

## A MONTHLY REVIEW OF EURO-GULF RELATIONS

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### Kuwait's 2020 Election Results and the New Government



The results of Kuwait's 2020 parliamentary elections signal continuation and intensification of a conservative turn as Kuwaitis elected an all-male parliament with the Islamist opposition strengthening its position in the 50-member National Assembly. There was the reelection of 19 MPs from the outgoing Assembly, a return of 7 former MPs after several years away from politics — including some significant opposition figures — and the entrance of a bulk of first-time MPs, who form almost half of the new Assembly. Two former Ministers, Badr Nasser Al-Humaidi and Shuaib Shabbab Al-Muwaizri, entered the parliament. The fact that less than a half of the incumbent MPs running for reelection in 2020

managed to secure seats in the Assembly mirrors the electorate's discontent with the results of the previous legislature as the country faces several challenges, including COVID-19, low oil prices, corruption, rising public debt and liquidity crisis, and a demographic dilemma.[1] Some other MPs also raised, for example, the issue of the status of the bidoon, or the electoral system, which since 2012 allows voters to pick only one candidate instead of four. The new parliament, and government, need to avoid deadlocks over pressing issues, such as the public debt law, and find a common ground to navigate Kuwait out of its looming economic crisis. The MP-elects include personalities with backgrounds ranging from

### Kuwait's Electoral Rollercoaster:

**The al-Sabah, the National  
Assembly and Gulf  
Democracy**

Kuwait's electoral history has been a rollercoaster ride. Parliaments have come and gone. Constitutions have been promulgated, suspended and re-introduced. Voting rights and the overall purpose and quality of political representation have been passionately debated. It is a story of beginnings, interruptions and resumptions. But, like any rollercoaster, even violent ups and downs occur within predictable parameters. In Kuwait, the drama of general elections has been played out against a background of a resilient al-Sabah monarchy, the state's vulnerability to external threats, and a developing political culture that has embraced elections and the whole democratic process.

### **Independence, a Constitution and a Parliament**

Kuwait's assertion of full independence in 1961 was not attended by any major step towards democracy. The 1940s and 1950s had demonstrated that the ruling al-Sabah family were capable of containing demands from below for political reform by a mixture of familial discipline and the development of a generous welfare state. It took an invasion scare by neighbouring Iraq in 1962 to jolt the Amir, Sheikh Abdullah Salim, into consulting with reformist members of

*Continued PAGE 7*

*Continued PAGE 9*

# An Overview of the GCC Countries' Parliaments

On 5 December 2020, Kuwait will hold parliamentary elections where voters are set to elect 50 members of the National Assembly. Its parliament is considered to be one of the most independent among the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, having powers to pass legislation and dismiss Ministers. With this in mind, it is, therefore, interesting to understand how parliaments in the GCC countries operate, exploring the similarities and differences that exist among them.

## Kingdom of Bahrain

Bahrain has a bicameral parliament, the National Assembly, which consists of two 40-member chambers: the Council of Representatives (COR, Majlis al-Nawab) and the Consultative (Shura) Council (Majlis al-Shura). While the former is directly elected, the latter is appointed by the King. The National Assembly was first formed in 1973, but two years later it was disbanded until its reactivation in 2002 under King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa as part of the new Constitution, which enabled both men and women to vote and run in the parliamentary election. Since then, elections take place every four years. Women first entered the parliament in 2006 as one woman was elected to the COR and nine were appointed to the Shura Council. Like in the rest of the GCC countries, political parties are prohibited, however, in contrast to its Gulf counterparts (except Kuwait), candidates can align with political associations and run under their banner in elections, or run as independents. Once seated, their roles include proposing laws, and, unlike the other GCC parliaments, they may amend the Constitution. Moreover, the COR can call a vote of no-confidence of Ministers and dismiss them, while the Shura Council oversees the state budget and can accept, amend or reject draft laws. In the most recent

2018 election, independents won 35 seats, al-Asalah, a Sunni Salafi society, won three, Progressive Democratic Tribune (al-Minbar), a left-wing society, won two and the National Unity Assembly, a Sunni party, won its first seat. About half of the elected independents then formed parliamentary groups: Bahrain, Taqadom, a left-leaning group, and Al Methaq (National Action Charter), a politically liberal alliance, leaving the number of unaffiliated at seventeen. Within this composition, women secured six seats in the COR and nine seats in the Shura Council, including Fawzia Zainal, who became Bahrain's first female Speaker and second among the GCC countries, after the UAE.

## State of Kuwait

Kuwait's unicameral parliament, the National Assembly (Majlis al-Umma), consists of 50 members directly elected every four years, along with 15 appointed Ministers, so-called ex-officio members, of which one has to be also an MP.[9] Thus, in contrast to its GCC counterparts, Kuwait's parliament seats more elected than appointed members. Those elected are considered independents since political parties are outlawed, but, as in Bahrain, members can form informal societies.[10] Following Bahrain again, these members can interpellate, dismiss and call a vote of no-confidence in Ministers, as well as initiate and pass laws and approve the budget. The first National Assembly was elected in 1962, making it the longest-serving majority-elected parliament in the GCC. While elections take place every four years, Kuwait's parliament stands out in the region as it is often dissolved by the Emir, most recently in 2016 due to disagreements over oil prices. New elections, however, must always be called within two months following the dissolu-

tion. In the last election of 2016, the opposition, which included the local Muslim Brotherhood affiliate, Salafis, Shia Muslims, tribal factions and liberals, won 24 seats, and the remaining 26 went to pro-government coalitions. This includes only one female parliamentarian, a decrease from when four women first took office in 2009. In fact, despite being the second GCC country to grant women the right to vote in parliamentary elections and hold office in 2005, Kuwait has the lowest proportion of female parliamentarians in the region. This mirrors the trend in the GCC countries with parliamentary elections that fewer women get elected than appointed.

## Sultanate of Oman

After Bahrain, Oman is the second GCC country with a bicameral parliament. The Council of Oman consists of the State Council (Majlis al-Dawla), appointed by the Sultan, and the directly elected Shura Council (Majlis al-Shura), with both houses enjoying 86 seats designated to independents. This makes it the largest GCC parliament, who, like the aforementioned parliaments, propose and review laws and examine the annual budget. Yet, in contrast, Oman's Shura Council can merely interpellate, but not dismiss, Ministers. In terms of passing laws, Oman's parliament is one of the least active in the GCC, having passed only 30 laws in the previous legislature. Oman established its first parliament, the State Consultative Council, which was fully appointed, in 1981. A decade later, it was transformed into Majlis al-Shura and a selected group of voters was allowed to choose its members. It was only in 1996 that the upper house, Majlis al-Dawla, was founded, forming the current bicameral parliament. Since 2003, universal suffrage was adopted, significantly expanding

# AN OVERVIEW OF THE GCC COUNTRIES' PARLIAMENTS

Although the GCC countries remain hereditary monarchies, it is interesting to look at how their parliaments operate, examining some key similarities and differences that exist among them, as well as highlighting important milestones.



## COMPOSITION

Oman and Bahrain are the only two **bicameral** GCC parliaments, the rest is unicameral.

50% of UAE's FNC members are elected by the **electoral college**. FNC is the only GCC parliament that **cannot propose new laws**.

	National Assembly	National Assembly	Council of Oman	Federal National Council	Consultative Council	Consultative Council
elected members	40	50	85	20	0	0
appointed members	40	15	86	20	35	150

Those are Cabinet Ministers (ex-officio members).

Kuwait's National Assembly seats **more elected than appointed members** and has **more powers** than its GCC counterparts.

**Qatar and Saudi Arabia** are the only two countries with **all-appointed parliaments**.

## POLITICAL PARTIES



Political parties are in general **prohibited** across the GCC and candidates thus run in the elections as independents. However, in **Bahrain** and **Kuwait** they can form **political societies** and run under their banner.



## WOMEN IN THE PARLIAMENT

### FIRST AND LAST



Oman was the **first country to allow women run and vote** in parliamentary elections.



Qatar was the **last GCC country to appoint women** in its parliament in 2017.

### 1ST FEMALE SPEAKER



The UAE elected the **first woman Speaker of the House** in the GCC in 2015, the second one was elected in Bahrain in 2018.



### 1ST WOMEN QUOTA



Saudi Arabia was the **first to introduce women quota** in the parliament. It was set at **min. 20%** and KSA thus has the **largest number of women members (30)** among the GCC parliaments.

### PROPORTION



The UAE was the **2nd to introduce quota for women** and the first to set it at **50%**, becoming the first GCC parliament with **equal gender representation** and simultaneously also the **largest proportion of women**.



**Kuwait** currently has the **lowest proportion of women** in the Parliament.

the pool of eligible voters. This included women who were the first in the GCC to gain the right to run in the Shura Council election in 1997 with two females elected to parliament accordingly. In the latest 2019 election, 2 women were elected to the Shura Council, while fifteen were appointed to the State Council.

## State of Qatar

Qatar's unicameral parliament is known as the Shura Council (Majlis al-Shura, Consultative Assembly). It is the smallest parliament in the Gulf region, currently holding 35 seats, which are all appointed by the Emir. This comes despite the 2004 Constitution, which stipulates that the Council should comprise of 45 members, 30 of whom are directly elected, and 15 of whom are royally appointed. Elections have been postponed several times; although, in the Council's 49th session, the Emir proclaimed that the first parliament elections will be held in October 2021. Despite this anomaly to the aforementioned parliaments, their duties remain similar to them as members propose and consider laws, as well as approve the national budget. Moreover, they can interpellate and call a vote of confidence of Ministers like in Bahrain and Kuwait. The Shura Council was first formed in 1972 with 20 appointees, expanding its membership in the subsequent years. Females, however, only entered this equation in 2017 when four women, who are currently still in office, were first appointed to the parliament, making Qatar the last GCC country to do so.

## Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's parliament, the Shura Council (Majlis al-Shura), is unicameral, consisting of 150 members plus the speaker. It is the oldest parliament in the GCC, formed in 1927. However, unlike its GCC counterparts (except Qatar), members are not elected but appointed by the King for a four-year







renewable term. In terms of their duties, it can discuss government reports as well as social and economic plans and it is the only GCC country where parliament has no oversight of the budget. Further, the Council cannot pass laws, but it may propose new laws or amendments to the existing ones. It can also seek accountability of Ministers through a request to the Prime Minister. In 2013, Saudi Arabia was the first GCC country to institute a quota reserving at least 20 percent of seats in the Shura Council for women. Accordingly, 30 women were appointed to the Council that year for the first time in the Kingdom's history, and continue to hold the same number of seats.

### **The United Arab Emirates**

The UAE's unicameral parliament, the Federal National Council (FNC), is a manifestation of the country's federal system — it is comprised of 40 independent members, half of which are indirectly elected, while the remaining

20 are appointed by the rulers of each of the seven emirates, serving four-year terms. Each emirate can elect a fixed number of members based on the size of its population, with the largest amount assigned to Dubai and Abu Dhabi (8 each). Unlike its GCC counterparts, the Council does not propose laws; however, it can pass, amend or reject laws and review the general budget. Further, it also debates international treaties and agreements along with other issues relevant to the Federation, and questions the Ministers' performance, although, similar to Oman and Saudi Arabia, it cannot dismiss them. The FNC was formed under the Provisional Constitution in 1971, and, in 2006, the electoral college members voted in the first parliamentary election. In the same year, females were also given the right to vote and run for office and, consequently, one woman was elected, while eight women were appointed. Nine years later, the FNC appointed the first female Speaker, Amal Al-Qubaisi.

A further progression occurred in 2019 as the UAE President ordered to raise female representation in the parliament to 50 percent, becoming the second Gulf country to implement a quota and taking the lead in the proportion of females in the GCC parliaments.[41] Consequently, the latest 2019 FNC election saw for the first time equal gender representation, with seven women elected and thirteen appointed.

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The GCC countries' parliaments, while sharing several similarities, vary both in terms of their structure, legislative competencies and extent of power they are granted over the executive. With the upcoming elections in Kuwait, it remains to be seen whether the parliament's composition will significantly change and what implications on society this could have.

*by Sophie Smith*

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# Kuwait's Parliamentary Elections 2020

## Topics, Trends and Challenges

Kuwait's parliamentary elections on 5 December, the first under the country's new Emir, Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, are less than one week away and, like in many other countries, the impact of COVID-19 pandemic is profound and visible. Each of the five electoral districts will elect 10 MPs to represent them in the unicameral National Assembly, of which at least one will be appointed as Minister. Strict measures of social distancing and wearing masks will be observed on election day. Provisions are also in place to ensure that patients infected with COVID-19 can cast their ballots and the government sought to allow Kuwaitis living abroad to vote for the first time, along with significantly increasing registration fees for the candidates (from 50 to 500 Kuwaiti dinars). Due to COVID-19 restrictions, such as the ban on physical gatherings and rallies, the candidates had to rely entirely on modern technologies and social media for political campaigning, which significantly reduced opportunities to influence voters by anything more than their election programmes. Although the total number of candidates slightly dropped compared to 2016 (321), there are significantly more registered voters and more women decided to run (27), raising hopes for increased female participation in the parliament—although, the bar is fairly low because there is now only one female MP. Despite this positive development, female candidates still represent only a fraction of the candidates and continue to face significant obstacles and prejudice, drawing more attention to gender-related issues, which Kuwait will have to address

sooner or later if it wants to ensure social and economic development. Those issues are however likely to be overshadowed by the lingering economic crisis and perhaps even more downplayed with Islamists' gains.

### New Leadership and Managing Conflicts between Executive and Legislative

Of the six GCC countries' parliaments, Kuwait's is considered to be the most powerful in terms of its competencies and, although political parties are not allowed as in the rest of the GCC, candidates can run for political associations. In 2020, all but 7 MPs of the incumbent Assembly seek reelection and it is expected that the opposition will repeat the success of the previous election, when it secured almost half of the seats (24) in the 50-member Assembly. The big winners were Islamists, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM) and the Salafis. It will be interesting to see whether the conservative trend will continue, especially as many religious hardliners have sought to score political points with some recent events, such as the heated debate over French caricatures of prophet Mohammed and remarks by France's President, Emmanuel Macron, about Islam in crisis, prompting calls for boycotting French products; promoting and supporting the Palestinian cause amid UAE's and Bahrain's normalisation with Israel; and championing opposition to the government mismanagement and high-level corruption. The results of Islamists and the Muslim Brotherhood in particular, will be interesting because some high-level officials

in Kuwait's new leadership, such as Crown Prince Mishal Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, former Deputy Chief of the National Guard and Chief of State Security, are not particularly fond of them. Kuwait's relatively lively political scene has been marked by conflicts between the Cabinet, appointed by the Emir and the elected Assembly which periodically results in parliament's dissolution and Cabinet reshuffles—the latest example being the Cabinet's resignation in November 2019. Between 2012-2016, Kuwait held four parliamentary elections and the 2016-2020 legislature is one of the rare occasions when the Kuwaiti parliament actually completed its four-year mandate. Such internal political conflicts will represent a challenge for Emir Nawaf as even the late Emir Sabah, known for his conciliatory efforts, was unable to resolve them all. Emir Nawaf will have to find a way to manage tensions between the two branches to navigate Kuwait's precarious economic situation. His choice of Prime Minister and the new Cabinet following the election results will be crucial for those efforts and will indicate the new leadership's course. The conflicts between executive and legislative and frequent changes have at times drew attention away from more pressing issues related to the country's development and stalled progress, which Kuwait cannot afford at this point. Should the Islamist opposition strengthen its position in the parliament, the situation could be further complicated.

### Kuwait's Lingering Economic Challenges

Similar to the rest of the world, Kuwait's economy suffered un-



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der COVID-19 restrictions and a long economic shutdown, which struck a blow to its private sector and strained public finances. As one of the world's top oil producers, Kuwait relies on oil for 88% of its public revenues and is therefore sensitive to oil market fluctuations such as the ones in early 2020, which saw the oil prices plunge to US\$25 per barrel, less than a half of what Kuwait's budget counted on. Additionally, Kuwait also has to allocate increasingly more funds to oil extraction as it needs to exercise more efforts to reach deeper reserves. Yet, the largest item of the state budget remains salaries of employees in the public sector, where the majority of Kuwaiti nationals work, and subsidies. Facing the economic fallout of the pandemic and low oil prices, Kuwait's government had to reduce expenditures and introduced a budget with a record deficit of 14 billion Kuwaiti dinars (KD), which is a sharp increase compared to the 2018/2019 fiscal year, when Kuwait managed to decrease its public debt by more than 30% to KD3.35 billion thanks to higher oil prices and non-oil revenues. Amid this bleak outlook, the estimated 2020/2021 revenues were almost halved from the initial KD14.8 billion in January to KD7.5 billion in September. Kuwait's US\$527 billion sovereign wealth fund is among the world's largest but the government needs National Assembly's approval to increase the debt ceiling limit and borrow from international investors to cover the deficit. However, the parliament has been reluctant to release billions for the government — particularly due to a series of high-level corruption and mismanagement cases — and demand structural reforms that would address the high expenditures on state institutions. Conflict over funding caused deadlock between the government and the parliament as parliamentary authorisation to refinance or sell debt expired in 2017 and it recently refused the new public debt law proposed by the government that



would allow it to borrow KD20 billion. As the government cannot access the assets in the US\$489 billion Future Generations Fund without parliament's authorisation, it relies on the second segment of the sovereign wealth fund, the US\$38 billion General Reserve Fund, which acts as its treasury and is nearing depletion. Kuwait's Finance Minister, Barrak Al-Sheetan, warned that without the public debt law the country would soon run out of funds to pay state employees' salaries. The thinning liquidity reserves were among the reasons that led the Moody's to downgrade the country's debt rating in September 2020 for the first time.

#### **Candidates' Top Priorities**

COVID-19 thrust economic topics to the forefront of the debate and have featured prominently in the candidates' campaigns. Following the global trend, populism is also visible, particularly regarding preserving and improving citizens' living standards amid worsening economic situation, promising to reject plans that would negatively affect taxes, subsidies or public services' fees. Some candidates focused on the need for economic reforms and diversification plans, housing and employment, while some decided to take a different route, such as one candidate that placed culture and arts — topics usually sidelined in election campaigns — as a priority. One of the key issues also continues to be corruption and mismanagement of public funds, which has gained

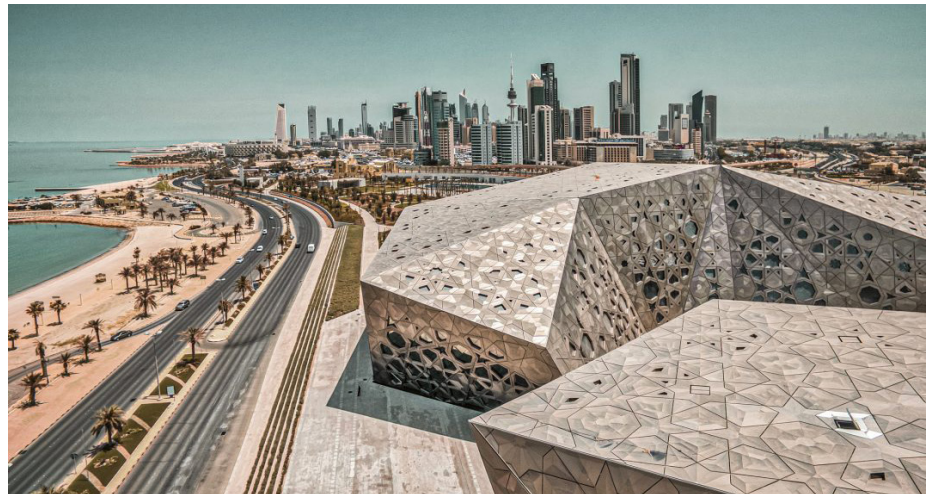
more attention in the past years and will inevitably come under more scrutiny as people's economic situation deteriorates with the pandemic. Hundreds of Kuwaitis have expressed their discontent in a large anti-corruption protest outside the parliament in November 2019. Another topic that evoked passion amid the pandemic and its increasing strain on the economy is related to demographic situation and "Kuwaitisation" plans that seek to redress the expats-to-nationals ratio, which is currently around 70% to 30%. Kuwait's National Assembly recently unanimously approved a population restructuring law seeking to reduce the number of expatriates, who predominantly work in the private sector.[20] Some candidates warned that those plans are unrealistic given Kuwait's low fertility rate and the lack of Kuwaitis' interest in certain jobs. Apart from the public debt bill, Kuwaitisation and economic diversification plans, the future parliament and Cabinet will also have to oversee the implementation of the 5% Value Added Tax (VAT) in 2021. COVID-19 and its economic fallout accentuated Kuwait's deep rooted structural issues. The country is now at a crossroad and navigating it out of its economic conundrum towards long-term development, prosperity and progress will require Kuwait's new parliament and Cabinet to cooperate and compromise across the board.

*by Nikola Zukalová*

# Kuwait's 2020 Election Results and the New Government

FROM PAGE 1

law, political science, security and military apparatus, to banking and economics. Yet, the diversity of the new MPs backgrounds was not translated into gender diversity as no women were elected to the parliament in 2020. The failure to elect any women parliamentarians points to the long-standing challenges related to deep-rooted traditions and prejudice faced by female candidates. The first and third districts put forward the most female candidates (9 each), the second and fifth districts had 4 each, while no woman ran in the fourth district. Ghadeer Asiri, former Minister of Social Affairs, placed first among female candidates in the first district, overall 19th, with 1,119 votes. Ealiat Al-Khalid ranked 13th in the second district with 1,307 votes and was the only woman to make it to top 15 in 2020. In the third district, Shaikha Al-Jassim placed 25th with 642 votes, while the only female MP of the outgoing Assembly, Sa-faa Al-Hashem, lost the election receiving only 430 votes, approximately eight times less than in 2016. Khadija Al-Qallaf placed the 31st in the 5th district, the highest of the four female candidates. Ahead of the first session of the 16th legislative term on 15 December 2020, the majority of the new lawmakers showed an intent to replace Marzouq Al-Ghanem, who has been the Assembly's Speaker since 2013, despite his election win in the second district. His successor could become Bader Nasser Al-Humaidi, former Minister of Public Works (2003-2007), who reportedly received an endorsement from 40 MPs. In line with the tradition, the Cabinet of Prime Minister Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Sabah, in office since November 2019, resigned after the elections but Emir Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah decided to reappoint him as Prime Minister to form the next Cabinet, the first under the new Emir. The new 15-member



ber government was approved by the Emir on Monday, 14 December. There are a few survivors from the previous Cabinet, such as Ahmed Nasser Al-Muhammad Al-Sabah, who will continue as the Minister of Foreign Affairs, and Rana Abdullah Al-Fares, the only woman in government, who will remain the Minister of Public Works and Minister of State for Municipal Affairs. But there are also several significant changes. Kuwait's former Ambassador to Saudi Arabia and former Minister of Information, Hamad Jaber Al-Ali Al-Sabah, will become the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence. The Ministry of Interior will be controlled by Thamer Ali Sabah Al-Salem Al-Sabah, who led Kuwait's National Security Bureau since its establishment in 1997, first as Deputy Chief and since 2013 as its President, which will return the Ministry's leadership to the Al-Sabah ruling family. Khaled Ali Mohammad Al-Fadhel was replaced by Mohammed Abdul Latif Al-Faris, member of the board of the Kuwait Petroleum Corporation, as Minister of Oil and Minister of Electricity and Water. Khalifa Hamade, former Undersecretary at Ministry of Finance, was appointed as its Chief, replacing Barak Al-Shitan. According to the law, at least one of the new MPs will be part of the Cabinet—the reelected MP from the first district, Issa

Ahmad Al-Kandari, will become Minister of Social Affairs and Minister of Endowments and Islamic Affairs.

## Kuwait's 2020 Parliamentary Elections Results by Districts

### First District

In the first district, 3 MPs — Issa Ahmad Al-Kandari (3,398 votes), Adnan Abdulsamad Zahed (3,052 votes, MP since 1981) and Osama Issa Al-Shaheen (2,167 votes) — of the 2016 Assembly were reelected. Adnan Abdulsamad Zahed is affiliated with the Shia National Islamic Alliance and is at the same time the oldest serving MP of the new Assembly, entering the parliament in 1981. Zahed stirred a controversy in 2008 for taking part in an event celebrating Imad Mughniyeh, a senior Hezbollah leader responsible for a number of terrorist attacks, as a hero after following his death that year. Two former MPs — Hassan Abdullah Johar and Ahmed Khalifa Al-Shuhoomi 4,129 votes (2006) — returned to the Assembly after more than a decade. Johar, a former Shia-affiliated MP (1996-2008), won the first district's polls, celebrating his return with 5,849 votes after boycotting the elections for the past 8 years due to the new electoral system. Half of the 10 MPs elected in the first district were elected for the first time, namely Yusuf Fahad Al-Ghurayyeb 5,064 votes, Hamad Ah-



mad Rouhuddine 3,783 votes, Ali Abdulrasool Al-Qattan 3,320 votes, Abdullah Mohammad Al-Turaiji 2,472 votes, Abdullah Jassem Al-Mudhaf 3,437 votes. More than 70% of eligible voter in the first district participated in the elections.

#### *Second District*

Half of the 10 MPs elected in the second district consisted of reelected members of the 2016 Assembly, including the incumbent Speaker, Marzouq Ali Al-Ghanim, who topped the elections in the second district by a big margin with 5,179 votes. The other four reelected MPs are: Mohammad Barrak Al-Mutair (3,456 votes), Khalil Ibrahim Al-Saleh (3,117 votes), Badr Hamed Al-Mulla (2,483 votes), and Hamad Saif Al-Harshani (2,208 votes), who is in his 75 years also the oldest MP of the entire new National Assembly. Hamad Mohammad Al-Matar, who was an MP in 2012, returned to the Assembly with 3,903 votes. As in the first district, the second half of the elected MPs consists of those entering the Assembly for the first time, which includes also Badr Nasser Al-Humaidi (2,534 votes), who might become the Assembly's new Speaker, Salman Khaled Al-Azmi (2,866 votes), Khaled Ayed Al-Enezi (2,565 votes) and Ahmed Mohammad Al-Hamad (2,195 votes).

#### *Third District*

As in the first district, three MPs of the outgoing Assembly were reelected — Abdulkarim Abdul-lah Al-Kandari (5,585 votes), Yusuf

Saleh Al-Fadhalah (2,992 votes) and Saadoun Hammad Al-Otaibi (2,979 votes). Fares Saad Al-Otaibi, who was an MP in 2013 returned to the 2020 parliament with 2,942 votes, while six new MPs were elected — Osama Ahmad Al-Munawer (3,858 votes), Muhannad Talal Al-Sayer (3,565 votes), Hisham Abdulsamad Al-Saleh (3,345 votes), Abdulaziz Tareq Al-Saqabi (3,340 votes), Mubarak Zaid Al-Mutairi (2,982 votes), Muhallal Khaled Al-Mudhaf (2,904 votes). Interestingly, except for the winner, Abdulkarim Abdullah Al-Kandari, who has been in the parliament since 2013, new incoming MPs were endorsed by more voters than the reelected ones, signifying a demand for a change. According to the official data, voter turnout in the third district was 68%.

#### *Fourth District*

Fourth district marked almost 71% voter turnout in which four MPs were reelected — Shuaib Shabbab Al-Muwaizri (6,200 votes), Thamer Saad Al-Dhefeeri (4,935 votes), Saad Ali Al-Rashidi (4,520 votes), Mubarak Haif Al-Hajraf (4,422 votes) — while six MPs were elected for the first time — Fayez Ghannam Al-Mutairi (5,774 votes), Musaad Abdulrahman Al-Mutairi (5,750 votes), Mohammed Obaid Al-Rajhi (5,198 votes), Saud Saad Al-Mutairi (5,100 votes), Marzouq Khalifa Al-Khalifa (4,760 votes), Farz Mohammad Al-Daihani (4,701 votes). Shuaib Shabbab Al-Muwaizri, a leading opposition figure, who

entered the parliament in 2009 and formerly served as Minister of State for Housing and for National Assembly Affairs, won the elections in the fourth district. Al-Muwaizri as well as several of the newly elected MPs in this district were previously part of Kuwait's security and military apparatus, having served at Ministry of Interior or in the Army.

#### *Fifth District*

The fifth district reelected four MPs — Hamdan Salem Al-Azmi (8,387 votes), Khaled Mohammad Al-Otaibi (5,387 votes), Mohammad Hadi Al-Huwaila (4,720 votes, a long time MP) and Nasser Saad Al-Dossari (4,750 votes), who, in his 34 years, continues to be the youngest elected member of the new parliament. Three former MPs — Badr Zayed Al-Azmi (8,371 votes), Al Saifi Mubarak Al-Ajmi (6,294 votes), Ahmed Abdullah Al-Azmi (4,651 votes) — returned to the parliament after several years, while three new personalities — Mubarak Abdullah Al-Ajmi (6,801 votes), Hammoud Mubarak Al-Azmi (5,347 votes), Saleh Theyab Al-Mutairi (5,113 votes) — were sent to the Assembly for the first time. Hamdan Al-Azmi served as an MP since 2013 and won the fifth district's elections with 8,387 votes, only 17 points ahead of Badr Zayed Al-Azmi, who returned after being an MP in 2012 and following the election boycott. These two received the most votes of all 50 MPs.

*by Nikola Zukalová*



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# Kuwait's Electoral Rollercoaster:

## The al-Sabah, the National Assembly and Gulf Democracy

FROM PAGE 1

the merchant class (longstanding agitators for checks on government powers) regarding liberalisation. A remarkably liberal constitution, including the enshrinement of a democratically-elected National Assembly with powers to examine and dismiss ministers, was the result of this. The first general elections were held in January 1963. Over the next thirty years, relations between the National Assembly and the al-Sabah – who continued to control the executive government – were often tense and boiled over at crucial points. Although there were already important limits to the scope of democracy – including media curbs, the reservation of seats in the National Assembly for unelected ex-officio ministers and a ban on political parties – the al-Sabah remained sensitive to public criticism levelled against their stewardship of the state and were prepared to rein in the parliament when it became too challenging. In 1976 the National Assembly was shut down by the government. It was reopened in 1981 as the regional turmoil unleashed by the Ayatollah Khomeini's triumph in Iran necessitated greater national unity. But the underlying tensions between ruling family and its critics did not evaporate. The 1985 general elections were of momentous importance. Amid ris-

ing public dissatisfaction triggered by a stock market collapse in 1982 and proposed government amendments to the constitution, for the first time the opposition factions gained a majority in the National Assembly. The Assembly immediately began to bare its teeth, subjecting the government to greater scrutiny and forcing the dismissal of one minister. But there was to be no Soviet Union-style glasnost' revolution – with all of its attendant chaos – in Kuwait. Instead, in 1986 the government suspended the 1962 constitution and abolished the Assembly; for a second time, the state veered towards authoritarianism.

### The Iraq Invasion and the Return to Democratic Politics

1985-6 was, therefore, Kuwait's 'turning point when history refused to turn'. But that moment was fast approaching. The 1990-1 Iraqi invasion and occupation of Kuwait jolted the al-Sabah back into embracing meaningful popular participation in national politics. The 1990 invasion, like the 1962 Iraqi threat, compelled the government to focus on nation-building and domestic stability: rapprochement with democracy advocates was crucial to this. It was also apparent that a close relationship with the United States of America depended to an extent on fostering a genuine

democracy. The consequences were profound. The 1962 constitution was restored, as was the National Assembly, and fresh elections were held in 1992. The October 1992 general election was the most important in Kuwait's short democratic history. Despite the less than normal circumstances, it was peaceful, free and fair. It was the clearest evidence of the new compact between government and citizens, and it revealed the extent to which liberalisation and democratisation were being embraced by the nation. The number of registered voters rose significantly, from 56,848 in 1985 to 81,440 in 1992; it would rise again to 107,169 by 1996. After 1992, general elections became institutionalised as a regular feature of Kuwaiti political life. Democracy embedded itself as an aspect of national identity which Kuwaiti citizens regarded with pride. The government recognised this, and this helped to ensure that there was no return to the wild oscillations of the 1970s and 1980s. Instead, debates in the 1990s and early 2000s focused on the political status of women in Kuwait. This debate did not begin in the 1990s, but did become much more prominent during these years. In an ironic twist, it was the Amir, Sheikh Jaber, who granted women the right to vote in 1999, before conservative ele-



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ments in the National Assembly overturned the ruling as unconstitutional. The question was finally resolved in 2005, when women were enfranchised and permitted to stand as candidates. The 2006 general elections were heralded as historic around the world as Kuwaiti women cast their ballots for the first time. Three years later, the first women were elected as deputies.

### **Into the 2000s: Debates and Divisions**

The largely smooth incorporation of women into the mainstream of democratic political life in Kuwait indicated the extent to which political liberalism had embedded itself in the amirate – but the rollercoaster was not yet ready to slow down. The years after 2012 bore witness to a revival of the tensions

between proponents of democracy and the ruling family, with the unfolding of the Arab Spring across the Middle East raising still higher the tensions and the stakes. This time, rather than shutting down the Assembly and suspending the constitution, the government responded to parliamentary criticism (on matters such as corruption) and a rising tide of Islamism by introducing changes to voting procedures: reducing the number of possible individual votes from four to one. In the second of two elections in 2012 opposition candidates boycotted the ballot and took to the streets, demanding action on corruption and a return to the former voting system, which they regarded as fairer. Voter turnout in the second election of 2012 was as low as 45%. Further elections followed in

2013 and 2014 but were unable to reconcile the divides between government and opposition; in fact, much of the remaining opposition walked out of the Assembly in 2014. Now, the Kuwaiti ‘democratic experiment’ appears to have weathered the shocks of the past decade. Voter registration is at record high levels and many opposition politicians have ended their boycott; the 2020 election will be the first since 2003 not to follow a dissolution of the Assembly by the Amir. With a new Amir and a record number of women candidates, it may be that Kuwaiti democracy is set to enter a period of stability, and the rollercoaster is finally starting to brake.

*by Gerald Power*

## **Record Number of Women Brace for Tough Fight in Kuwaiti Elections**

With elections in Kuwait less than two weeks away, candidates’ campaigns are in full swing. 395 candidates are competing for 50 seats in Kuwait’s National Assembly. This year sees a record number of women — 33 — running in the election, which is more than the number of women candidates in the 2013 and 2016 elections combined. This would not have been possible without the long struggle and fight for women’s political rights that started decades prior to the momentous 2005 decree that allowed women to vote and run for office. Over the past few years, Kuwait has witnessed multiple legislative reforms in favour of women’s rights. For example, the domestic worker’s law of June 2015 helped regulate labour rights of the domestic workers in the country, the overwhelming majority of whom are migrant women. In 2013 Kuwaiti women could, for the first time, apply to become prosecutors, and five years later women were allowed to become judges, with the

first 8 female judges taking office in September 2020. This year Kuwait also passed its first law designed to tackle domestic violence. And the list of achievements goes on. After years of activism, women in Kuwait have come a long way. However, since 2005, only seven women have made it to the parliament: Aseel Al Awadhi, Masooma Al Mubarak, Salwa Al Jassar, Rola Dashti, Thekra Al Rashidi, and Safaa Al Hashem. In the 2016 elections, only one woman was elected, despite the fact that women represent almost 40% of the country’s population. Reem Abdallah Aleidan, a candidate in the third district, highlighted the challenges female candidates face in Kuwait: ‘Our biggest obstacles for us female candidates are political blocs that do not want to cooperate with us and even put us down for the mistakes of previous candidates... However, we are determined to restore the confidence between electorates and women in parliament.’[1] Women candidates are constantly confronted with the

prevailing negative assumptions of women’s ability to perform as political leaders: ‘There is a small group that rejects the political existence of women, either because of negative customs and traditions or because of Islamic movements that are unconscious and devoted to marginalizing women,’ explained Aleidan. Additionally, there have been also frequent social media attacks against female candidates through WhatsApp and Twitter. In an article, for the Kuwaiti daily newspaper, Al Qabas, Dr Balkees Al Najjar wrote: ‘It seems like budgets have been allocated to discredit some female candidates and to question their principles and attitudes, to weaken their chances of winning...’ Amid these challenges, a new online platform, Mudhawi’s List, was created to support women running for elected office position. Through this platform, female candidates can connect with volunteers and donors that would help them in their campaign, facilitating them access to skill development and



the latest technologies. It also seeks to raise awareness about the importance of women in leadership positions, who are more actively involved and advocate more in gender-salient issues. Aleidan, for example, said she was determined to achieve justice in women's issues, including gender-based violence, girls' right to education and the government's policy of "social and cultural development," among others. But most importantly, she wants to focus on the Kuwaiti nationality law that discriminates against women, preventing them from passing on their nationality to their children and spouses on an equal basis with men.[2] Only by having more women in power can gender equality be achieved. However, it is yet to be seen how much gender parity this election will bring. Leanah Al Awadhi, founding member and project manager of Mudhawi's List, expressed hope for the upcoming parliamentary elections: 'At Mudhawi's List, we are hopeful to see change within the new upcoming parliament, and we are hopeful to see at least more



than one woman in office within this new parliament. However, we hope that this is only the beginning and it would be fair to say that this generation of youth and all upcoming generations are starting to take a shift from traditional voting behavior that is heavily backed by tribal and cultural ideologies to rational voting behavior that will hopefully have a positive impact on the upcoming parliaments and their members.[3] Kuwait is wasting a precious resource in the dramatic underrepresentation of women in leadership positions. The talents

and skills of Kuwaiti women can have an undeniable positive impact on the public sphere. Empowering these women to run for public office is needed to ensure that governments reflect the diversity of the societies they represent and to ensure that gender considerations are more systematically embedded in all policies.

*The article is a result of an interview with Reem Abdallah Aleidan, on 18 November 2020.*

*by Romy Haber*

## EURO-GULF MONITOR

6 - 11 December 2020

by Arnold Koka & Veronica Stigliani



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### WEEK IN BRIEF

1. French and Qatari officials discussed Gulf Crisis, Libya, Lebanon and countering terrorism and violent extremism.
2. Kuwait's parliamentary elections sent 31 new parliamentarians to the 50-seat National Assembly, 19 MPs were re-elected and no woman secured a seat.
3. Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince met with United Kingdom's Prime Minister to discuss cooperation and normalisation with Israel in London.
4. The European Union hailed efforts by Kuwait and the United States to solve the GCC rift.
5. Bahrain's national air carrier, Gulf Air, signed five agreements on cooperation in aviation with Israeli companies.





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