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Kuwait: Beyond Women's Suffrage

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In what will be remembered as the year of the woman in Kuwait, Prime Minister Sabah Ahmad Al Sabah on June 12 appointed Massouma Almubarak as Minister of Planning and Administrative Development. Just one month earlier, the feisty Kuwaiti parliament gave women the vote after having resisted the Emir's initiative since 1999. These steps have changed politics in Kuwait permanently. Other Gulf countries are undergoing similar transformations—Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates also now have female cabinet members—but the achievement of women's political rights was even more significant in Kuwait, where it was the result of intensive political and social debate rather than executive fiat.

The appointment of Minister Almubarak, a liberal Shiite academic with a degree from the University of Denver, served several purposes at once for the Kuwaiti government. In addition to addressing the longstanding aspirations of Kuwaiti women, the choice of Almubarak also mollified Shiites, who had been disgruntled since the only Shiite minister resigned from the cabinet in January 2005. The fact that Almubarak wore a headscarf also served to blunt criticism of her appointment by Islamists, who had inserted into the recent suffrage bill a clause calling for women politicians to abide by Islamic law. And of course the move won Kuwait high marks from the international community on the eve of U.S. Secretary of State Rice's visit to Kuwait and the Kuwaiti Prime Minister's visit to Washington.

For Kuwaiti women now, the immediate challenge is how to mobilize themselves and translate their newfound rights into effective political participation. The battle of political awareness is upon us, and the burden falls squarely on Kuwaiti women's organizations and their supporters to prove wrong those who opposed suffrage on the grounds that women were not prepared to exercise such rights.

While some in Kuwait hope that women's suffrage will mark the end of the road for reform, most believe it is only the first step toward greater political involvement and power sharing. Now the long-postponed discussion of political reforms can begin. One issue likely to emerge is redrawing electoral districts from the current 25 to ten or even five

districts in order to make them more broadly representative (and less based on sectarian or tribal factors) and to discourage vote buying and changing residency. Furthermore, debate is likely to resume on the issue of lowering the voting age from 21 to 18, an initiative supported by most members of parliament (including the Interior and Armed Services Committees) but so far opposed by the government.

The huge influx of women voters—which will increase eligible Kuwaitis from 140,000 to 350,000 for the 2007 parliamentary elections—will also lead to serious discussion of legalizing political parties. If in addition the voting age is lowered to 18 and military personnel are enfranchised, the current voter base would be tripled. In this situation, there will be an urgent need for political parties (until now forbidden) to organize and channel participation. Parties will also be needed to improve women's chances of being elected to parliament, because in the absence of quotas few will be elected as independents. In any case, the era of independent candidates is over in Kuwait for men as well as women.

Women's suffrage might have another salutary effect on Kuwaiti politics in that it is serving to shift the focus of politics from personal, tribal, and sectarian factors to a broader and more comprehensive national political sphere. Thus Kuwaitis with better professional qualifications might be attracted to run for office, whereas in the past many shied away due to the consuming demands of personal patronage. Until now, such personalized politics have undermined checks and balances as well as accountability and oversight in the Kuwaiti system.

Since its inception over four decades ago, the Kuwaiti parliamentary experience has been the harbinger and beacon for other Gulf states. With the full participation of all its citizens, Kuwait now becomes more important than ever before as an indigenous model. As such, the fate of the Kuwaiti experiment is no longer solely a domestic issue but one of regional significance.

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