyway, because members of those organizations are prohibited from participating in voting. The result is that out of 1.8 million people who live in Kuwait, only 700,000 of them are Kuwaiti citizens and only about 107,000 can vote. That's only 15 percent of the Kuwaiti citizenry that actually gets to participate in the election.

Voting rights are only half the problem. The other half is what happens after the election and representatives are elected into a national assembly trying to represent the voters. The Kuwaiti National Assembly, for example, does not consist of representatives of political parties, but entirely of individuals. Parties in Kuwait are against the law. That presents practical problems get-

ting people to coordinate vote swapping with one another. How do you campaign, for example, without a platform and a bloc of supporters? Individuals have to arrange all of that, and it's very difficult.

Beyond that, another problem is that the Kuwaiti Parliament doesn't actually get to pick the prime minister of the cabinet. Ordinarily, in a parliamentary system the prime minister would be the head of the party that won the most seats in parliament. In Kuwait, the prime minister is by tradition the crown prince, who in turn appoints the cabinet of 10 people, who are often royal family members. So, although the Kuwaiti National Assembly can carry the cabinet, can instruct the cabinet and build the cabinet, it can't actually choose the cabinet.

Last, but not least, if the Kuwaiti National Assembly becomes too obstreperous in challenging or questioning the cabinet, it can be disbanded. Under the Constitution, the prince is himself a legislative authority and can issue legislative decrees that have the force of law, and if parliament objects to that, he can just ignore it.

So, the Kuwaiti system is one of limited franchise in which citizens have limited power through the national assembly. It certainly is not a democracy in any western sense. Because of these factors, the consensus grew that Kuwait was a superficial electoral sham with no interest in democracy and that it wasn't actually worth investigating.

Nonetheless, there have been developments in Kuwait over the last four years that suggest a great potential for democratization—better, in fact than in almost any other country in the Middle East. Kuwait has the only parliament in the Gulf. Kuwaitis have been voting for parliament since 1962. Kuwaitis have been voting for national representation since the 1920s. They have a long tradition of self-government and of speaking up to and opposing the government.

In 1992, when the next-to-last national assembly was elected, it marked a kind of watershed in Kuwaiti politics. This particular assembly became much more confrontational and much more independent from the Prince, and it worked on an agenda of issues that put it much more on a collision course with the traditional structure of power than any assembly ever was before.

Kuwait was invaded by the Iraqis in August 1990 and liberated by the Americans in February 1991. For a period, the Kuwaiti government had been ruling in exile from Saudi Arabia. It had lacked completely any access to its traditional financial apparatus or coercive forces that allowed it to maintain the loyalty of the population. It had to summon a national conference in September 1990 to try to assert its authority along nationalistic lines, to woo people over to supporting the government. So, when the Kuwaiti National Assembly was elected in 1992, it looked very different from any of its prede-

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cessors. The citizens had shown their frustrations in terms of for whom they voted. Traditionally, the vast majority of delegates in the Kuwaiti National Assembly were "independents" with no particular ideological persuasion. The 1992 assembly was different in a number of different ways.

First, and most obviously, there was a huge vote for Islamic movements. About one-third of the parliament was occupied by representatives of one of two main Sunni Islamic parties. One of them, the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood—its actual name is the Islamic Constitutional Movement—includes political Islamic revolutionaries. They believe that Islam is a modern message that requires a fundamental reorganization of the institutions to society. It got about 16 percent of the vote. Another 16 percent of the vote went to a very different Islamic movement. The *Salafi* movement in Kuwait is about as popular as the Brotherhood is, and it's actually very conservative. It's very popular, in fact, among the same tribes that participate in the *Wahhabiyya* in Saudi Arabia, the *Mutayr*, the *Aiman* and the *Utayba*. Its orientation politically is one of trying to reinforce conservative trends, and trying to keep alive the traditional power structures of society. The two groups are actually working on very different agendas. They will, however, vote together from time to time, as a bloc. They do have certain slogans that they're able to rally under. When the assembly, for example, addresses the issues of whether or not men and women should be segregated in universities, they will rally together.

Another one-third of the vote went to a very different type of political force, and one that there was a little bit more precedent for. This was the liberals, who are sometimes called the "1985 Deputies." In the Kuwaiti Parliament, oddly enough, what the Kuwaitis call liberals would get called Marxist in the United States. Some 8 percent of the Kuwaiti Parliament consisted of a lot of old followers of the movement of Arab nationalists, who in Kuwait are called the Kuwaiti Democratic Forum. They're socialistic in their understanding of how economics should be handled, and they're anti-imperialistic in terms of their international policy. They're liberal in that they stand for social liberalization. They stand for progress. They stand for advancing the rights of women. They stand for modernizing society. Now, ideological liberals like the people of the Kuwaiti Democratic Forum make up about 8 percent of the 1992 national assembly.

A much larger group were the people who were called the "Bloc of 1985" deputies. These people, about 20 percent of the 1992 parliament, actually represent the old mercantile families of Kuwait City. These are the people who made their fortune back before oil. They are opposed to the Amir partly because they think he's uppity. One significant way Kuwait differs from Saudi Arabia and some of the other societies in the Gulf, is there are 30 or 40 different families in Kuwait City itself that consider themselves to be of every bit as noble lineage as the Al Sabah ruling family. They don't see themselves as being in any way socially inferior, just because the British and the Americans came in and decided to deal with these guys as the ruling family. So, they've long been the backbone of political opposition to the royal family in Kuwait. It's not well known in the West, but actually in the 1930s, during the Great

Depression, these people organized a constitutional movement that forced the Amir to accept a national assembly back in 1938. It was eventually suspended, but Kuwait has a long tradition of these folks demanding of and insisting upon collective consultation. This 1985 Bloc gets its name because in the 1985 election they first emerged as a big coherent force. A lot of people in this group who were elected in 1992 were reelected in 1985 and forced themselves into a political coalition at that time.

One-third of the assembly was liberal, one-third of the assembly were Islamic Movement, and another third of the assembly were people who either described themselves as independent or tribalist. Twenty-eight percent of the assembly described themselves as independent. Four percent were tribalist. These two groups, in practical fact, were aligned with the government, with the cabinet, with the royal family. Only about one-third of the people elected were looking to the Amir for their leadership. They had a situation where the Amir was not in control anymore. He had less than a majority of the delegates' support. There was always the possibility that either the liberals or the Islamic Movement would win away enough independents to carry a vote on a bigger issue. And, there was a real danger in the 1992 Assembly that actually the Islamic Movement and the liberals might unite together and form one voting bloc against the Amir.

That was something that the royal family worried about a lot in 1992-1993, because there were a series of issues that were actually forcing events in that direction. The Islamic Movement and the liberals, regardless of their ideological differences, shared certain common criticisms of the political order of Kuwait. They wanted to know, for example, what the cabinet had been doing during those months when Saddam made a threat to the country. Why weren't those things discussed in the papers? Why hadn't the cabinet dealt with these threats? Why didn't they take them seriously?

They were also very concerned with some of the financial mismanagement which came to light in the immediate aftermath of the Gulf War. Kuwait was unique among the states of the Arab Gulf in that it had set aside a certain portion of its oil revenues into a series of funds, called the Fund For Future Generations. Its purpose was to build up a portfolio of financial assets that at some point in the future would provide revenue for the population to live on, even after oil had ceased to have value. By 1989, the revenue return on the investments in the Fund For Future Generations was already larger than the value of Kuwaiti oil income. By 1990, the Fund For Future Generations was easily worth \$100 billion, or even as much as \$110 billion. It looked like Ku-

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wait was the one state in the Gulf that had tried to beat the problem of oil dependency that plagued all the states in the region.

But the Fund For Future Generations is now down to a high, according to some people, of perhaps \$30 billion, and a low of perhaps \$15 billion. The Kuwaitis had had to spend more than \$30 billion on the immediate cost of the Gulf War. One of the reasons why the Americans thought the Gulf War was such a great deal was because the United States didn't pay for it. We prepared \$58 billion worth of bills and mailed them out to Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, Japan and Germany, and they paid for it. Well, that hit the Kuwaitis hard, and they also had a horde of different emergency expenditures. They had to continue paying the pensions of their population that had fled the country. After people moved back in, they had to rebuild the country. They had to recap all those oil fields, and so on. That cost about \$20 billion. Their income was never the same after that, because the Fund For Future Generations had gotten much smaller and there was no longer a big return off of that. Oil revenue took a couple of years to build back up.

As a result, Kuwait today is no longer a creditor state, but a debtor state. For a long time, Iraq held the record of about \$90 billion in foreign debt. There's actually one state in the region now that has borrowed more, not internationally, entirely, but also from domestic markets, than Iraq: Saudi Arabia. The Middle East exported \$1 trillion worth of oil from 1973-1983, making it the most capital-rich region of the world, and most of us continue to think of it that way, but the ugly truth is that actually the entire region has been transformed into a debtor region, and Kuwait is near the head of that pack.

So, the Kuwaiti Parliament in 1992 wanted to know, what had the Amir been doing when the Iraqis were getting ready to invade? And, where did all this money in the Fund For Future Generations go, because when they started to do the accounting—yes, they took some big hits while paying off the Americans and putting out the oil fires—but it still turned out there was about \$15-\$20 billion that was unaccounted for, but missing. And, in some cases, they could tell actually that during the immediate chaos in the Iraqi invasion, the practice was simply to transfer out of the Fund For Future Generations into the private bank accounts of the members of the royal family. So the parliament wanted some financial accounting of who was responsible for this; they wanted to see if they could retrieve any of the funds.

The third issue was, given that this money was gone, Kuwait was now living well beyond its means and no longer had the revenue to sustain its traditional lifestyle. In the first year after the Gulf War, Kuwait ran a \$22 billion budget deficit. Every year since, it has run short of a \$5 billion structural budget deficit. They're spending in excess of what they're earning off of oil revenues, or returns on the Fund For Future Generations, or what the tiny bit that the Kuwaiti government collects in taxes. Incidentally, Kuwait actually collects less in taxes than any other government in the world. Kuwait collects only about 8 percent of its total government revenue in the form of taxes. All sorts of things that you and I wouldn't think about twice about paying a

tax on—sales tax, customs tax—the Kuwaitis don't pay. There's virtually no taxation.

People in Kuwait knew that they had a problem. In 1993-1994, the government could not afford to continue providing the level of service that it had in the past. People in Kuwait used to make phone calls for free, and they used to get the phone the moment they moved into their apartment. Now, there's a long waiting list for phones. Ninety-three percent of the Kuwaiti population works for the Kuwaiti government. Public employment was the way to keep salaries flowing. For many years the government created jobs; any state university graduate could immediately expect to be hired by the Kuwaiti government. Unemployment was on the rise dramatically in Kuwait for the first time in living memory.

In the parliament in 1992, the two opposition groups, the liberal bloc and the Islamic bloc, were looking at huge economic issues, some of them short-term: how to audit the Fund For Future Generations. But increasingly, they were facing extremely ugly long-term issues as well, having to do with how to restructure the economy so that they could sustain it. Now, the first two years of the 1992 National Assembly were spent by the delegates—the Muslim bloc and the liberal bloc actually did join together on case after case—in demanding an accounting from the government. They scored a number of big victories, some of them setting important precedents for the operation of the Kuwaiti Parliament. For example, limits to freedom of speech: you can criticize anybody in Kuwait as long as they're not a member of the royal family. Now, most Kuwaitis I spoke with found that acceptable in terms of the Amir himself and don't see any reason why people should be talking about him. But, when half the members of the cabinet are members of the royal family, that seriously hampers the ability to investigate public spending and affairs.

One of the things that happened in the first few years after the 1992 national elections was that parliament managed to establish that members of the royal family would no longer be tried in special courts that were answerable only to the Amir, but rather in the regular public courts under the same rule as any member of the population. There were some other important precedents that were set as well.

Parliament for the first time began dictating the military budget. That budget had previously been off limits. The Kuwaiti defense budget occupied a very unusual position in the country's military budget. In most countries, the defense budget is only about military preparedness. In Kuwait, the defense budget was essentially a giant bribe to the government of the United States. Kuwait purchased \$35 million of new weapons in the aftermath of the Gulf War, and the army was actually shrinking in size because they were expelling a lot of the non-citizens that used to make up its troops. Kuwait already had

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far more military equipment in 1990, at the time the Iraqis invaded, than it actually had people to use and operate it. Yet, it bought a whole new generation of jet fighters and tanks and armored personnel carriers. Why? Because it's very well understood in Kuwait, by both the government and the opposition, that it's the multibillion dollar contracts that are cycled out annually to McDonnell Douglas and others in the United States that are part of the *quid pro quo* that Kuwait pays for enjoying the benefits of American military protection.

I was surprised that a lot of Kuwaitis are quite angry about this: they felt that it was fine to pay the United States for these certain services, but what the United States was asking for was totally unrealistic. Kuwait was facing a serious budget deficit and had to cut back on expenditures. Kuwait had to cut its defense budget by 10 percent or 20 percent. Over the first couple of years, 1992-1994, a consensus began to emerge inside the Kuwaiti Parliament about how to handle the country's economic crisis.

It was based on three programs. First, everybody wanted to privatize. Second, they wanted to impose fees for goods and services. And third, they wanted

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to raise the taxes. About 93 percent of the Kuwait population works for the government. They work for government agencies like the Kuwait Oil Corporation, or Kuwait Airlines, and so on. There's a sincere hope in Kuwait that if you can take these corporations and transfer them over to the private sector, they will become more efficient and more competitive and they'll expand and create new jobs and that will take care of the unemployment problem.

There's some understanding in Kuwait that free international phone calls are a luxury that the population is soon going to have to learn are expensive. Imposing some kind of billing system that encourages people to conserve: The story in Kuwait was always that you were worried that your tiles would crack inside your apartment during the summer when you were away on vacation. So, you left your air conditioning on all summer. There's overkill on air conditioning, there's overkill on the way people water things. You get all the kinds of problems in Kuwait that you get in any society that gives away a lot of things for free. People take too much advantage of it. National health care is a guaranteed right, and there's no charge for pharmaceuticals.

Anyway, they want to privatize, they want to impose some fees, and there's actually some recognition that it may be necessary to institute something resembling a tax system. When people want to import VCRs and things like that, maybe there should be an import tax. Maybe there should be an income tax. There's an agreement actually, among all three of the major factions of the 1992 national assembly, that they ought to do these things.

Privatization is particularly popular. Privatization is actually an opportunity for Kuwaiti businessmen to buy shares in Kuwait Airlines as it's sold off to the private sector, and there's a chance for money to be made here. Privatization will probably happen first, so revenues will come in, but taxes are the real problem.

The delegates of the national assembly in 1994 were facing the issue of how to institute a tax system for the country that meant they were all faced with the kind of scenario that every year American politicians dread—imagine going home to your home constituency and saying something like, hey guys, remember that tax increase I promised all of you? Well, it's here. They were trying to think of a way to soften the blow. Trying to think of a way to make taxes palatable. One day, a leading liberal came up with an interesting idea. He said, look, there's no way economically we can offset imposing taxes on people. There's no economic benefit we can exchange for taking money back from people. That would be worse; that would defeat the purpose of taxation. But, maybe we can work out a political tradeoff. Maybe what we can do is we'll take more money from people, but we'll give them more political rights and liberties in exchange. For example, a very important part of the Kuwaiti workforce, about one-third of it, in fact, and in many cases the portion of whose revenues are growing most rapidly, is women. But women can't vote anywhere. It's not that it's not constitutional for them to vote. There was just an election law passed in 1963 that says that women can't vote. It would be very easy to repeal that. Give women the vote. In exchange, they'll pay part of their income in taxes.

The liberals began buzzing. What about the idea, we work out trades of civil liberties in exchange for taxes. Some began preparing lists of what civil liberties they wanted and which taxes they might impose on people. This idea was appealing politically; it was almost like getting something for nothing. It was a win-win situation. Then, the idea actually spread out from the camp of the liberals; it caught on among the Islamic groups. Some of the guys in the Islamic movement began to say, oh, we don't really need taxes. What we need is a *Zakat*—an Islamic tax. And, how about we work out a deal where we trade Islamic taxes for Islamic rights? And, the Islamic candidates began preparing a list. In many cases some of the rights that the liberals and the Islamic movements wanted were exactly the same rights.

They wanted the right to organize parties. They began to talk about having the ability to appoint the prime minister by parliament. Or, select all of the ministry and cabinet, etc. But, there were a few issues on which they differed. All in all, it's an idea of bolstering the fabric of civil rights, which may actually be the most exciting thing to happen in Kuwait, or in any Middle Eastern country, in terms of democracy, in the last five years.

Democracy isn't missing in the Middle East because people don't hold elections—elections are held all the time. The Moroccans have elections all the time. The Algerians have had elections. The Tunisians have elections. Even the Syrians have elections. But, there are two problems with elections in those cases. One of them is that people who can actually compete in the elections is

often quite restricted. For example, in Syria, you have to be one of the officially ordained parties to even run. Second, when the officially approved parties are not the ones that win, people won't pay attention to the election results.

Civil rights can make a difference on both of those things. Iran is actually, in many ways, one of the most democratic societies in the Middle East. Iranians have a functioning parliament that has a great deal more power and autonomy than the Kuwaiti parliament does. In some ways, it certainly has more power than the Turkish parliament. They have real elections that are hotly contested and a very active press. There's a lot of expression of opinion. In a lot of ways, Iran looks very democratic. There's one problem.

Although the Iranian Constitution guarantees its citizens a long series of rights, there's always one last line in each article of the constitution: provided it's not incompatible with Islam. You have a right to pursue the profession of your choice, as long as it's not incompatible with Islam. You have the right to voice any opinion, provided it's not incompatible with Islam. That exception, that one last restriction has actually been used, in point of fact, to limit very narrowly exactly what opinions you can hold. With the Iranian situation, you have a lot of the functional institutions of democracy with fair election, but no rights. It's what Jacob Talmon called a totalitarian democracy. It's a situation where the freest elections Iran ever had were the first ones they had after the revolution. Everybody came out and ran for office. But once the Islamic Republican Party won those elections and came into power, it said, OK, we're the majority. We rule. What we say goes. And, the first thing we're going to do is deny access to the press. We're the majority. This has a chilling effect on political competition. In result, the political spectrum has grown steadily narrower, but elections are every bit as honest today as they were five years ago. If Iran had a system of civil liberties, then it might have genuinely competitive elections.

Algeria in 1989 is another similar example. Algeria had some of the most honest and most inclusive elections of any state in the Middle East. In February 1989, the Algerian people voted for change. They voted for the Islamic Salvation Party, for the *Front Islamique du Salut* (FIS). When the military saw that the FIS was coming in, what ran through their heads? These guys had run on a platform that said the country had been run for 20 years by corrupt Arab nationals who absconded with billions of dollars and oppressed the people, and they should have been taken right up against the wall and shot. The army said, What's wrong with this picture? Civil liberties could have made a difference in Algeria, too. They did, for example, in Latin America in the early 1980s, where the military regime faced a very similar kind of situation as that confronting the Algerian military in 1989.

The Algerian military actually wanted to get out of the business of running Algeria. They knew themselves they hadn't done a very good job of it. It wasn't nearly as lucrative as it had been in the past. They wouldn't have minded stepping out of the way and letting some civilian regime come in and accept the responsibility for the failing economy. They wouldn't have minded stepping aside if they thought they couldn't have done so and kept their lives and

fortunes in hand, and that's what was missing. There weren't established civil liberties that guaranteed that when a new government came into power that it wouldn't turn around and simply shoot all the members of the old government.

These countries need a fabric of civil liberties to ensure that most essential ingredient of democracy, which is the actual transfer of power as a result of election. So, the Kuwaitis of 1993-1994 were starting to talk not just about having more elections, or doing the types of things that American AID programs try to push, like parties and slogans and televised campaigns—some of the dumbest things for promoting democracy. They tried to make places more and more like Alabama. The Kuwaitis were actually coming up with something different and a little bit peculiar. Not a standard part of modernization theory. They were talking about trading off taxes for civil liberties. And about making their democracy more representative by expanding the electorate and civil liberties.

This tradeoff is why Kuwait's prospects for democracy are so exciting today. Kuwaitis have talked over this issue, they have begun talking in terms of using this interesting situation where the government is suddenly dependent upon its public for certain economic concessions; the government needs to get people to agree to a few economic changes. And, the population is in a position to leverage that economic need into some political concessions. Unfortunately, what happened in Kuwait in 1994-1995, was that the liberal bloc and the Islamic bloc began to both

talk about putting together a joint program under which they would vote through a series of different taxes, and gain in exchange the provision of civil rights. There were a number of important sticking points in the positions of the two sides over exactly which rights they wanted.

The liberals, for example, looked at the Islamic bloc demand. The Islamic bloc wanted the Kuwaiti Constitution to be changed. There's one article in the Kuwaiti Constitution that says, the Islamic holy law shall be the primary source of legislation. And, the Islamic bloc wanted to take out the word "primary." They wanted to make it "the" source of legislation. The liberals were very worried that if that happened, it would mean that they were going to bring back *Hadd*, they were going to bring back corporal punishment, you know, lopping of people's hands for theft and stoning for adultery and things like that. The liberals went berserk whenever that was mentioned.

Likewise, the liberals were pushing for greater inclusion of women in the political system—which would probably have been a good move for them; the women who would vote are most likely to be the most educated, more liberalized sections of the population. In fact, women this year were very active in protesting their exclusion. The suffrage movement in Kuwait looks like it may be a big power in the next four years. But, the Islamic movement ob-

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jected to that in much the same way that the liberals objected to the revisions to the Constitution. They said, no, no, no, no, we shouldn't be talking about suffrage for women, we should be talking about stricter sexual segregation in Kuwaiti society. In fact, the Islamic movement tabled a motion that would require Kuwait to create a second Kuwait University. The existing one would be turned over to men, and the new one would be turned over to women, so there would be no hobnobbing and fraternizing between the genders.

Basically, what happened then was instead of these two groups uniting and pushing through a program of political reform, they spent 1994-1995 on a series of very vicious fratricidal debate over these two issues, Islamic law versus the exclusion of women. The public became thoroughly disgusted with both groups. And, it was very clear as of this spring, that point in fact, in the 1996 elections for the national assembly, it was very likely that there would be a big turnover of faces. It was thought that both groups would be punished for having neglected to address the really important economic issues that everybody was concerned about.

All the survey research showed that Kuwaitis were really worried about the economic questions. The Number One issues they were concerned with were rising rates of unemployment and how to handle the budget deficit. They were not actually terribly concerned with either women's issues or the question of Islamic law. That was not what was motivating people. So, people went to the polls in 1996, and it was expected that both of these groups would lose out.

Instead, a rather surprising result occurred. The *Salafis* and Muslim Brotherhood movements that make up the Islamic Bloc continued to have about 32 percent of the vote between them. They continued to make up about one-third of the national assembly. That didn't actually change. That was a little surprise. What was a bigger surprise is the vote for the Shi'a. The Shi'a had about 10 percent of the people in the 1992 assembly, about eight delegates. Their vote actually went down. That's surprising. It has always been surprising that the Shi'i representation in the Kuwaiti Parliament is as small as it is. Shi'a make up about 25 percent or 30 percent of the Kuwaiti population, and yet they've never had anything like that in terms of representation of the National Assembly.

A bigger surprise than that, however, is what happened to the 1985 Bloc. Remember the liberals and the 1985 Bloc? The liberals stayed about the same between the two assemblies, with 8 percent of the vote. But the 1985 Bloc, those deputies who made up the backbone of the Kuwaiti political opposition, had about 20 percent of the seats in the 1992 Assembly and got only 4 percent in the 1996 Assembly. This was the group that the public punished for the inaction of the Kuwait Assembly over the past couple of years. And, whom did they reward? Progovernment forces got about 4 percent of representation in 1992; they went up to 50.

This changes the whole logic of the political game in Kuwait. Partly, for simple mechanical reasons, it now means that the government, with 36 percent of the people who are independents or progovernment candidates and

14 percent tribalists, now have 50 percent of the assembly. The government can now put through legislation virtually on its own. But also, this election indicates a deeper force at work in Kuwait society, that's changing a lot of people's calculations, something nobody was really expecting during the election.

There became an expectation that the Liberal Party proportion would shrink and Islamic Party would shrink, but nobody expected the dramatic growth on the part of the tribalists. It was really a much more dramatic, a kind of watershed election, and it indicates the kind of structural change occurring at the grassroots of society that will have implications for the future. The country is subdivided into 25 electoral constituencies, each one of which elects two representatives to parliament. The way the balloting is done, everybody gets to vote for a first choice and a second choice, and the two people who come away with the highest vote total go to the national assembly. These voting results indicate a huge shift in who was voting where and why between two different parts of Kuwaiti society.

Suddenly, a division appeared in society that people certainly had been aware of for a long time, latently, but it had never been an electoral issue before. It was based, in part, on geographic terms. The constituencies numbered from one to 13 is the old heart of urban Kuwait. The others, 14 through 25 are the new parts. They are quite distinct in their voting patterns. The old urban core is old urbanites—people who usually have higher literacy rates, they usually have jobs that are higher up on the government list of functionaries, and they have higher income. It's partly an urban-rural difference, but it's partly a difference of class.

Old money in Kuwaiti society is in these first 13 districts, and they have the old political power as well—they know how to organize to be effective in the political system. They dominate the chamber of commerce, the unions, the nongovernmental organizations—and they traditionally determined the outcome of the elections. A lot of the Kuwaitis in the other districts are recent citizens.

When the Bloc of 1985 was causing more difficulties for the Amir, the Amir tried to combat that by going out and recruiting support among Bedouin tribes that were not settled, began extending citizenship to their members and offering them housing in the suburbs, settling them down, and giving them jobs. Between 1960-1990, 250,000 new Kuwaiti citizens fit into this category. They tend to be poorer, less literate, and they also have one other feature: they were still organized along tribal lines.

Traditionally, this had been a handicap in the electoral process—when people were organized on tribal lines, it made it more difficult for them to get together and push their candidates through. This year, something interesting happened: a pact of different Kuwaiti tribes discovered primaries. This year, for the first time in Kuwaiti history, there were primaries in half of the constituencies. Tribal primaries each produced one candidate that would get the vote of every member of the tribe.

Half of the members of the Kuwaiti Parliament were already known before

the elections this year, because they were decided in the primaries. These groups had learned to readdress the political divisions and make the system work for them. Everybody who came through from the outer districts this year was either a tribal member or a representative of one of the two Islamic movements, which were the only group that had about equal representation between the two sets of constituencies.

So, the government had a majority, but the government still had to make economic reforms, and the only way the government can make economic reform palatable is to give people civil rights in exchange for it. So, many think, this new progovernment bloc in the Kuwaiti Assembly is likely to vote through economic reform, and give people civil liberties in exchange. That would be very exciting.

However, Kuwait has a serious structural financial crisis, and the Kuwaiti Parliament over the next few years will probably avoid some of these reforms and at the very least start with the easier one: privatization. The current parliament is not likely to put through the "tax for civil liberties" reforms—that

The only way the government can make economic reform palatable is to give people civil rights in exchange for it.

will take some time politically for the idea to congeal. In the next four years, the liberals will reorganize, the Islamic movement will reorganize, the women's groups will organize—women are going to become a much stronger force in Kuwaiti politics in the future. They are liberals' best chance for a comeback—the people who will vote for taxes in exchange for women's suffrage. But, it will take time for these reforms to work through.

The third, and very real possibility of how Kuwait can get out of the current budget crisis is an uglier prospect: one doesn't require a sophisticated level of reform, and it's kind of a zero-sum game. What if the portions of the population that were poorer, that lived in the outlying regions, decided to insulate their families from the government deficit difficulties by using their power to guarantee themselves and their family members access to better-paying jobs? There are other examples of this happening in the Middle East, in Algeria, for example—the FIS proposed firing all the women from government jobs and giving them to men. Most of the women in Kuwaiti government jobs are from the old Kuwaiti families; replacing them with men from the outer districts wouldn't solve the government expenditures problem but would ease the difficulties of those constituencies. This sort of determination can be done along gender lines, along class lines, along tribal lines—but it can be very dangerous and can lead to civil war, depending on which groups are selected and excluded. But, it's a short term solution to a problem that requires painful long term measures, and people often look to those kinds of solutions.

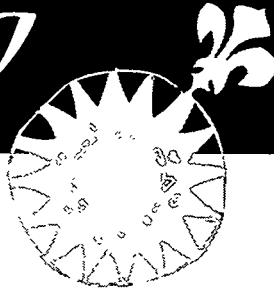
If there is a potential for democracy in the Middle East, and I believe there is, it will come about through these sorts of strange deals that are being struck

by people the West has never heard of, working with structural reform issues of the type that defeat the U.S. government's pictures of how reform is supposed to happen. It will come out of small countries like Kuwait or Yemen that aren't making it onto the U.S. evening news.



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