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Kuwait: Interview with Ali al-Rashed, National Assembly member and candidate**Who has been responsible for the repeated crises between the Kuwaiti government and the recently dissolved National Assembly?**

There were undoubtedly a number of responsible parties, but mainly it was members of the ruling family who were removed from positions of influence and wanted to get back at those who removed them. Such members sometimes would take this out on the prime minister and his first deputy, inciting Assembly members beholden to them to create problems in an effort to have the Assembly dissolved.

How will the law reducing electoral districts from twenty-five to five influence the parliamentary elections scheduled for May 17?

I hope for the better. We must recognize an important truth, which is that the people are used to the twenty-five district system that was in place for twenty-five years. We will not be able to judge the new system by these first elections; it will take another round to get used to the five district system and for it to produce a more effective National Assembly.

What do you say to accusations that the National Assembly has become an obstacle to economic growth?

This is not true, and I do not agree with it. The government merely wants to pin its own shortcomings in achieving growth on the National Assembly, and it uses the huge government media outlets to do this. It does this because the Assembly questions the government and holds it accountable on issues such as deficiencies in hospital, road, and housing construction. We ask why the government has no work program and vision for the years ahead.

When we entered the Assembly, we met with His Highness the Emir and the prime minister and asked them to submit any law or economic development plan that would benefit the country and that they wanted the National Assembly to enact. We were ready to hold a special session and to vote upon any plan without delay. The government did not once request that any law be enacted or voted upon. This shows that the neglect was on the part of the government, not the Assembly.

Do you expect improved cooperation between the government and the new Assembly after the elections?

There will be cooperation when the government has a real vision and specifies what it wants to do for the country with a clearly defined growth program offering specific dates. There will be cooperation when the government understands the meaning of democracy. The government does not know the meaning of democracy because in its view democracy means that the National Assembly approves everything that is presented to it; the government considers any disagreement a lack of cooperation. This means that it considers the views of the Assembly to be always wrong. If the government's understanding does not change, it cannot say that the Assembly is uncooperative.

What is your view of the first experience with women's participation in the 2006 elections? Do you expect any women to be elected this time?

I hope so. We are now taking the first steps toward social acceptance of female participation in elections. The performances of former minister Massouma al-Mubarak and current Minister of Education Nouria al-Subeih have demonstrated women's abilities. We as a movement remain convinced that women are capable of serving in government, but there are other movements that believe the contrary. We always want to prove that women are capable of achievement, sometimes more so than men.

We as a society need some years to accept the situation and make an historic transition. This is natural in all societies, but I believe that in Kuwait we will achieve this transformation quickly, even before some of those states that had women in parliament before we did.

I am convinced that if women do not win in these elections, then they will in the next elections. But I expect that at least one woman will win in the coming elections and join the Assembly and we will support her. We, the National Democratic Alliance, will include women on our lists.

Do you think that the new Assembly will legalize the formation of political parties? And how would that affect the political process?

I hope that it will. I was the first to propose a law for the formation of political parties in the National Assembly. The current situation is chaotic. We need parties, governed by a law so that their size and funding and foreign links can be made clear. I submitted a draft law, but it was not debated because its turn did not come up. I will do so again in the coming session and will take care to ensure that it is a priority.

How do you see the future of the liberal movement, to which you belong?

I believe the liberal movement will achieve greater acceptance in the future and will attract many Kuwaitis. There are many who are leaving the Islamist movements. This is a good thing because the citizens of Kuwait have begun to realize that these movements are political, and that although they cloak themselves in religion, they are in no way religious. For us it is a matter of time and expansion, particularly in tribal areas where our presence is limited.

The Democratic National Alliance is new, only four years old. This is the first time that a movement of this age has announced candidates for three of the five constituencies; we might have as many as eight candidates. For us, this is not a simple step. We need the people to trust us more and we need greater media outreach and material assistance from our supporters.

In the past there has been some cooperation between liberals and Islamists in the National Assembly; will this be repeated?

That depends on the issue. Sometimes there are common issues, such as the electoral districts, which all agree upon. However, there are issues upon which we do not agree, such as personal freedoms. We, the liberals, consider such freedoms a red line and cannot accept any violation. The Islamists want to be the caretakers of society and we do not accept that.

Might you cooperate on a law legalizing political parties?

Yes, it is possible. We might differ on the details, but we all want a law organizing parties. There is sure to be significant cooperation on this among all of the groups in the National Assembly, not just between us and the Islamists.

The law proposing coeducation, which you proposed, incited a major controversy in Kuwait.

I received death threats because of this law. One zealot, not one of the Islamists, threatened that if I did not withdraw the proposal he would shoot me.

The law of coeducation is extremely simple. It stipulates that male and female students be permitted to study in the same lecture hall in the universities. This law was applied in Kuwait between 1965 and 1996—thirty-one years—but after the emergence of the Islamists in 1996 the situation changed and male and female students were segregated.

Segregation by sex has proved to be a failure culturally, scientifically, and practically. I proposed the coeducation law because it is a natural development and prepares male and female students to work in society. I have faced a number of accusations, but I have also been surprised by the extent of popular support the bill has enjoyed. This shows that I stirred something in the hearts of the people. They support this approach and this proposal, which I will continue to push until it is enacted, because we refuse paternalism and it is our right to choose how we educate our children. I will continue the struggle against any effort to infringe upon our freedoms.

Michele Dunne conducted this interview and Kevin Burnham translated it from Arabic.