Kuwait’s Post–Arab Spring Islamist Landscape: The End of Ideology?

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THE ARAB SPRING IN KUWAIT: PRIORITIZING POLITICAL REFORM

By the time the Arab Spring came to Kuwait, the country was already undergoing serious political debates about the prevalence of state corruption. Indeed, the need for accountable governance was a common theme of protests throughout the region. In Kuwait, such concerns came to overshadow the more social and ideological agendas that had previously been the focus of Islamists, such as gender segregation in schools and the proclamation of sharia as the primary source of legislation. The Muslim Brotherhood, as Kuwait’s oldest and most organized Islamist organisation, having been established in 1951, tended to voice support for such policies both inside and out of parliament. This Sunni group created a dedicated political arm, the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), in 1991 to manage the Brotherhood’s electoral participation. In recent years, and particularly since the Arab Spring, the ICM has come to focus its agenda more urgently on agitating for political reform rather than the promotion of social policies often linked to Islamist blocs. While cross-ideological, pro–reform movements uniting members of the Muslim Brotherhood and secular political actors crumbled elsewhere in the Middle East, I argue that they have in fact persisted in Kuwait and even expanded to include increasingly politically pragmatic (or Ikhwanized) Salafi blocs. Shiite Islamist groups meanwhile remain politically active and pragmatic, largely by maintaining a rather reliably loyalist position with government policies.

From 2010 to 2011, members of the cross-ideological opposition, including the Muslim Brotherhood, some Salafi groups, and secular political blocs, called for the questioning of Prime Minister Shaykh Nasser Mohammad al–Sabah on charges of inappropriate use of public finances for a second time, leading to the largest demonstrations in Kuwaiti history in September 2011. In this atmosphere, the opposition also increasingly began agitating for electing prime ministers and other cabinet members, all of whom are appointed by the emir, as a means of enhancing public oversight of governance and diminishing corruption.

In the midst of protests in late 2011, the cabinet resigned and parliament was dissolved, leading to elections in February 2012. In these polls, the public elected a decidedly pro–opposition parliament, with 34 out of 50 seats going to members of the broad-based opposition, and with Salafi and Brotherhood blocs each winning all four seats they contested. After only four months, however, the pro–opposition parliament was dissolved, with the Constitutional Court declaring the dissolution of the prior 2009 parliament unconstitutional and reinstating that decidedly loyalist legislature. This action, a rare foray of the judiciary into political life in Kuwait, galvanized members of the

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opposition from varying ideological strands, including the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis, and secular blocs, to form the National Front for the Protection of the Constitution in September 2012. Such cross–ideological coalitions originally emerged as early as the 1990s, helping the ICM earn more seats in parliament, but tended to fall apart largely due to disagreements between secular and Islamist blocs about the urgency of social reform legislation. In the 2000s, however, such coalitions have dissolved largely due to changes in legislative law introduced by the government that have spurred political blocs to reorganize their campaigns.

In October 2012, Emir Shaykh Sabah al–Ahmad al–Sabah, warning of threats to national unity, persuaded the cabinet to change electoral law ahead of the December 2012 polls. This move granted each voter one rather than four votes, a measure expected to strengthen the representation of traditionally loyalist tribal groups at the expense of ideological political blocs. This decision ultimately led to an opposition–wide boycott of the polls. As a result of the cross–opposition boycott, parliament was dominated by a blend of liberal and tribal blocs, with independent pro–government MPs holding 30 out of 50 seats. Within the opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood’s political bloc was entirely absent from the legislature for the first time since its creation in 1991 because it refused to participate in the election. Sunni Islamist representation, comprised of both the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi groups, was therefore the most drastically affected by the change in electoral law, as their number of seats decreased from 23 MPs to four. Several popular Salafi blocs joined the election boycott, leaving Salafis independent of these blocs to win seats. Elections in June 2013 yielded very similar results, as the opposition boycott continued.

While loyalist parliaments, which served from December 2012 to October 2016, sought to stave off the implementation of vastly unpopular austerity measures as low oil prices persisted, they passed several controversial laws, including a law barring those who had been jailed for insulting the emir from contesting parliamentary elections, as well as a law mandating DNA testing for all citizens (which has since been overturned). Such policies, in addition to widespread suspicions of government corruption in Kuwait, galvanized the opposition blocs that had previously boycotted the elections to resume participating in electoral politics in 2016. At the time, it was thought that these opposition groups could block the most objectionable policies from within parliament at the very least, and at most, they could enact reforms to enhance public participation in government. The opposition’s return to the polls in November 2016 predictably altered parliament’s composition: 60 percent of seats changed hands, amid 70 percent voter turnout—quite an indictment of the previous assembly.

Throughout the post–Arab Spring era, both Sunni and Shiite Islamists have been active participants in Kuwait’s political system, though, broadly speaking, Sunni Islamists have become more involved with the cross–ideological opposition and Shias have been associated with a loyalist position.

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The Muslim Brotherhood

After the Arab Spring, and because of the change to electoral law that granted each Kuwaiti citizen one rather than four votes each in 2012, the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood, through its political bloc the ICM, removed itself from institutionalized political life. In the words of one former MP from the ICM, the bloc hoped to demonstrate that “[t]he more we stay away, the more we show it’s the government that cannot perform.” Ahead of the November 2016 polls, however, the ICM became one of the first opposition groups to determine that political participation would be worthwhile despite its reservations about the new electoral system.

Leaders of the ICM believed that the Brotherhood enjoyed enough popular support to garner seats in parliament.
Indeed, upon its return to parliamentary life in 2016, the ICM won three seats, though a fourth is informally under its control in the current legislature, meaning that a fourth MP reliably votes alongside the ICM in the legislature. Although members of the ICM do not always vote in line with each other in parliament, as a whole, they have become part of the opposition movement, though they previously enjoyed closer relations with the government, particularly before the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The government’s sentencing of 67 opposition activists, including ICM MP Jamaan al-Harbash, to harsh prison sentences in December 2017 for having stormed parliament in 2011 only strengthened cross-ideological opposition unity. Although the accused were quickly released from custody, the final result from the Court of Cassation released in July 2018 upheld shorter sentences of three years for al-Harbash, as well as two other current MPs and the opposition figure Musallam al-Barrak.

The issue of corruption, which drove protests during the Arab Spring, continues to unite the cross-ideological opposition and encourage the political pragmatism of Sunni Islamists. Indeed, the latest parliamentary questioning of the prime minister in May 2018, filed by one member of the secular opposition and one Salafi, largely focused on reasons behind Kuwait’s decline in the Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI) published by Transparency International to rank perceived levels of corruption around the world. The CPI marked the first time anywhere in the world that Salafis participated in parliamentary elections—and impressively won two seats in parliament.

Kuwait’s Salafis first became politically organized in 1981 as the Society for the Revival of the Islamic Heritage (RIHS), inspired by the ideology of Egyptian Shaykh ‘Abd al-Rahman ‘Abd al-Khaliq, who approved of Salafi participation in politics despite objections from the quietist Salafi clerics. The RIHS participated in the 1981 polls—marking the first time anywhere in the world that Salafis participated in parliamentary elections—and impressively won two seats in parliament. Following the liberation of Kuwait in 1991, however, the RIHS became more politically aligned with the government, with many members having been granted government positions, especially in the Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowments) and Islamic Affairs. Kuwait’s Salafi landscape became divided after the Iraqi invasion and occupation in 1990–1991: one branch became politically active because of its objections to the government’s handling of the crisis, and the other remained politically inactive and loyal to the regime at all costs. The Islamic Salafi Association (ISA) formed in 1991 in response to the perceived co-optation of the RIHS by the government and has subsequently become the largest Salafi bloc in parliament. The ISA’s agenda primarily emphasizes social morality and loyalty to the government. The Salafi Movement, created as an offshoot of the ISA in 1996, openly promotes the implementation of political reform. This movement has become one of the most outspoken Salafi blocs in voicing a desire to increase popular political participation. It has also become increasingly oppositional towards the government. The Umma Party, established in 2005 as an offshoot of the Salafi Movement, is the only more...
oppositional Salafi bloc. Furthermore, even though political parties are illegal in Kuwait, the Umma Party was established as a self-proclaimed political party. The Umma Party is most similar in priority and structure to the Muslim Brotherhood, as it mainly calls for enhanced participation in government. Over time, Kuwait’s activist Salafis have become more Ikhwanized, generally privileging political agendas over social reforms.

In the 2016 election, while the pro-government blocs had a poor showing, independent Salafis won four seats. This result signals a shift in the Salafi landscape towards the opposition and away from previously organized political blocs. The rise in independent Salafi candidates, and now MPs, further suggests frustration with bloc policies of boycotting and an inability to unite Salafis from different blocs. It may also signal a new strategy of running independently as a means to circumvent the 2012 electoral law, which many Kuwaitis believe was implemented to erode support bases of organized blocs by decreasing the number of votes per person from four to one. Logically, then, activist Salafis and the Muslim Brotherhood have sought greater cooperation through the Kuwaiti League of Preachers, which has granted ulama, a space for speaking about political reform, although it has not led to any formal unification of political agendas.

Shiite Islamists
The National Islamic Alliance (NIA), founded in 1979, is Kuwait’s primary Shiite Islamist political bloc, tracing its origins to Hezbollah of Kuwait. The organization follows the teaching of ‘Ali Khamenei yet has been careful not to adhere too closely to pro-Iranian political stances. After the Kuwaiti government summoned 1,500 Shias for mourning the death of Hezbollah commander Imad Mughniyeh in 2008, the NIA has been particularly careful to maintain good relations with the Kuwaiti government. Meanwhile the Justice and Peace Assembly (JPA) primarily comprises followers of the Shirazi school and has a reputation of being a reliably pro-government force in the National Assembly, though it tends to win only one seat. Neither of these blocs participated in the opposition’s parliamentary boycott, and the NIA actually benefitted the most from the decreased competition during the boycotted elections. Indeed, in the first post-boycott election, the NIA had more seats in parliament than any other single bloc, at five.

While not experiencing Ikhwanization in terms of working with political blocs of different ideologies to effect political change, the Shiite movements are acting pragmatically to maintain freedom to form political blocs, as are Sunni Islamist groups, suggesting the limits to Islamist ideological influence within the parliamentary system. Since the scandal of the Imad Mughniyeh affair in 2008 and increasingly in the past decade, Kuwait’s Shiite Islamist movements have come to be identified with regime positions, in this way maintaining their safety and position within political life.

LOOKING FORWARD
Broadly speaking, since the Arab Spring, we have not seen a targeted governmental campaign against Islamists or the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait, as has occurred elsewhere in the region. Rather, it seems that the government is more concerned about efforts that unite secular and Islamist political blocs since such campaigns were successful in restoring parliament in 1992 and adopting five electoral districts in 2006. As Bjorn Olav Utvik argues, while politically active Sunni Islamists often begin with a “moral watchdog approach” to gain followers, their supporters subsequently expect the organization to gain more influence over government policies, in turn pushing Sunni Islamists to enter politics. Having gained a following by opposing the Muslim Brotherhood’s politicization, increasingly vocal politically active Salafis have come to resemble the Brotherhood in order to maintain political relevance in post–Arab Spring Kuwait, where corruption has become a key issue. In fact, the anti-corruption agenda has even been increasingly resonant with Kuwait’s traditionally loyalist tribal populations.
Sunni Islamist groups in Kuwait have learned the lessons of Islamist groups elsewhere about overreaching in terms of running too many candidates and of the need for working across ideological lines to advance political reform, rather than trying to achieve it alone. Meanwhile Shiite Islamist groups have also acted pragmatically to maintain their ability to act in political blocs. Both Sunni and Shiite blocs in Kuwait, then, have understood how the Arab Spring revealed the fragility of Islamist groups. In such an environment, the traditional Sunni Islamist focus on social policies and ideology will also likely continue to diminish, with increasing focus on sweeping political reform and less focus on serving as a so-called “sharia lobby.”

ENDNOTES


3. Interview with former ICM MP, Kuwait City, November 21, 2013.


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