

Bitter-Sweet Elections

The Oxymoronic Condition of the Kuwaiti Current Political Scene

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It all started during a typical winter desert day in a not-very-typical-desert land; the rain was trickling lightly on the fashionable attires and the silky Abayas that adorned women's figures and the pearly "Dishdashas" that draped carelessly over men's bodies, all having lined up in long queues awaiting their turn to vote. As the rain gained more power, hammering down on beautiful silky veils, black frizzy hair and white crinkled "Gitras," so did the political scene which grew more intense by the hour and as the day fizzed away. When the election centers closed at 8 PM, most Kuwaiti houses went into tea/TV mode, a rare instant of a revival of TV interest, as people sat in front of their screens, sipping tea and following the results, engulfed in total wonderment.

Kuwait is divided into 5 electoral districts; voters cast one vote for a single candidate (a much debated electoral system that was imposed through an Emir decree of an urgent status in the year 2012), resulting in each district producing 10 winning candidates. This election term, the eighteenth term since the Independence of Kuwait, is like no other previous ones. As Kuwaitis, most of us have waited patiently and passionately for the 2016 parliament to come to an end, putting up with a term that, in a rare occurrence, completed its four-year period, evidently with not much public satisfaction. Kuwait has seen 17 Parliaments, 2 were absolutely eliminated and 8 were dissolved, leaving us with only 7 parliaments that completed their four-year period, the 2016 parliament being one of them. The late 2016 parliament was very much pro government, one reason why it completed its designated four years, a parliament that left people bitter, angry and submerged in an unhealthy, prejudiced and somewhat violent discourse. It was time for change; this idea manifested itself strongly during the 2020 elections in many positive and not very positive ways.

One major apparent "disappearance" during this election term was that of the strong involvement of political money; it seemed that buying allegiances and loyalties was subdued this term, as the "pole heads" and key power-players took a back seat and watched from afar, probably avoiding a risky intervention that seemed to surely backfire in their faces under the current congested atmosphere. Even the phenomena of buying votes and imparting valuables (one year there was a big buzz about Chanel bags being "gifted" to women after swearing allegiance), which are actions usually carried out by the semi-rich, semi-powerful runners, even this phenomena has cooled down, leaving only very few struggling candidates to shamefully resort to the act. It could be the buzz this disgraceful act has created during the past election terms, it could be the few candidates that were taken to court and smeared with verdicts, or it could be that people are simply fed up with the results of corruption that dissuaded the process. The end result: political money was very low-key this term; this seemed like a good omen.

With more than 350 runners for this parliamentary election, among whom 33 were women, we seemed to be more than ready to go full force into "making" a new reformative parliament. Kuwaitis were excited, energized, and eager to change the status quo, one that we seemed to have been frozen in for many years. However despite this excitement and regardless of the good omen of the suppression of political money, by-elections peered strongly with its ugly head on a much hoped-for clean political scene. It was no surprise of course, for we knew that with every election term, heads of families and tribes and leaders of sects run their own aside-elections to strengthen their position by producing one candidate upon which all votes are cast. However, whereas this practice has always manifested itself undercover, the last three terms (2020 included) saw brashness in the action, as these by-elections were announced on twitter and confirmed with pictures and video tapings; some of the defeated in these by-elections went so far so as to publicly object to the results and threaten to take their counter-candidates to court over an action that would criminalize all parties. The scene was bizarre and chaotic, only to be met with sheepish and sometimes awkward reactions from the government albeit the clear illegalization of this act in Kuwaiti law. That was a very bad omen.

With all these good and bad omens, no one at the beginning of that rainy humid day of the 5th of December could have predicted the results that appeared at the end of it. Great changes took place, some good, some bad, some blatantly confusing. The parliamentary picture saw more than 60% change with 31 new faces, out of a total of 50, that will show soon in Abdulla Al-Salim Hall, the main half-circle beautiful chamber of the parliament. Amongst the 50 current parliamentary seats, 29 were tribal, making this one parliament that will have not only a strong tribal voice, but a powerful opposition attitude as well, as most tribal voices are opposition voices, which begs the question: will this parliament see its four assigned years to the end? What confirms this strong opposition presence in this parliament is the reelection of Dr. Hassan Jouhar, a Shiite previous MP who lost his seat four election-terms ago because of his opposing stand that the Shiite community did not perceive well nor condone. His reelection this term is a loud scream, a blaring scene that is saturated with opposition color. It is also noticeable that purely religious seats saw significant decrease with 5 seats for Shiite, 3 for Muslim Brothers, and 4 for Salafs. The picture is clear, this was the “photo’s negative” of the fall of Muslim Brothers in Egypt and thus the weakening of Islamic political movements Middle-East wide; the message is unambiguous: we have had enough of you.

All of this being said, the turn to the opposition direction, the rejection of the Islamist ambiance, all of this does not rebuff the fact that people still voted as per their sectarian, tribal, and familial affiliations. This can be seen reflected in the by-elections amongst all these denominations, particularly and most clearly amongst the tribal. These affiliations are, sadly, encouraged by the district division (five electoral districts in Kuwait) that encourages this “dark quota” if I may say; these affiliations are also maintained by the absence of formal and legal political parties that should be built on ideological affiliations and should produce real political, financial and social strategic plans. As the Kuwaiti political scene continues to miss this kind of modern civil form of political orderliness, it will continue to produce affiliated MPs, ones that have more loyalties to their tribes, sects and families than to the modern political institutions of the State.

Blissfully, many good things happened as well. Dominant faces in the parliament that occupied their seats on the span of 30 years, such as Khalaf Al-Dumaitheir, are missing the show. Muhammad Hief, who was a senior strong salaf has lost his seat as did Salih Ashour his analog on the Shiite side. A bitter-sweet change (ironically more sweet than bitter) was Safaa Al-Hashim’s loss of her seat, the only female MP in the 2016 Parliament, leaving this current parliamentary term womanless. This was a significant loss, one that despite the fact that it left us with no female-seats in the current parliament, has also left us relieved of a load and obnoxious biased voice that left no occasion clear from its attack on expats of Kuwait. Al-Hashim, marveling at an initial reaction from the Kuwaiti society that responded cheerily to her bigoted discourse, took it too far, to the degree where bashing non-Kuwaitis became her crusade, blaming them at every turn for much of the corruption and lack of civil and social services in Kuwait. She went all the way to call for charging them for the streets they drive on and even the air they breathe. The deliciousness of this dogmatic discourse was not digested without an after taste. People grew weary not only of the intolerant discourse but also because of the lack of any other serious and vital one. She gravely lost the one female seat we had for the 2016 parliament (coming in the 30th position in her electoral district).

This brings us to the women’s electoral dilemma, why is it just too hard for women? Several obvious reasons factor into this, some are recurring but very true and prominent clichés such as those concerning the social, traditional and financial obstacles. Yes, it is absolutely the same old universal story, women have to work twice as hard to secure half the reward and still entertain double the criticism. And yes it is absolutely the same struggle with the fear for the reputation and the desire to protect the honor that limit women’s literal and metaphoric mobility and thus their political achievements. In addition, it must be kept in mind that despite the presence of Kuwaiti women in the public scene since the very beginning of the creation of the community of Kuwait and despite their strong presence in the work field even prior to the establishment of the modern State, Kuwaiti women actually only started participating more directly in the political field since 2005, giving them merely 15 years to build a political base that took men more than 60 years to establish. Most of the Kuwaiti allegiances, alliances, political relations and even legislative discussions initially take place in Dewanias, which are men’s gatherings or rather clusters that are representative of some sort of affiliation: tribal, familial, sectarian and sometimes ideological. Women were banned for a long time from attending such gatherings, and even now that they are welcomed in some of these spaces, the welcome remains limited and does not stretch to all voting districts.

The Islamic voice, addressing issues of women's legislative eligibility, women's lawful presence in male-dense arenas and women's public and domestic guardianships, was not as conventionally loud as it used to be; however, it was still audible and it must have deterred a considerable number of voters. Traditions stand even stronger than religion as a matter of fact in this fight against women, with the issues of the reputation and honor being on the line when it comes to women's public work, particularly if this work is "smeared" with a political temperament that requires women's much mixing and mingling with men. The protection of the domestic sphere and its "guardian angel" is also a topic that presents itself with full force in this discourse. As if all of these difficulties are not enough, there comes the issue of financing the electoral campaign which is either unaffordable or not acquirable for women, as families, tribes and sect-clusters prefer to finance male candidates to female ones. Politics in Kuwait is a close-net circle, only a few big players are allowed to visit that luxurious "basement" and are accepted into its inner circle; word has it, there is not one woman to have ever visited that basement.

But enough blaming the circumstances, for albeit these accusations being true and constituting maybe 80% of the reasons of why women have to "sit on the bench" for this upcoming game as they did for many other political games before, there must be 20% self-reflection and reproaching that needs to be done. The fact of the matter is women's discourse during this election term was not nearly as strong as it should be; they did not address critical issues with much knowledge and depth and they certainly avoided, for my big personal dismay, the humanitarian debate on the "stateless" that needed to be addressed strongly, directly and courageously.

Yes indeed, this is one bitter-sweet election, for with all the positive changes that took place, there was a strong residue of negative practices that have often "mushroomed" on the face of the Kuwaiti political scene, practices that dominated in the past and continue to show intimidating strength at current time. Political and financial powers and relations are all still in full force, the win of Marzouq Al-Ganim (the previous Chair of the parliament) an example. For despite the often unjust evaluation of Al-Ganim as the sole cause of domestic damage and the unreasonable view of him as THE icon of corruption in Kuwait, he still managed to win first in his district (one that is closed for rich merchants). This win was not a surprise, for he still had a very strong base of supporters, particularly among his class and "origin" base, however to win that huge was not very much anticipated. Al-Ganim's win, albeit expected, was as well not the happiest of news for humanitarian activists in Kuwait; Al-Ganim not only stood as an opposed figure to the Stateless in Kuwait, he also primarily participated in spreading a very archaic and ethnically-charged discourse as he advertised and mainstreamed terms like: double-citizenship holders, citizenship forgers, counterfeiters, and phrases like: protection of national identity and transgression on identity among some other charged and poignant expressions. He, during the electoral preparation month, did not find it the least uneasy to flaunt his financial abilities across the Kuwaiti media scene; at one point he had a video made of the highest quality that presented him as some sort of a savior, and for the night before election day, he actually booked two and half hours of air time on almost all media venues of Kuwait, all at the same time, leaving viewers with not much of a local choice of viewing, and that is to broadcast what he called a "seminar," which in reality appeared to be a long expensive personal advertisement. At one point during that long "ad" he actually stated that "to be a Stateless in Kuwait is better than to be a citizen in any other country," a slogan that circulated comically throughout that night. It was not a pretty scene, yet with all the power and wealth it oozed, it certainly partook in wining Al-Ganim this latest election.

The final picture is still misty, it is difficult to read the scene clearly as of now; however, one thing is undoubtedly evident, the Kuwaiti people wanted change, and change they got. This is certainly a younger parliament, one that is more inclined towards a voice of opposition and not necessarily an opposition distressing voice. Upon an initial evaluation, it looks like it might not be smooth sailing for the 2020 parliament with a conventional governmental "sail," which begs the inference that it might not see its fourth birthday if the governmental approaches remain the same. However, the Kuwaiti political scene, as are all political scenes assumingly, is full of surprises. There is a number of significant battles coming up our way, corruption cases that involve big players, humanitarian pressing dilemmas that have often weighed down on Kuwaiti's international reputation and then your regular every-day predicament of the financial future of Kuwait! The fall of big names and the rise of a new younger parliamentary generation is a clear message from the Kuwaiti people, one that has to be dealt with seriously and with much warranted respect.

All in all, we feel good; most likely adrenalin is still high and reality will set itself soon though. Enough change took place to promise some attempt at reformation and enough monotony is present to warn against false hope. I guess only time will tell.

Disclaimer

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