They've Kuwaited Long Enough

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On Monday morning, May 2, the National Assembly of Kuwait, to the disappointment of the royal-family led government, refused to take the final step necessary to give women the right to vote in municipal elections. This calls into doubt the present parliament's capacity to grant women the right to vote for, or serve in, the National Assembly itself--a right the government has for several years been supporting without finding a majority of legislators to join it.

It's not every constitutional monarchy in which the government is more progressive than the parliament. Nor is it every government that invites journalists and scholars, as Kuwait's invited me, to meet with an assortment of citizens and to explore what many members of the government regard as an embarrassment--the denial, despite the promise of equality for all citizens in the country's constitution, of the right of political participation to women. Then again, Kuwait is no ordinary country.

It's tiny, a little smaller than New Jersey. The land is flat, rocky desert. It's home to 1 million citizens, and hosts approximately 1.3 million guest workers. The principal population center, Kuwait City, is built along one of the few natural harbors on the Arab side of the gulf.

For almost 200 years, from the late 18th century until the early 1950s, the economy was based on pearl diving, fishing, and trading, which resulted in the men spending up to six months at a time at sea. In their absence, the women not only ran the homes but also managed civic life and so developed habits of self-reliance. Kuwait is now, and has been, a staunch ally of the United States. The kingdom served as a launching ground for Operation Iraqi Freedom. And it sits atop 10 percent of the world's proven oil reserves.

In many respects Kuwaiti women are the freest in the Gulf. They enjoy the right to speak, to travel, to own property, to dress as they please, to get an education, to practice law, medicine, business, or almost any job they might choose. They excel at their studies and account for a majority of the students in many of the faculties at Kuwait University, including the College of Islamic Law. Quotas have been imposed in engineering to save room for men. In 1993 Fayza al-Khorafi was named president of KU and so became the first Arab woman to lead an Arab university. Nabila al-Mulla, currently Kuwait's ambassador to the United Nations, is the first Arab-Muslim woman to represent her country in that position.

So if they have achieved so much, why do Kuwaiti women still lack the right to vote in national elections, to run for national office, or to serve as judges? And why do so many Kuwaiti women, including the well-to-do and well-educated, seem not to mind terribly much?

I took this puzzle up two days before the National Assembly decision with Dr. Mohammed Al Moqatei, professor and vice dean at the Kuwait University School of Law. Speaking to me in the traditional Arab white robe and head covering (worn by the great majority of men in Kuwait), he told me that women are flourishing in the study, teaching, and practice of law. And his tone and demeanor suggested that he is comfortable with their success.

When it comes to political participation, he explained, it is not religion that is holding women back. For one thing, women have not mobilized in significant numbers to claim the right. More important, he stressed, giving women the vote would upset the complicated web of social relations in Kuwait, impairing women's ability to manage the home, and throwing into confusion the role of *diwaniyas*, the informal, all-male, evening social gatherings, typically held in special rooms in homes, where men unwind, drink coffee and tea (alcohol is prohibited in Kuwait), play cards, watch TV, and discuss politics. Although he supports women's right to vote, Dr. Moqatei's tone and demeanor suggested that he was comfortable for the time being with their exclusion.

Dr. Ali Al Tarrah, Dean of the College of Social Sciences at Kuwait University, wasn't buying it. Wearing a suit, and characterizing himself as a "liberal" and a member of the "opposition," he insisted that the exclusion of women from politics was wrong, but it had nothing to do with religion or social roles.

Women vote in Iraq, Iran, and Egypt, he pointed out. And yes of course, he insisted, it's a contradiction that women drive and hold jobs as surgeons and oil executives but do not participate in politics. The real reason, contends Al Tarrah, that women in Kuwait lack the vote is simple--crude political calculation. Members of parliament fear that if they give women the vote they will not be able to control the outcome and so may not get reelected. Al Tarrah does not hesitate to blame the government. But for "leadership without vision," Kuwaiti women would, he maintains, already have the vote.

None of the dozen female students I talked to sitting at tables in the shade in the university court yard seemed particularly troubled by the exclusion of women from politics. A first-year student in the social sciences, dressed in the traditional dark Islamic cloak and head scarf, said she was not at all concerned that after graduation she would enter a world in which she could not vote. "We have everything we need," she told me, arms-crossed and nervously amused. And indeed, Kuwait's massive welfare state is among the most generous on the face of the earth.

Hanady, also a student of the social sciences, wears a colorful blouse, designer sunglasses, and head scarf. She said she would "love to have women vote," but felt it "not that important" because women in Kuwait already have all rights.

A law student, dressed in a bright red blouse, jeans, and without head covering, did not want to give her name but said that it bothered her that women lacked the vote, that in fact a majority of women wanted it, and that as a lawyer she would be active in seeking it.

Aisha, dressed traditionally with only her face--featuring flashing and carefully made-up eyes--visible, said that she was in favor of women voting in national elections but against their running for office. "It has never been our culture," she explained, "that women lead. Women always depend on others." The playfulness of the smile that danced across her face as she spoke prompted me to ask about the leadership exercised by Kuwaiti women doctors, lawyers, and business executives. To which she replied that a pregnant member of parliament would be a joke. It was of course the reply of reaction, but her smile and insouciance suggested that in uttering it she was having a laugh not with, but at the traditionalists.

The next day I visited with students at the brand new American University of Kuwait, a small private liberal arts college, the first of its kind in this country. The students do not represent a cross section of Kuwaiti society, but the wealthier, more cosmopolitan section they do represent is articulate, impatient, and struggling to find its own way between tradition and freedom.

Several of the women--they could have passed for American coeds--observed that Kuwait was moving through a period of rapid change. For the tastes of these students, however, it was not rapid enough. One woman wearing a head scarf diffidently approached me at the end of the discussion. "Can I tell you something about our parliament," she shyly and smilingly asked. "It really sucks."

So what do Kuwaiti women want? Hard to say among the young women to whom I spoke, whose opinions diverge sharply. This, perhaps not coincidentally, is a telltale sign of the growth of freedom.

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