



# Islam and Democratization in Contemporary Kuwait: The Political Participation of Women and the Formation of the Civil Society

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# **Islam and Democratization in Contemporary Kuwait: The Political Participation of Women and the Formation of the Civil Society**

Aiko HIRAMATSU\*

## **1 Introduction**

After the end of the Cold War, “the third wave” of democratization surged in many places across the world. However, unlike the East European countries, the Middle Eastern countries were seen to be late in riding this tide of democratization. Kuwait has had a National Assembly (Majlis al-Umma) since its independence in 1961. The members of this assembly are selected in an election in which all Kuwaiti citizens aged 21 or above can vote. Although this elected assembly has legislative power, Kuwaiti polity has been perceived as “conservative” and non-democratic. Many social and political customs related to Islam and tribalism, both has penetrated Kuwaiti society, and the resulting sense of values has been regarded as a barrier against democratization. However, after the 12<sup>th</sup> general election for the National Assembly held in May 2008, Islamist groups occupied the largest proportion of the seats<sup>1</sup>.

This paper focuses on the issue of the participation of women in Kuwaiti politics. Owing to the fact that women’s suffrage was not granted until 2005, this has been a “symbol” indicating that Kuwait is not a democratic country. The surveyed objective is the women’s branch of an Islamic group, the “Social Reform Society (Jam‘īya al-Iḥlāq al-Ijtimā‘ī)”, which is the most influential group, not only politically but also socially, in contemporary Kuwait.

The second section presents an argument on a suitable perspective from which to analyze the relationship between Islam and democracy in Kuwait. The third section contains a case study on the practices and ideas of social and political Islamic women’s groups.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the data from the Kuwait News Agency and the Kuwaiti Times on 18 May 2008, Islamist groups won 20 seats, several influential tribal families got 15 seats, and ‘liberal (Lībrālīya)’ group occupied only 7 seats out of all the 50 seats chosen by citizens. However, the formation of a political party is not permitted in Kuwait; therefore it is not necessarily clear into which groups the winner can be categorized, and the number of seats that each political group actually got is subtly different according to who the observer was.

## **2 A Perspective on the Analysis of Islam and Democratization in Kuwait**

### **2.1 Arguments on Islam and Democracy**

In the 1990s, much attention was paid to the issue of Islam in relation to some Western values, including democracy. In addition, the question of why the Middle Eastern countries have failed to undergo the process of democratization became one of the main issues in studies on Middle Eastern Politics. Under these conditions, the argument on Islam and democracy has been presented from two different perspectives.

The first perspective is that Islam and democracy are incompatible. E. Kedourie argued that Islam and the tradition of an authoritarian political culture are not compatible with democracy (Kedourie 1994). In addition, B. Lewis observed that democratization and its consolidation never started in the countries which had Islam-based societies (Lewis 1993). The second perspective was that Islam contains many democratic ideas (Esposito & Voll 1996; Mernissi 1992). Such conflicting discourses as to whether or not Islam is democratic became both emotional and controversial. The concept of “the clash of civilizations” as advocated by Huntington was one of the triggers of the intense antagonism found in arguments on Islam and democracy (Huntington 1996).

Another trend in studies on Middle Eastern politics tends to deliberately avoid mentioning the subject of the relationship between Islam and democracy. M. Herb, in his paper titled “Islamist Movements and the Problem of Democracy in the Arab World,” states that Islam has nothing to do with democratization, and to consider the correlation between them does not make any sense at all (Herb 2005: 5). Such a trend, which avoids considering the relationship between Islam and democracy, stems from four problems contained in the argument on Islam and democracy.

First, in previous studies, the concepts of “Islam” or “democracy” have been regarded as if they have a fixed meaning (Voll 2005: 85–87). Second, some scholars are very doubtful about the possibility of analyzing the relationship between two ambiguous concepts. For instance, we can deal with democracy as a political issue. Islam, however, seems not to be synonymous with any political concept, and appears in the political, social, educational, economical, and religious arenas. If we focus only on the political aspect, we cannot analyze the relation between them, and we merely conclude that there is no relevance at all. Third, analyzing the relationship between the concepts of Islam and democracy may only lead to a more antagonistic situation (Kisaichi & Kurita 2004: iii–viii). Finally, the relationship between Islam and democracy varies from country to

country and in different periods, therefore it is impossible to find a general pattern in the relationship between them.

Owing to such reasons, the concerns of many studies on democratization in the Middle Eastern countries have moved to why and how the authoritarian regimes in the Middle East can continue to exist.

In recent years, research on Islam and democracy has increased once more, and many books whose titles include both “Islam” and “democracy” have been published, particularly since 2005. The following are some examples; (Sadri M. & Sadri A. 2000; Ibrahim eds. 2002; Benard & Hachigian eds. 2003; Al-Sulami 2003; Volpi 2003; Cesari 2004; El-Fadl 2004; Arat 2005; Herb 2005; Hunter & Malik eds. 2005; Mahmood 2005; Rizzo 2005; Ansari 2006; Azra 2006; Bayat 2006; 2007; Jazouli 2006; Mir-Hosseini & Tapper 2006; Rash 2006; Glancy 2007; Khatab & Bouma 2007).

We notice that these recent studies have three characteristics that distinguish them from the previous studies on Islam and democracy. First, some of these studies attempt to demonstrate the compatibility between Islam and democracy by distinguishing democracy from liberalism, secularism, or industrialization. These concepts were often regarded as a set constituting modernization in the previous studies (Voll 2005: 87–90). Second, they tend to explain the relationship between Islam and democracy by focusing on one country’s situation or the activities of a particular group. Third, nearly half of these studies were undertaken by Muslim authors.

## **2.2 Survey of Previous Studies on Kuwaiti Politics**

In previous studies on Kuwaiti politics, some argue that there is no significant link between Islam and democracy (Crystal 1990; Hudson 1991; Ismael 1993; Herb 1999; 2004; al-Dekhayel 2000; Nonneman 2006). (Crystal 1990; Ismael 1993; al-Dekhayel 2000) are studies that can be categorized as studies based on the Rentier Theory. Their hypothesis is that rentier states such as Kuwait are non-democratic countries, and there is no demand for democratization from their citizens because they receive benefits from their oil revenues through governmental distribution. (Hudson 1991) emphasizes the pressure exerted by the United States on the Gulf States to democratize after the Gulf War in 1991. (Herb 1999) analyzes why the monarchies in the Middle East, including Kuwait, can continue to exist. He suggests that such monarchies have possibilities for moderate democratization modeled on the constitutional monarchies which the north European kingdoms accomplished.

We must be aware of three problems in the above mentioned studies while exploring the

relationship between Islam and democracy in Kuwait. First, all their approaches exclude Islam from their analyses of democratization. Second, they evaluate Kuwaiti politics as being an imperfect democracy or not being democratic at all. Third, except for some arguments based on the rentier state theory, these studies limit their scope to a particular area, similar to the way that social science has become specialized.

### **2.3 An Alternative Perspective: Islamic Civil Society**

So what kind of approach would be effective when trying to explain the contemporary situation in Kuwait? In order to overcome this difficulty, I have adopted the theory of Islamic civil society. The basic notion of this theory lies in the idea that an Islam-based autonomous civil society can be constructed within the framework of a modern state (Kosugi 2006: 518–540). The perspective of the Islamic civil society differs in some aspects from the “conventional” civil society, based on the experiences in Eastern Europe in the late 1980s. Many researches on the civil society as an important political factor in bringing about the transformation into democracy were conducted in the 1990s<sup>2</sup>.

The first reason that Islamic civil society differs from the “conventional” model is that Islamic law, in principle, is superior to the statutes of the state, and that the scope of its application is so wide that it can encompass the whole society. The activities of Islamic movements therefore, are not limited to political affairs which are concerned with the state. Indeed, the activities of the Islamic movements in Kuwait started as grass roots activities, for instance, organizing Qurʾān reading circles, sports meetings, and other charitable events. Since the late 1970s, they have legally entered political arenas like the National Assembly as political organizations, particularly after the Iranian Revolution in 1979<sup>3</sup>. Although their political awakening has attracted much attention in terms of “Islamic Fundamentalism” or “Political Islam,” the base of the Islamic movements in Kuwait has, since their beginning, been rooted in a more comprehensive social arena.

The second and crucial difference is that from the perspective of the Islamic civil society, the civil society’s growth can be a factor in reforming society according to the principles of Islam, while studies on the “conventional” civil society argue that the growth of a civil society leads to democratization (Norton 1995). Against such presumptions, some studies argue the critical view in which the authoritarian government utilizes the civil society to control the people (Hicks & al-Najjar 1995). Both “conventional” researches examine the

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, A. Norton edited broad and comprehensive books on the civil societies in the Middle East (Norton 1995).

<sup>3</sup> From the 1960s to the early 1970s, the National Assembly was occupied by the Arab nationalists. However, since the 5<sup>th</sup> general election, Islamist groups have won the seats, and they have gradually increased their seats in the assembly.

existence of the civil society and its growth, by studying the transition to and consolidation of democracy in relation to the level of the political system which is supposed to be required for democracy to flourish. However, the Islamic civil society more focuses on the civil society itself rather than the form of the political system, because it is not possible to assume an ideal political system which is universally applicable to all the countries in the world.

In the next section we will examine the actual civil society in Kuwait, focusing on the issue of the political participation of women and women's activities in the Islamic movements.

### **3 The Formation of the Civil Society: Arguments on the Political Participation of Women**

#### **3.1 The Political Participation of Women in Kuwait: Does Islamism Hinder Women's Suffrage?**

Since Kuwait's independence from the United Kingdom in 1961, all its male citizens aged 20 or above have possessed the right to vote and run for the National Assembly. However, such political rights were limited to men. As a result, women without suffrage were the "symbol" indicating that women were suppressed and that, consequently, the political system in Kuwait was not democratic.

Islam is often viewed as a hindrance to granting women suffrage (Barakat 1993; Faqir 1997; el-Mikawy 1999; Moghadam 1993; Peterson 1989). In fact, the Islamic political group voted against the laws permitting women's political rights in the Assembly. Moreover, the Ministry of Islamic Affairs issued a fatwa that it was not acceptable to acknowledge women's suffrage in 1985 according to the principles of Islam. In Kuwait, the government has urged women's suffrage and the National Assembly elected by its citizens has denied it. For instance, the Amir issued a decree granting women suffrage in 1999, while the assembly was closed. The new assembly chosen in the 9<sup>th</sup> general election of that year rejected the Amir's decree. In 2005, the Ministry issued a new Fatwa stating that the Amir must resolve this issue. In the same year, the government submitted a law which permitted women full political rights; the right to vote and run for office. The assembly finally passed the law, with favorable votes from some Islamic groups.

To understand what the Islamic groups think about women's political participation, the following two sub-sections explore the practices and ideas of the women's branches of the "Social Reform Society" and the "Islamic Constitutional Movement (al- $\square$ araka al-Dustūrīya al-Islāmīya)." The Social Reform Society, which conducts various social



activities, is the largest Islamic group in Kuwait. The Islamic Constitutional Movement is the political branch of the Social Reform Society and the most influential political organization in the National Assembly<sup>4</sup>.

### 3.2 The “Woman’s Office in the Islamic Constitutional Movement”

In the fieldwork I conducted in May 2008, I witnessed an innovation in the Islamic movement in contemporary Kuwait. A new women’s branch, called “Woman’s Office in the Islamic Constitutional Movement (Maktab al-Mar’a bi al-‘Araka al-Dustūrīya al-Islāmīya)” was established in 2007. In other words, we can understand that the Islamic Constitutional Movement changed its organization and activities to accommodate women, who had been allowed to participate in elections since 2005. We can assume that two factors influenced the foundation of this women’s office.

First, the women’s branch of the Social Reform Society had agreed to the political participation of women before women’s suffrage was permitted in 2005. In an interview, the leader of the new women’s office of the Islamic Constitutional Movement said that the purpose of the office was to balance women’s roles both inside and outside their homes. We can understand that this office’s task is to encourage women to vote.

Second, the actual political situation demanded the foundation of a women’s office since the majority of the constituents were women. In the 2006 general election, the first election in which women participated, the total number of voters was around 340,000, consisting of 147,000 men (43.2%) and 193,000 women (56.8%). The male candidates and campaign staff generally cannot enter a house or even a room, which is occupied only by women. In Kuwait, men and women have demarcated physical zones; therefore, they form their personal relationships within each separate community. A member of the Islamic Constitutional Movement told me during my interview that all the candidates now require both male and female staff members who have wide connections in each group of voters.

The Woman’s Office of the Islamic Constitutional Movement is not just a group consisting of supporters. In May 2008, during my visit to Kuwait, there were seven staff

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<sup>4</sup> In recent years, 4 main groups have occupied the Islamic groups’ seats in the National Assembly. First, the Islamic Constitutional Movement, mentioned in the text, was started as a Kuwaiti branch of the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt. Second, “the Society for the Preservation of Islamic Heritage (Jam‘īya I‘yā’ al-Turāth al-Islām)” was split from the Social Reform Society in 1981. Third, “the Scientific Salafi Movement (‘Araka al-‘Alafīya al-‘Ilmīya) was split from the Society for the Preservation of Islamic Heritage in 2004. The second and third groups were known as “‘Alafī” by Kuwaiti people. The final group is “the National Islamic Alliance (Tajammu‘ al-Wa‘anī al-Islāmī)”, which is Shi‘i Islamist group. Among these groups, the Islamic Constitutional Movement has generally occupied the largest proportion of the assembly.

members. Women with experience in social activities or skills which are useful for the campaign are selected as staff members by the head office. The role of the “Woman’s Office” is to serve as a link between the female voters and the head office of the Islamic Constitutional Movement. So far, the head office of the organization has fielded only male candidates; therefore, the staff of the “Woman Office” gathers the support of female voters to vote for the male candidates.

### **3.3 The Women’s Branch of the Social Reform Society**

“The Women’s Committee (al-Lajna al-Nisā’īya)” of the Social Reform Society was founded in 1982. Under the influence of the Iranian Revolution, Islamic revival movements became active in the 1980s. According to an interview with one of the group’s leaders, the aims of the women’s committee are to learn how women communicate with society and to support women who need help; further, she said that the teachings of Islam guide the people in everything that concern them.

The activities of the Women’s Committee are diverse. They offer classes for reading the Qur’ān, learning Arabic, and other educational courses thrice a week for children. In addition, they also teach household work such as cooking and cleaning as well as childcare to young women. The committee also holds lectures once a week, the themes of which are various, for example, prayer, fasting, women’s rights, etc. In addition to regular activities, they told me that they do everything in their capacity if any woman needs help. The most common and important matters that the committee deals with are the problems of divorce and life after divorce, and the nursing care of patients or the elderly. In addition, they provide a service that to take care of the children of working mothers.

The committee has agreed to the participation of women in politics for many years (Rizzo 2005: 52), because they believed that it could prove to be beneficial and supportive for women. Indeed, the membership of the Woman’s Office in the Islamic Constitutional Movement, that actively urges women to vote, overlaps with that of the Social Reform Society. Yet, some members of the Women’s Committee of the Social Reform Society do not support the women in the Islamic Constitutional Movement and do not go to the polling stations. A leader of the Women’s Committee explained the attitudes of women who do not vote by saying that political affairs have nothing to do with themselves, because their main purpose is to try to realize an ideal society based on Islamic principles.

The activities of the Social Reform Society have gradually changed in recent years. Although they rarely used to discuss the issue of women’s rights and political affairs at

the beginning, the opportunities to listen to and discuss such topics have now increased. It is uncertain whether the main purpose of their activities will ever change into gathering votes for the Islamic Constitutional Movement. Of course, politicians may try to mobilize them and gather their votes; however, the Social Reform Society does not belong exclusively to the politicians. The civil society is the arena of ordinary citizens. We need to pay careful attention to them, as the situation and position of women in society has started undergoing transformation.

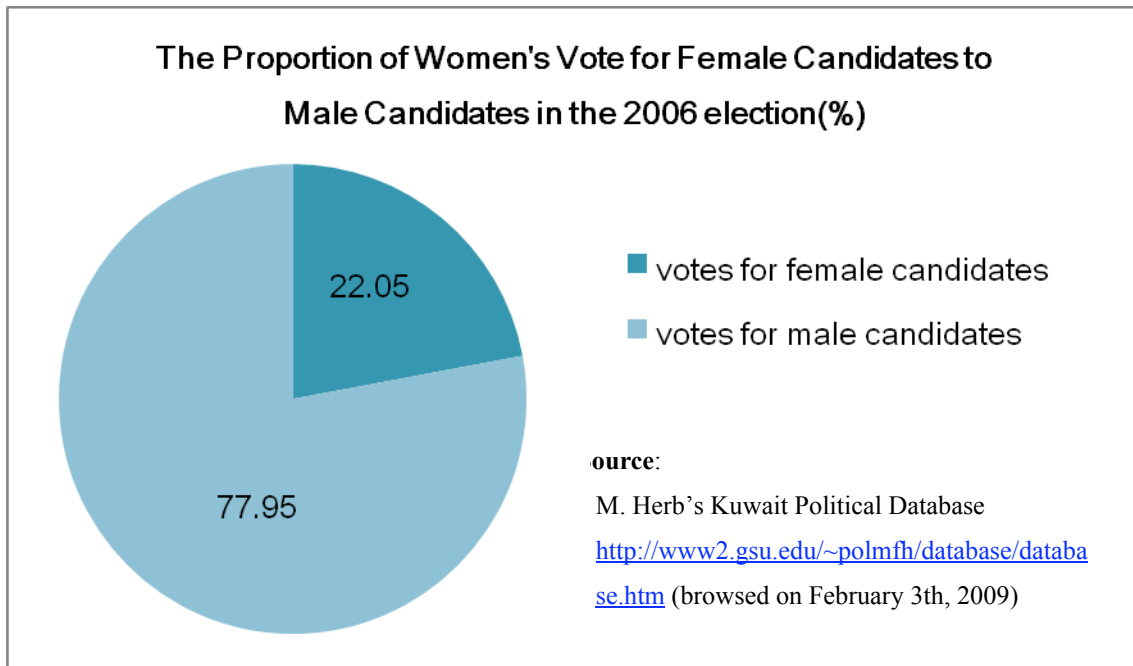
#### **4 The 12<sup>th</sup> General Election in 2008**

In this section, we analyze the reality of women's political participation through the 12<sup>th</sup> General Election held on May 17<sup>th</sup>, 2008. In March 2008, the Amir decided to dismiss the National Assembly and declared a general election for a new assembly. At this time, the number of constituents was 361,684, consisting of 161,185 (44.6%) male voters and 200,499 (55.4%) female voters, and 275 candidates including 27 women ran for election. The voting rate as a whole was estimated to be around 60%, and the women's voting rate was expected around 50%.

All 27 female candidates failed to win a single seat, although the government did appoint two women to ministerial positions. The results were not so different from the previous election held in 2006, when 211 male candidates and 28 female candidates ran for office, and all the female candidates failed to win seats.

On the other hand, if we study the female voters, we will observe an interesting phenomenon. The participation of women in politics means not only that women are chosen as members of the assembly, but also that all female citizens can express their political opinions in any ways. Indeed, women in Kuwait have strong opinions about many issues. Some hope that women will become members of the assembly or that women's suffrage is accompanied by an increase in support for female candidates. However, in reality, it turned out that most of the female citizens voted for male candidates.

Regarding the 2008 election, data on the voting behavior of women has not been made available. However, M. Herb has published data for the 2006 election. The chart below shows the proportion of female citizens who voted for male and female candidates in the 2006 election.



With regard to how women voted in the 2008 election, the case of the Islamic Constitutional Movement that follows gives us an insight into the situation. The Woman's office of the Islamic Constitutional Movement encouraged their female supporters to vote for the male candidates whom the head office supported. It is clear that we cannot make the assumption that women will vote for female candidates in any society. Therefore, we must not evaluate the political participation of women in a society by only paying attention to whether or not women win the elections.

The reality of women's political participation reveals an important problem in Kuwaiti society, that the issue which concerns women the most is the problem of divorce. Yet divorce concerns not only the woman, but also her husband, her children, and her parents and relatives. Indeed, how women can deal with life after divorce is one of the significant problems in Kuwaiti society. As a result, we can see that the problems that Kuwaiti women face are not only an issue for women.

## 5 Conclusion

First, we have focused on the practices and ideas of two women's Islamic groups in Kuwait. Both have a common goal to improve society by realizing an ideal society based on the principles of Islam. Some believe the participation of women in politics is useful as a tool in achieving their goal. Others, however, think that political participation in the assembly is not such an important factor in achieving their purpose.

Second, the body of a political organization is a social group. The Social Reform Society, for example, started as a social and charitable group. While the Social Reform Society has been active in society for more than 50 years, it did not begin its political activities officially until the founding of its political branch, the Islamic Constitutional Movement, in 1991. They entered the political arena and utilized the National Assembly as a means to accomplish their aim of constructing an ideal society.

Finally, from the perspective of the Islamic civil society, political issues such as selecting the parliament can be incorporated into a movement that aims to approach an ideal society based on Islam. The citizens themselves consider and judge whether political participation is useful or not important, in terms of realizing what they believe to be the ideal society.

This paper has examined the development and the present status of the Islamic civil society in Kuwait, a nation whose people thinks, debates, and strives for an ideal society based on Islamic principles. The Islamic movement has been expanding in Kuwait. We often tend to presume that the growth of liberal groups shapes civil society and leads to democratization. However, the expansion of the constituency did not lead to an increase liberal support; on the contrary, the Islamist groups have gained ground in the current political situation. Indeed, analyzing the behavior of the civil society is more relevant than studying the form of the political system if we are to better understand the reality of the development of the civil society in contemporary Kuwait.

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