

Women in Kuwait: The Struggle for Political Equality

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After the Gulf War in the 1990s, Kuwait became one of the most advanced democracies in the Middle East. Despite its progressive attitude, women were, until May 2005, unable to vote. Relative equality in other areas of society, such as education and employment, made women highly aware of the disadvantages they faced in not voting. Using the knowledge and resources available to them, they began a grassroots suffrage movement that engaged in tactics such as strikes and demonstrations to gain the vote for women. Before these tactics could be effective however, women had to convince both the government and society that by voting they would not be abandoning their Islamic beliefs. Before gaining the right to vote, women faced the challenge of proving that Islam itself did not discourage women from voting.

INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Gulf War in the early 1990s, the state of Kuwait has been acknowledged as one of the most advanced democracies in a region where democracy has long been absent. Unlike its neighbors in the Gulf region, Kuwait's constitution provides for a fully elected parliament, with substantial lawmaking powers (McElhinny, 2005). Despite Kuwait's progressive system of government, however, a large and important part of its population has been deprived of the right to participate. Women in Kuwait, until May 2005 when they were officially enfranchised had been excluded from voting and from running for office (Online NewsHour, 2006). This exclusion brings into question the extent to which Kuwait could truly be called a democracy. Before the success of the women's suffrage movement and the enfranchisement of women, only about 10% of Kuwait's population was allowed to participate (Human Rights Watch, 1999).

Furthermore, recent statistics illustrate that Kuwait, a state often viewed by its neighbors as an example on which to base their own democratic institutions, actually lagged behind other Gulf states in allowing women to participate. In 2004, Kuwait was the only democratic Gulf state that did not allow women to vote or run for office. The only other Gulf states without suffrage for women were Saudi Arabia and the U.A.E., neither of which allowed for any sort of elections. Yet, even in Saudi Arabia, where neither men nor women could vote, there were women present on the appointed council known as the Shura (Choucair, 2004). These statistics lead to the question: why did women in Kuwait have to fight so hard for the right to vote in a country that was the most progressive democracy in its region?

It took many years of patience before Kuwait's women's suffrage movement succeeded in getting the vote for women. During that time, women's rights activists engaged in tactics similar to those used in Western countries in their fight for greater political rights. In their struggle, they faced many obstacles, perhaps the biggest of which was the region's traditional exclusion of women from participating in politics. This exclusion, though often attributed to the region's predominant religion, Islam, may have more to do with the traditions of the people who came to practice the religion. As this paper will suggest, there is evidence that suggests that Islam itself is highly tolerant of women in politics. Because of this, women in Kuwait had to wait for a change in the views of society about women's role in politics. When this change came, the grassroots tactics of the suffrage movement allowed women to slowly build support for their cause and, eventually, gain the right to vote.

THE WOMEN'S SUFFRAGE MOVEMENT IN KUWAIT; BACKGROUND & CHARACTERISTICS

When Kuwait gained its independence from Britain, a constitution was established that would give equality to all Kuwaiti citizens. It even goes so far as to stipulate gender equality in a nation that is overwhelmingly Islamic (News: Arab World, 2005). Despite the equality explicitly granted to them in the constitution, Kuwaiti women have been excluded from politics for more than forty years. That period of time would turn into forty years of fighting for those rights to which Kuwaiti women felt they were entitled. The suffrage movement in Kuwait began in the 1960s, not long after the constitution went into effect (Gorvett, 2005).

When Kuwait gained its independence and established itself as a democracy, politics became, essentially, the only

public sphere in which women were not equal to men. Universal education and healthcare, along with equality in employment, have allowed Kuwaiti women to become both highly successful and highly visible in society (Tétreault, 2004). In Kuwait, 70% of college students are women (Power, n.d.). Because women in Kuwait are well educated and are entitled to the same employment as men, many women hold very prominent positions in business and in society. These advantages place women on equal footing with men in most respects. Political participation is the most obvious exception to this equality.

Mary Ann Tétreault contends that it was, in large part, the freedoms of women in other parts of society that motivated them to push for greater rights in the political realm. This argument is highly plausible for two reasons. First, equality in most public spheres would increase the awareness of Kuwaiti women of their exclusion from politics. If women were allowed to have the same education as men, hold the same jobs as men, and earn the same income as men, why should they not be allowed to have the same say in government as men? Second, the high levels of education among women and their prominent, high paying positions in the work force would provide women's rights activists with both the knowledge and the resources necessary to organize a movement to gain more extensive political rights (Tétreault, 2004).

The organizations established by suffragists proved to be highly important in the struggle to attain the vote for women, largely because the suffrage movement required grassroots tactics to accomplish its goals. In this way, Kuwait differs greatly from its neighbors in the Persian Gulf. In the vast majority of Gulf states which allowed women to vote in elections, the reform came from the top down (McElhinny, 2005). In these countries, the government granted women the right to vote, giving the public little or no say in the decision. In Kuwait, however, attempts by the Emir to grant women broader political rights were not successful. On several occasions, Kuwait's parliament overruled decrees sent out by the Emir that would have allowed women to vote (Gorvett, 2005). Though the highest levels of government supported change and the granting of political rights to women, the attitudes among the elected parliament did not. In most cases, opposition to women's rights was strongest among members of parliament who were Islamists or tribal leaders (Gorvett, 2005). McElhinny (2005) points out, however, that supporters of women's rights also generally opposed the decisions from the Emir. Though allowing top-down reform would have been a faster way to achieve suffrage for women, this reform would ultimately be more legitimate if society itself, and parliament along with it, came to accept the change. As a result, the women's suffrage movement in Kuwait came to resemble similar movements in the West, with grassroots tactics such as protests and strikes becoming the tools used to achieve the ultimate goal.

Women's organizations in Kuwait became very important throughout the suffrage movement as they helped to organize

the activities of the suffragists. The Women's Cultural and Social Society (WCSS), one of Kuwait's earliest organizations for women, began organizing protests, marches, and forums on women's rights from the beginnings of the suffrage movement in the early 1960s (Tétreault, 2004). This organization, along with others such as the Graduates Society, were the channels through which women were allowed to express their views and voice their desire for greater political rights. One *al Jazeera news* article illustrated clearly the atmosphere surrounding the women's suffrage movement. The article described a group of close to 500 Kuwaiti women holding a demonstration outside of parliament. Loud chants and signs, some written in Arabic, others in English, made the wishes of the crowd known (*News: Arab World*, 2005). The tactics described in this article such as strikes, marches, protests and pickets are similar to tactics used by Western movements and particularly mirrored the women's suffrage movement in the United States.

As time went on and the women's suffrage movement began to grow stronger, leaders of women's organizations felt that a higher level of organization was necessary to keep the movement consistent and unified. As a result, the Women's Issues Committee (WIC) was established in 1995. The main purpose of this new committee was to coordinate the actions of the different women's suffrage organizations. Typical grassroots tactics remained in effect under the WIC's guidance, but tactics such as lobbying parliament for bills granting women the vote increased. Additionally, the WIC helped women to bring court cases against those who would not allow women to register to vote, claiming that such discrimination was unconstitutional (Tétreault, 2004). Though such tactics were present throughout the movement, the greater organization and influence of the WIC allowed them to become more effective and influential.

The grassroots tactics, as well as the lobbying campaigns and court cases, would eventually alter the views of society in such a way that opposition to suffrage for women would fade, and a new and legitimate law would emerge that would allow women to both vote and run for office. Before this could happen, however, suffragists had to overcome several obstacles that had for years stood in the way of greater political rights for women.

THE GREATEST CHALLENGE: ISLAM VS. DEMOCRACY & THE RIGHTS OF WOMEN

Any discussion of political rights in a predominantly Islamic country must take into consideration the relationship between Islam itself and democracy. In this case, it is also important to look at the views of Islam toward the rights of women.

A major issue in global politics at this time, especially in light of the current Iraq war, is the debate over the compatibility of Islam and democratic systems of government. Some scholars argue that democracy could never thrive in a place in which the dominant religion is Islam. Islam, it is thought,

lacks many of the principles necessary for a democracy to survive. The most important of these principles is the separation of church and state. In Islam, there is no concept of a division between the secular and the religious (Rizzo, 2005). Muslims are expected to follow the laws of Islam before any other law. Because of this, the laws of Islam and the laws of society are often one and the same. This leads to another tension between Islam and democracy. Because Islam is the highest law, the individual rights and liberties that have come to define democracy are often not recognized in Islamic countries (Rizzo, 2005). Without these rights and liberties, any claim to true democracy is lost. It is for these reasons that many doubt that democracy can ever truly succeed in an Islamic country.

Though it is often argued that democracy and Islam are incompatible, several case studies have proven that democracy can be functional and legitimate in an Islamic society. One of the biggest examples of this is Kuwait itself, where an elected parliament establishes law and citizens enjoy substantial liberties and freedoms. Though Kuwait's democracy is not perfect, and only recently allowed women to begin voting, it stands as an example of how democracy can thrive in an Islamic country. Muslims living under democratic circumstances generally take full advantages of their rights and liberties, as well as their civic responsibilities. In Kuwait, for example, citizens who hold very orthodox Muslim beliefs tend to have extremely high levels of political participation (Rizzo, 2005). Scholars who say that Islam and democracy are compatible, point to aspects of Islam which suggest that democratic practices are actually encouraged in Islam. One of these aspects, mentioned by Rizzo (2005), is the fact that Islamic doctrine emphasizes, "consultation and consensus in political leadership" (P.2). This suggests that Islamic leaders are encouraged to consult with each other and with those under their care in order to be truly effective leaders. These ideas of "consultation and consensus" are arguably two of the major criteria of democracy.

While some argue that Islam and democracy can never coexist, examples such as Kuwait, suggest that democracy can, in reality, thrive in an Islamic country. What, however, does this mean for women? In order for a government such as Kuwait's to be considered a democracy, women must enjoy the same rights as men, both socially and politically. This is problematic, as many view the exclusion of women from politics as a characteristic of Islam. This was the major obstacle faced by Kuwaiti women in their struggle to gain the right to vote. As a result, the suffrage movement in Kuwait faced something of a paradox. Women had to attempt to separate the issue of women's rights from religion completely, while at the same time showing that they still adhered to the traditional values and teachings of Islam. It was, in fact, common for women to push for their rights while being very careful to show society that they were not so radical as to have abandoned their Islamic values. An article in *al Jazeera* pointed out

that many of the women engaged in a protest were wearing traditional Islamic clothing (*News: Arab World*, 2005). Women in Kuwait were extremely careful to preserve their image as faithful Muslims in order to make society more at ease with their desire for greater rights. In proving that they could participate in politics and at the same time retain their religious beliefs, women in Kuwait would both make the public more amenable to reform and create more legitimacy for that reform.

In their fight for the right to vote, women in Kuwait joined with an expanding global movement to redefine the role of women in Islam, using Islamic doctrine itself as justification. As Rizzo (2005) pointed out, the lack of rights for women in Islam stems not from Islamic doctrine, but from the melding together of Islam and traditional tribal beliefs and customs. The issue, Rizzo argued, is the difference between what she refers to as "traditional Islam" and "Pristine Islam" (P.29). Traditional Islam, the actual way in which the religion is practiced, excludes women mainly because of tribal customs and the interpretation of its leaders (Coleman, 2006). This suggests that Islam's exclusion of women has more to do with custom than with actual doctrine. This can be argued because many Muslim countries throughout the world have granted women the right to participate in politics. Turkey, which has universal suffrage (CIA Factbook, 2007, *Turkey*), is a good example. In light of this, Muslims who support greater rights for women are turning both to the Koran and to Islam's early history to find evidence that their religion does, in reality, justify political rights for women.

Reinterpretations of the Koran have played a very large role in the women's rights movement in the Middle East (Coleman, 2006). Women's rights activists point to passages in Islam's holy book which suggest that women would, if true Islam were being practiced, have equal rights to men. Rizzo (2005) pointed out one such passage that states that both sexes are equal under the eyes of God. Other arguments that use Islam as a justification for women's rights point to the status of women in the early days of Islam. In the days when Islam was a new religion, women held equal status with men in most respects, including their right to have a say in decision making. Women in early Islam were even known to ride to battle alongside their male counterparts. Perhaps the biggest justification for women's rights, however, comes from the views of the prophet Muhammad himself. Women's rights activists point out that Muhammad held women in very high regard, and often consulted them on important matters. This was particularly true of his daughter, who had considerable influence (Rizzo, 2005).

These arguments, using Islam as a means of justifying broader political rights for women, often came into play in Kuwait during the women's suffrage movement. As was pointed out earlier, most of the opposition to women's rights came from Islamists and tribal leaders, who had to be convinced that granting women certain political rights would not con-

tradict their Islamic beliefs. Though the fight would be long and difficult, the suffrage movement would eventually succeed in overcoming Islamist opposition. In truth, by the time women were actually granted the right to vote and run for office, the majority of Kuwaiti citizens who held strict orthodox beliefs had actually come to support the granting of rights to women (Rizzo, 2005). In addition, large numbers of Islamist women who had earlier opposed the expansion of rights gradually joined the movement, indicating a shift in the attitudes of Islamists towards women's suffrage (Tétreault, 2004). In addition to this shift, the Islamic Constitution Movement, Kuwait's largest Sunni Islamist group, abandoned its original stance on women's rights in 2004. After opposing the expansion of political rights to women for so many years, the Islamic Constitution Movement suddenly threw its support behind the suffrage movement (Al Mughni, 2004). This was also indicative of the success of the women's movement in convincing Islamists that political rights for women did not interfere with Islam. It was largely this change in the Islamic camp that eliminated a large part of the opposition faced by the suffrage movement and made granting voting rights to women possible.

Because the major argument against expanding political rights for women stemmed from the belief that such rights were against Islam, Kuwaiti women had to work hard to assure society that they could, in fact, hold Islamic values and still participate in politics. By showing that Islam itself does not necessarily discourage women from participating, women's rights activists in Kuwait were eventually able to wear down the Islamist opposition and gain their right to vote. The importance of this issue is illustrated by a clause in the law granting women their political rights which states that women must follow Islamic law in order to be allowed to vote (McElhinny, 2005).

OTHER OBSTACLES:

Though the status of women in Islam was perhaps the biggest difficulty for the women's movement in Kuwait, there were many other obstacles which had to be overcome before Kuwaiti women could receive the vote. First, the ideas of Kuwaiti women on political participation were not always consistent. Often the opposition was able to discredit the efforts of the women's suffrage movement by showing that not all women supported the expansion of political rights. Highly conservative women who believed that Islam afforded women all of the rights they needed were used to persuade society and parliament that women did not, in fact, want the vote and should not be granted suffrage (Tétreault, 2004). These women often joined Islamists in arguing that Islam forbade women from participating in politics. It was not until the shift in the views of Islamists, discussed above, that these arguments began to become ineffective in keeping women from gaining their political rights.

Second, one of the most common traits of politics in general kept women in Kuwait from gaining their right to vote.

In Kuwait, where women had never been allowed to vote or run for office, the power had always been held by men. Adding a new bloc of voters would be a risk to those in office. The idea that the men in power were simply afraid to lose that power is especially plausible in Kuwait, where such a small percentage of the population held the vote. Now that women in Kuwait have been granted the vote as well, the number of registered voters who are women outnumber men by about a third (Brown, 2006). This disparity in numbers could be explained by the exclusion of all males serving in the military from voting. In addition, Kuwait has an estimated population of 2,418,393 and approximately half of this population consists of non-nationals, many of whom do not meet the voting criteria (CIA Factbook, 2006, *Kuwait*). When such a small number of people are allowed to vote, the exclusion of males serving in the military increases the chances that women voters will outnumber men. This factor suggests that the prospect of allowing women to vote did cause the men in power to fear a loss of that power. With the majority of voters being women, it is highly likely that at least some of the power in parliament will shift to women, or to those who represent women's views. This possibility, along with differing views among women themselves, helped to delay the granting of political rights to women and prolong the suffrage movement. Only time and the gradual change of the views of society, assisted by the grassroots tactics of the women's movement, allowed these obstacles to be overcome.

INTERNATIONAL PRESSURE AS A FORCE FOR CHANGE:

It has already been suggested that grassroots tactics, lobbying, court cases, and arguments using Islam to justify women's rights were used to overcome obstacles, alter public opinion, and persuade parliament to finally grant Kuwaiti women the vote. There was, however, one other major impact on Kuwait's decision to allow women to vote. This was outside pressure from foreign countries and international organizations.

Ever since Kuwait was freed from an Iraqi invasion in the early 1990s, the small state has been largely dependent on foreign support, especially from the U.S., for its security (Brown, 2006). The U.S. has had a long-standing policy of promoting democracy in the Middle East and has taken a strong interest in Kuwait's democracy. It was, in large part, pressure from the United States that persuaded the Emir to support the extension of political rights to women and led him to attempt to bestow such rights upon them (McElhinny, 2005).

Pressure on Kuwait to amend its electoral laws and give women the vote came not only from the U.S., but from other international organizations. Human Rights Watch, an organization associated with the United Nations, criticized Kuwait on several occasions for failing to extend political rights to women. As justification for this, the organization pointed to the many human rights treaties to which Kuwait is signatory (Human Rights Watch, 1999). In not allowing women to vote, Kuwait opens itself to accusations of hypocrisy from the

international community. As dependant as Kuwait is on international support, this would be seen as an embarrassment by Kuwait's leaders, and would make them more amenable to supporting women's rights.

Kuwait's peers, its neighbors in the Persian Gulf, have also been a source of pressure on Kuwait's democracy, prompting political reform. Because Kuwait, with its fully elected parliament, is considered the most progressive democracy in the Middle East, its neighbors look to the tiny country as an example. Other gulf states watch Kuwait closely, observing its practices and government. This has led to an expansion of political rights across the gulf region, an increase in the number of countries with written constitutions, and more elections in which citizens choose their representatives in their respective assemblies (Brown, 2006). Kuwait's influence has been illustrated by talk in Saudi Arabia of allowing women to vote in municipal elections that, until recently, did not even exist. This idea of granting Saudi women the right to vote came about shortly after Kuwaiti women were enfranchised (McElhinny, 2005). It seems reasonable to suggest that, being the leading democracy in the Middle East, Kuwait would begin to feel a certain amount of embarrassment at being, as was mentioned earlier, the only state in the Gulf that did not allow women to participate in its democratic systems.

External pressure from the U.S., international organizations, and neighboring gulf states, pushed Kuwait to rethink its policies on the political rights of women. Wishing to avoid international embarrassment and accusation of hypocrisy, Kuwait's government began to support women's rights themselves. This international pressure combined with the tactics discussed earlier to help women in Kuwait overcome the opposition they faced in their struggle to gain the right to vote.

CONCLUSION

Despite the relative progressiveness of Kuwait's system of government, the absence of the right of women to vote kept Kuwait from being able to claim status as a true democracy. International pressure on Kuwait pushed the government to support the extension of political rights to women. Support from the Emir, however, did not translate into support from Kuwait's parliament, which blocked several attempts to grant voting rights to Kuwaiti women. As a result, international pressure alone could not attain political rights for women. Instead, Kuwaiti women had to organize to fight for those rights. Long years of engaging in grassroots tactics such as strikes, marches, and protests became characteristics of a suffrage movement that was more similar to Western movements than it was to the top-down reform processes within the Gulf region. In addition, Kuwaiti women lobbied hard to push legislation through parliament that would grant them the right to vote.

Before their tactics could succeed, however, Kuwaiti women had to alter the views of society and parliament on

the issue of women's rights. Using the Koran and Islamic history as justification, women's rights activists were finally able to overcome the largest obstacle they faced in their struggle for rights. This obstacle was the idea that Islam promoted the exclusion of women from politics. Women were able to overcome that obstacle by proving that political participation would in no way interfere with their desire or ability to follow Islamic laws and principles. Other obstacles, such as the unwillingness of men to risk the power they had held for so long, or divisions among women about their place in politics, were eventually overcome as the suffrage movement gradually convinced society that reform was both acceptable and desirable.

In the end, it was the mixture of international pressure, religious justification, and grassroots tactics that persuaded much of the opposition to abandon its former views on the issue and throw its support to the suffrage movement. This shift allowed Kuwaiti women, in May of 2005, to finally achieve the goal they had sought for more than 40 years: the right to participate in Kuwait's democratic processes by voting and running for office.

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