

كسر القوالب Breaking the mold

#Breaking_The_Mold

Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making

Country **Kuwait**

Five for Kuwait: Civil Society and Electoral Reform in an Arab Gulf State

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On July 17, 2006, the Kuwait National Assembly (KNA) approved a series of amendments to the country's longstanding electoral law. The new electoral law settled a nearly seven-month debate over various proposals, resulting in a change from 25 to five electoral districts. A broad spectrum of reform-oriented associations and legislators had long criticized Kuwait's electoral system and the inequality and clientelism it encouraged. Ultimately, a civil movement born from these efforts translated these disparate calls for reform into a coherent message: *Nabiha Khamsa*.

This case study places *Nabiha Khamsa* ["We Want Five"] in historical context, analyzes key features of the movement, and assesses the intended and unintended consequences of reform in a contemporary electoral authoritarian regime.

BACKGROUND

In 1981, following a nearly five-year suspension of the KNA, Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, the Emir of Kuwait, called for new elections. The election would be held across 25 districts, ranging in size from 1,300 (*Salmiya*) to 2,800 (*Rumaithiya*) registered adult male voters. According to Tetrault (2000, p. 108), "The new voters were geographically concentrated. This was a result of intentional and epiphenomenal settlement patterns that have produced significant, though far from universal, residential segregation in Kuwait, not only by tribe but also by sect, income group, age cohort, nationality, and marital status." The segmentation of different social groups into small districts privileged the ruling Al-Sabah family's traditional *badu* (tribal) allies at the expense of *hadhar* (urban) political, religious, and social associations (Crystal, 1995, p. 85; Herb, 1999, p. 164-168).

Over time, public frustration with the inequalities born from the electoral system grew. The segmentation of electoral life into small electoral districts created a predictable form of politics whereby

large numbers of the population felt discouraged from political participation (Albloshi & Alfahad, 2009). The nature of these small districts had also given rise to "service MPs," who were given access to state resources and benefits in exchange for their compliance with the government's proposals in the KNA. By the early 2000s, several forms of electoral malpractice (including vote-buying) led to the introduction of a number of reform proposals in the KNA itself. These underlying grievances shaped a number of subsequent public debates concerning the need for change.

TIMELINE

The passing of Emir Sheikh Jaber on January 15, 2006, after nearly 30 years of rule, led to the succession of Sheikh Saad Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah. Over a week later, Sheikh Saad abdicated after the KNA voted to remove him from power, largely due to ongoing health issues. The late Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah took power soon after. In many ways, the ascension of Sheikh Sabah presented an opportunity to break with a past that was tied largely to the personal legacies of Sheikh Jaber and Sheikh Saad.

As early as 2003, various proposals related to redistricting were discussed in the KNA. Soon after Sheikh Sabah's ascension as Emir in January 2006, the Council of Ministers (Cabinet) appointed a ministerial committee to explore the issue. Within weeks, the KNA requested the committee's report be submitted to it by April 12. The committee was tasked with studying a variety of different redistricting configurations against several criteria, including limiting vote-buying, encouraging national unity, and achieving population-based equality among different districts. The committee ultimately decided to support a five-district system. Though aspects of the report were leaked prior to its completion, both the Council of Ministers and the KNA were divided on the issue. Support for and opposition to redistricting coalesced ahead of the KNA's April 12 deadline.

Just prior to the deadline, on April 8, a separate parliamentary committee recommended that the 25 districts remain untouched. According to media sources at the time, opposition to redistricting in the Council of Ministers was led by Minister of Oil Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahed Al-Sabah and Deputy Prime Minister Mohammad Daifallah Al-Sharar. Elements of the ruling family—particularly those close to tribal and “service MPs”—opposed redistricting and sought to slow the momentum of reform through the introduction of competing proposals.

By early April, the issue of redistricting had become politically salient. On April 17, 29 MPs signed a statement of support for the five-district plan presented by the ministerial committee. The “Bloc of 29” organized themselves around the plan and pushed for a vote in the KNA. The next day, a group of 18 MPs signed a similar statement opposing the plan, arguing that the unbalanced distribution of voters across the new districts would undermine reform and introduce new inequalities. On May 15, ahead of a compromise vote on 10 districts, the Bloc of 29 walked out of the KNA. On May 21, the Emir dissolved the KNA following the submission of a vote of no confidence in the prime minister, Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah. New National Assembly elections were scheduled for June 29.

CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS

Nabiha Khamsa was a spontaneous civil movement that arose in response to a divided political elite and an emergent rift in the ruling family. The movement succeeded because it was able to navigate these divisions and galvanize the public with a clear commitment to a single goal.

The movement began online, largely as debates in the KNA evolved prior to its dissolution. By 2006, the Kuwaiti blogosphere had centered its attention on these debates. Though these blogs had been active for several years, the salience of the issue of electoral reform unified these disparate actors, creating both a community and a platform that was able to advocate for change. By April, bloggers were openly calling for action in the form of political mobilization. Specifically, participants in the blogosphere advocated attending (and disrupting) KNA sessions and holding rallies outside the KNA. These activities sent a strong signal to the Bloc of 29 that there was broader public support for the five-district system.

The online origins of Nabiha Khamsa have been documented elsewhere (Nordenson, 2010). The movement was largely spontaneous with little initial organization and direction. Activists encouraged the mobilization of supporters using the diffuse network structure of the blogosphere itself. Specifically, activists provided movement members with email addresses and phone numbers for MPs, government officials, and newspaper editors in order to direct public pressure towards government institutions. The blogosphere also enabled activists to expose efforts to limit the movement’s pressure campaign and share photos and other content related to government corruption. The blogosphere quickly became a substitute for more traditional sources of political news and information. This enhanced the movement’s credibility and attracted support among citizens who were previously unengaged or demobilized.



Soon after the dissolution of the KNA and the announcement of new elections, the movement shifted its attention to the election. The movement became an electoral force for two reasons. First, it was able to present itself as credible because it could claim an initial, important victory in the form of the Bloc of 29’s walkout. The support and encouragement the movement received from a number of MPs who supported the five-district plan strengthened its credibility and visibility. Second, the movement leveraged this credibility in service of a clear aim and goal: the passage of amendments to the electoral law in support of the five-district plan. The divided elites that gave rise to Nabiha Khamsa now needed the support of the movement during the upcoming elections. Movement activists were willing to provide that support to candidates who publicly supported the five-district plan.

STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

As the KNA debated various proposals for redistricting, Nabiha Khamsa activists prioritized direct contact. In late April, one of the activists behind the movement launched Kuwait5.org. The website listed personal contact information of MPs, the Council of Ministers, and other public figures who could draw attention to public support for the five-district proposal.





Figure 1. Screenshots from “5 للأجل الكويتي” (Retrieved from <http://kuwait5.org/>).

INFLUENCING FACTORS AND TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENTS

A number of factors contributed to Nabihah Khamsa’s success. The most important factor that facilitated the movement’s strength and its ability to transform from a civil movement into an election-focused interest group was its reliance on new forms of media. The disorganized, diffuse network structure of Nabihah Khamsa was a product of the movement’s use of online social networks, blogs, and other forms of mobile communication. As the movement grew, these communications became even more critical. They allowed participants to share information and updates that were otherwise not available from more traditional media organizations.

The fact that electoral reform had already become a salient political issue facilitated the rise of Nabihah Khamsa and enabled the movement to mobilize disengaged and politically disenfranchised communities. Movement activists were able to transform a seemingly technical debate over redistricting into a debate over the nature of political representation in Kuwait itself. The movement’s emphasis on corruption and inequality allowed it to present new, creative repertoires of action. This emphasis encouraged the public to view the issue of redistricting not as a technical debate, but as a tool that could be used to limit electoral malpractice and improve the quality of representation. Under the new system, activists emphasized, citizens would be liberated from the restrictions imposed by a political elite uninterested in preserving citizens’ political rights.

After the Emir dissolved the KNA, the campaign transformed from a network of mostly young, liberal, and politically engaged citizens into a more organized interest group nested in an electoral context. By May, the salience of the issue of redistricting had become overwhelming: each political association, faction and party released a public statement clarifying their position on the issue. Once elections were announced, most liberal and Islamist groups supported the five-district plan and fielded candidates who supported it. Nabihah Khamsa activists then turned their attention to supporting these and other candidates who pledged support for the five-district plan.

The movement’s insistence on five districts ultimately contributed to the Bloc of 29’s walkout on May 15. This was a watershed, transformative moment. When it became clear that a majority of MPs supported the ministerial committee’s plan, the movement was able to articulate its vision as one grounded in a political reality that was within reach. When the Emir dissolved the KNA less than a week later, it was clear that the government would not be able to ignore a new parliament that supported the proposal in similar numbers. Movement leaders were able to adapt their networks and resources to create an electoral force that cooperated with existing movements sympathetic to its goal. By this point, the movement had already crossed an important threshold that signaled its power to the broader public.

The mobilizational capacity of the movement allowed it to make this shift from a diffuse network into a more organized interest group. The shared experience of participation in contentious action endowed movement activists with a sense of shared purpose. The movement could continue as a loose network, so long as its electoral activities centered on supporting candidates who would vote for the five-district plan. In many cases, movement activists worked alongside volunteers from other parties, factions and associations.

POLICY OUTCOME

Once the KNA overwhelmingly approved the passage of a series of amendments in support of the five-district plan, Nabihah Khamsa claimed victory. From this perspective, the movement was a resounding success. The movement launched successful civil and electoral campaigns that leveraged a political elite divided over a salient issue. In so doing, it mobilized thousands of citizens, inspired new, previously disengaged citizens, and changed public perceptions of the nature of political representation in Kuwait.

Ultimately, the movement succeeded: 21 out of 29 members of the Bloc of 29 were reelected. Even in most districts where members of the Bloc had lost, their successors ended up supporting the five-district plan anyway. On the other hand, of the 18 MPs who opposed the five-district plan, nine were not reelected. Soon after the results were announced, it became clear that there was enough support in the KNA to pass the amendment. Just to make sure MPs knew the movement was still monitoring the situation, activists organized a protest in front of the KNA on Friday, July 7. The following Wednesday, on July 12, the KNA met for its opening session. Soon after, on Monday, July 17, the KNA adopted the change with overwhelming support—even from the previously divided Council of Ministers.

Though Nabihah Khamsa’s emphasis on the five-district plan unified the movement in service of an attainable goal, it did little to expose the underlying, structural forces that gave birth to the movement in the first place. Even though the number of districts changed, the underlying group-based logic of electoral politics had not. Voters still relied on tribal, familial and sect-based kin groups to make electoral decisions. In many cases, these groups still relied on elites with preferential access to state resources to resolve questions of political and candidate selection. This further entrenched clientelism, whereby MPs would exchange support for government proposals in the KNA for targeted benefits they could provide their constituents. Because these constituents were themselves a part of different social groups, the new system did little to encourage the growth of programmatic or reformist parties, factions or labels.

Another unintended consequence of the five-district system lay in the new boundaries it created. Previously badu-majority districts—which consist colloquially of the “external areas”—were now subsumed into the Fourth and Fifth districts. Traditionally, these “external areas” elected badu candidates loyal to the ruling family. Although this loyalty began eroding after the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1991, the change in districts punctuated badu frustration with the government. In many ways, the change in districts institutionalized a growing divide in Kuwait between its badu and hadhar citizens. To this day, many badu point to the new districts as evidence of the government’s neglect of the “external areas” and the Kuwaiti citizens who call these areas home.

CONCLUSION

Nabiha Khamsa was a civil movement born from public frustration with the government’s abuse of electoral politics and the inability of a divided elite to agree on reform. The movement’s online origins, diffuse and leaderless structure, and unified messaging contributed to its success. The movement’s ability to put pressure on government and parliamentary elites ultimately led to an unprecedented parliamentary walkout. The resulting walkout provided the movement with the momentum it needed to transform from a civil movement into an election-focused interest group able to coordinate with pre-existing parties and factions. The movement ultimately succeeded, though the unintended consequences of its narrow focus on redistricting led to new pathologies that have over time threatened the very pluralism that has characterized electoral life since independence.



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BREAKING THE MOLD PROJECT

In mid-2018, the "Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World" program at IFI, with the support of Open Society Foundations, launched the second round of its extended research project "Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making". This project mapped and analyzed the attempts of Arab civil society, in all its orientations, structures, and differences, to influence public policy across a variety of domains. This research produced 92 case studies outlining the role of civil society in impacting political, social, economic, gender, educational, health-related, and environmental policies in ten Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and the Arab Gulf.

Over two dozen researchers and research groups from the above countries participated in this project, which was conducted over a year and a half. The results were reviewed by an advisory committee for methodology to ensure alignment with the project's goals, and were presented by the researchers in various themed sessions over the course of the two days.

THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND POLICY-MAKING PROGRAM

at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, examines the role that civil society actors play in shaping and making policy. Specifically, the program focuses on the following aspects: how civil society actors organize themselves into advocacy coalitions; how policy networks are formed to influence policy processes and outcomes; and how policy research institutes contribute their research into policy. The program also explores the media's expanding role, which some claim has catalyzed the Uprisings throughout the region.

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