

# the weekly Standard

ON JUNE 29, in its comfortable Watergate suite, the Kuwait Information Office hosted a lunch in honor of its National Assembly's historic May 16 decision to grant women the right to vote and run for office. Granted, the very idea of a government ministry devoted to the regulation and dissemination of information evokes the specter of censorship and repression. But this Information Office is different. It has a track record of publicizing the views of critics of the country who seek greater freedom and more democracy.

Only the day before I heard the new Kuwait minister of Information recount to a small group of journalists in Washington how, upon his recent appointment, he told the prime minister that he saw it as his top objective to accomplish the abolition of the ministry whose reins he had just been handed. And now over lunch his D.C. office was putting on a panel discussion featuring five Kuwaiti women who had traveled to the United States to explain what the winning of political rights meant to them and to Kuwait.

The women were proud, articulate, professional, and anything but uncritical boosters of their country. Four could have passed for female executives in the United States. One wore a dark traditional cloak and head scarf. They shared a sense that justice long denied had at last been served--and that formidable challenges lay ahead.

That Kuwaiti women were only just granted the vote was, in a sense, the anomaly, because they are among the freest women in the Gulf, enjoying a wide range of rights and prospering in professional life. And this is partly a result of government policy. As panelist Lulwa Al-Mullah, secretary general of the Kuwait Women's Social and Cultural Society emphasized, the Kuwait government was ahead of its time, insisting on education for women since the

1940s. Moreover, Kuwaiti women have been active in forming a wide variety of civic organizations, and they hold high positions in business, medicine, education, and engineering.

In response to Saddam Hussein's brutal 1990 invasion and conquest, Kuwaiti women formed the backbone of the resistance, sacrificing, organizing, and demonstrating. After the American-led coalition liberated Kuwait in February 1991 in recognition of their fortitude, the emir promised to secure women's political rights. But when the emir finally issued an emergency decree in 1999 giving women their political rights, the National Assembly, which under the Kuwaiti constitution must ratify such decrees, democratically rejected it by a vote of 32-30.

Several panelists agreed that winds of change sweeping through the Middle East helped account for the victory in parliament this year. Indeed, during debate at the May 16 session of the National Assembly, liberal member Mohammed Al-Sager observed that of 53 Muslim states in the world, 50 have democracies and elected parliaments, but among these Kuwait is the only one which denies women political rights. "I wonder if these countries," Al Sager sardonically asked his colleagues, "have a different understanding of Islam than Kuwaitis. I wonder further if they are all wrong and we are correct? Do we understand the Sharia better than them?"

And then, to a parliament crowded with spectators, Al Sager rose to astonishing rhetorical heights: "For those who say women cannot run country affairs, what about the British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who privatized the public sector in England and created the modern England of today, or Indira Gandhi who built the new India and ruled her country in the most difficult period of its history. We also should remember the name of Golda Meir, the former Israel defense minister who defeated the Arabs during the 1967 war."

Surely it is a sign of changing times when Golda Meir's leadership (though the details are not quite right) is invoked on the winning side of a debate over progressive reform in an Arab Muslim country.

THE KUWAITI WOMEN who had come to Washington, however, are focused on the future. The next election is in 2007, and they are busy consulting about who should run, in which districts, and on what issues.

Immersed in politics, they recognize that unintended consequences may follow. Liberal members of parliament who supported giving women political rights may lose their seats to women eager to run for office. Tribalist and Islamist members who opposed political rights for women may gain more votes as the women in their communities (where some men have several wives) may rally in support of those who will uphold stricter interpretations of

Islamic law. In the meantime, the panelists insisted that they will remain focused on the issues that they believe men have neglected concerning children, the family, education, health, and the environment.

I asked how important it was for women to also focus on the economy, diplomacy, and national security. I was answered politely but forcefully by the woman in cloak and head scarf, Aroub Youseff al-Riffai, director of cultural and scientific resources at the National Council for Culture, Art & Literature. "I used to repeat all the time that we don't want women to reach the parliament just to focus on our issues. . . . Maybe for the first time we will expect women to give more attention to them. But we want everybody to give attention to our issues. Men and women. And we want the women who reach the parliament to pay attention to everything."

These are hopeful aspirations. And they provoke you to wonder whether Kuwait can serve as a model to other Muslim Arab nations.

In fact, there is cause for both doubt and hope. Kuwait has a tiny population, a large natural harbor, traditions of maritime commerce and trade that for centuries have promoted an appreciation of the diversity of nations, a policy of educating women, a system of consultation among the ruling family and the merchant class, and staggering oil wealth. So Kuwait is exceptional. At the same time, in organizing their private lives and in dealing with politics, its women have for many decades now struggled to honor the competing claims of Islamic faith, Arab tradition, individual freedom, and democratic self-government. So the struggle provides the model.

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