

# Political participation of the muslim brotherhood in Kuwait : the impacts of electoral reforms and the arab uprising

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**November 2018**

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This paper examines the impacts of electoral reforms and the Arab Spring on the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait. The Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), its political wing, has been participating in parliamentary elections since 1991. As a result of electoral reforms in 2006, the ICM lost some of its seats. However, it gained seats in the February 2012 election. Focusing on the structure of political competition in Kuwait, we analyse the reasons for this volatility.

**Keywords: Kuwait, Election, Muslim Brotherhood, Arab Uprising**

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**Political Participation of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait:  
The Impacts of Electoral Reforms and the Arab Uprising**

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**Abstract:**

This paper examines the impacts of electoral reforms and the Arab Spring on the activities of the Muslim Brotherhood in Kuwait. The Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM), its political wing, has been participating in parliamentary elections since 1991. As a result of electoral reforms in 2006, the ICM lost some of its seats. However, it gained seats in the February 2012 election. Focusing on the structure of political competition in Kuwait, we analyse the reasons for this volatility.

**Introduction**

As an example of Islamist political participation, the activities of the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM; Arabic: *al-Ḥarakah al-Dustūriyyah al-Islāmiyyah*) in Kuwait are examined. The ICM is the political wing of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood. It was established in 1991, soon after Kuwait's liberation from Iraqi occupation. The ICM is well organised and acts as a de facto political party, although political parties have not been legalised in Kuwait.

Having participated in parliamentary elections since 1992, the ICM has occupied a leading position within the Islamic bloc and the opposition, and led the electoral reform in 2006. In the 2006 election, which focused on the issue of electoral reform, they won six seats, the highest number ever won by the party. Following the revision of election laws, the ICM prepared a bill to legalise political parties and evolve the Islamic bloc into a parliamentary party. At that time, observers foresaw the beginning of party politics in

Kuwait.<sup>1</sup>

However, the ICM lost seats in the 2008 election, which was held under the new electoral system. After the 2009 election, it retained only one seat despite fielding new candidates. Subsequently, the ICM exhibited an evident decline in its influence and faced uncertainty regarding the future prospects of its leadership and representation. However, in the February 2012 election, it successfully recovered and, with affiliated Islamist members of parliament (MPs), formed a majority against the ruling family–led cabinet, urging revisions to the Constitution and the parliamentary cabinet system. In June 2012, the Constitutional Court ruled that these measures were unconstitutional and ordered the dissolution of parliament. Since that time, the ICM and a number of former MPs have been boycotting electoral polls.

Observers have analysed the ICM from three perspectives. The first focuses on the ICM itself, arguing in terms of the progress of democratisation, wherein the ICM is regarded as an example of a pragmatic and liberalised Islamic party that is succeeding in achieving legitimate participation.<sup>2</sup> The second focuses on the relation between the ICM and the Kuwaiti regime, arguing that it aids in maintaining authoritarianism by acceding to co-optation and divided government rule.<sup>3</sup> The third focuses on external influences, such as the regional influence of political Islamism and the Muslim Brotherhood due to its synchronised wins in elections held soon after the Arab Spring.<sup>4</sup> These three perspectives seem to have some explanatory power. However, they cannot explain the defeat of the

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<sup>1</sup> Nathan J. Brown, “Toward Party Politics?: Kuwait's Islamic Constitutional Movement,” *Carnegie Papers* 79 (2007): 3-20; Paul Salem, “Kuwait: Politics in a Participatory Emirate,” *Carnegie Paper, Carnegie Middle East Center* 3 (2007 June): 1-19; Amr Hamzawy, “Deconstructing Islamist participation,” *Al-Ahram Weekly Online* 885, <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2007/855/op11.htm> (accessed 17 November 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Nathan J. Brown and Amr Hamzawy, *Between Religion and Politics* (Washington D. C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2010); Marina Ottaway and Amr Hamzawy, *Getting to Pluralism: Political Actors in the Arab World* (Washington D. C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Shafeeq N. Ghabra, “Balancing State and Society: The Islamic Movement in Kuwait,” in *Revolutionaries and Reformers: Contemporary Islamist Movements in the Middle East*, ed. Barry Rubin (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 105-123.

<sup>4</sup> Brown and Hamzawy, *Between Religion and Politics*; Eugenio Dacrema, “New Emerging Balances in the Post-Arab Spring: the Muslim Brotherhood and the Gulf Monarchies,” *ISPI Analysis* 155 (2013).

ICM in the 2008 and 2009 elections; nor its recovery in the February 2012 election. What these perspectives seem to lack is a consideration of relations within the opposition and the structural framework of competition, both of which point to pluralism in Kuwait.

The ICM and its parent organisation, the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood, are now rethinking how to participate in parliamentary politics. Considering this situation, this paper aims to explain the causal mechanisms behind the decline and revival of the ICM, focusing on changes in interparty competition. To discuss the effect of the Arab Spring, we need to clarify the factors and parameters that determine the outcome of elections for the ICM.

## **2. Political participation of the Islamic Constitutional Movement**

The Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood, or “Islamic Guidance Society” (*Jama‘iyyat al-Irshad al-Islamiyy*), was established in 1952 by members of the educated urban middle class as a franchise of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood. This later became known as the “Social Reform Society” (*Jama‘iyyat al-Islah al-Ijtima‘iyy*), and in 1963, it was registered with the Ministry of Social Affairs as a social organisation.<sup>5</sup> The Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood has participated in parliamentary elections since the first election was held in 1963, aiming for social Islamisation through the enforcement of Islamic law (*Shari‘ah*). In the 1970s, the Muslim Brotherhood had close ties with the government and clashed with Arab nationalists and communists.<sup>6</sup> During the period of the first dissolution and suspension of parliament (1976–81), a member of the Muslim Brotherhood joined the government as a minister. In the 1981 election, the Muslim Brotherhood’s campaign platform was the revision of Article 2 of the Constitution to enshrine Islamic *Shari‘ah* as the highest source of law. After 1985, the Muslim Brotherhood clashed with the government. During the period of the second dissolution and suspension of parliament (1986–92), the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood participated in the “Constitutional

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<sup>5</sup> Falāḥ ‘Abdullāh al-Mudayris, *Jamā‘at al-Ikhwān al-Muslimīn fī al-Kuwayt*, (al-Kuwayt: Dāral-Qurtās li-al-Nashr 1999).  
Ibid., 12–13.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Abdullāh Abbās Buwayr, *Istijwāb fī al-Ḥukūmāt al-Kuwaitiyyah mundh 1963-2008*, (al-Kuwayt, 2008), 24.

Movement” (*al-Harakah al-Dusturiyyah*) in 1989, demanding the resumption of parliament and of constitutionalism. This campaign was led by the opposition leader and former speaker, Ahmad al-Sadoun, who supported a collegial system of factions and the formation of a government through the legislature.<sup>7</sup>

Members of the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood established the ICM as part of this system after the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in March 1991. The ICM entered the arena ready for factional politics, and with an eye towards party politics. It focused on political activity and aimed at achieving social Islamisation by enforcing *Shari‘ah* law, all accomplished through the parliamentary system of the current Constitution and regime. The ICM emphasised consensus building with other factions and respect for the Constitution and the legislature. It has been characterised as a political party in terms of its rules and structure. For example, a committee of eight has final approval over membership; internal committees correspond to parliamentary committees; and there are restrictions regarding party debates about votes. Well organised, the ICM has broad but shallow support across the whole country. It has been penetrating organisations such as labour unions, co-op societies and student unions and recruiting members from these organisations.

The ICM’s actual activities in parliament have been characterised by some opposition members as political betrayal. It cooperated with the government and accepted two ministerial seats in the cabinet at the beginning of the 1992 parliament. Soon after, however, the ICM clashed with the government over issues that included the revision of Article 2 of the Constitution, sex segregation at Kuwait University, women’s suffrage and political reform. The ICM held a leading position in the opposition, actively clashing with the government on many policies. During the 1999–2003 parliamentary term, the ICM led a nascent Islamic bloc, while simultaneously accepting a ministerial seat for a member who was not elected as an MP. Subsequently, leadership of the opposition and the Islamic bloc gradually shifted to prominent independents aligned with the Salafi Movement, who

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<sup>7</sup> Mary Ann Tétreault, *Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

were closely associated with their own clans and tribes. At the end of the 2003–2006 parliamentary term, the ICM enthusiastically supported electoral reform and joined “Bloc 29”, a coalition opposition bloc. However, Ismael al-Shatti, a member of the ICM, but not an MP, accepted the position of Minister of Communication. He was appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of State for Affairs of the Council after the 2006 election. This prompted a split within the membership, with the ICM declaring that he was not its representative in the cabinet. The ICM responded the same way when Mohammad al-Olaim, a member, but not an MP, was jointly appointed the Minister of Electricity and Water and the Minister of Oil in March 2007. During the 2006–2008 parliamentary term, clashes between the government and the opposition reached a climax. Therefore, the ICM aroused mistrust both among members of the opposition and voters.

It is usually understood in the Kuwaiti political context that the ICM was defeated in the elections of 2008 and 2009 because of indecisiveness. However, this view reflects a superficial understanding. We need to explore the structural factors beneath the surface to truly understand these events.

### **3. The structure of interparty competition**

The Kuwaiti party system was quasi-institutionalised at the level of parliamentary blocs from 1999 to 2008. This party system is characterised by a three-level nested structure. The first level is the government and the opposition, the second level is political orientation (*tayyār siyāsyy*) within transformed parliamentary bloc (*kutlat al-barlamāniyya*) and the third level is political association (*tajammu‘ siyāsyy*) of sect (*tā’ifah*), clan (*ā’ilah*) and tribe (*qabīlah*).

The concept of a quasi-institutionalised party system considers a parliamentary bloc as a component of the party system. Although political parties have no legal status in Kuwait, they do have political associations. Some of them, such as the ICM, act as de facto parties in local contexts. However, these political associations hold few seats in parliament and are not appropriate units of analysis for a party system. By contrast, parliamentarians have enhanced their cohesion according to their political orientations. Since the Assembly of

1999, there have been three opposition blocs. These are: the Liberal group, later renamed the National Action Bloc (NAB) by secular liberals from urban areas; the Popular Action Bloc (PAB) formed by populists from newly developed areas; and the Islamic Bloc (ISB). Except for independent loyalist MPs, who are called ‘service deputies’, most MPs belong to blocs. We can find some characteristics of parliamentary parties in these blocs.

We follow Giovanni Sartori’s brief definition of ‘party’ and ‘party system’.<sup>8</sup> However, we would like to examine the concepts of party system institutionalisation and the quasi-institutionalised party system. According to Mainwaring and Scully, party system institutionalisation satisfies four conditions. First, it ensures the stability of rules and regularity in patterns of inter-party competition, as measured by Pedersen’s index of electoral volatility. Second, the major parties must have somewhat stable roots in society. Third, the major political actors accord legitimacy to the electoral process, and to parties. Fourth, in party organisation matters, political elites are loyal to their parties and party discipline in the legislature is reasonably strong.<sup>9</sup>

Gwiazda categorises quasi-institutionalised party systems based on Mainwaring and Scully’s four conditions in order to elucidate examples of post-communist countries. She identifies three criteria: ‘stability of inter-party competition’, ‘high party discipline’, and ‘structural stability’, and then defines a quasi-institutionalised party system as one that ‘displays medium to high levels of institutionalization with regard to each criterion’.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, here we use indicators such as Pedersen’s index for Laakso’s and Taagepera’s effective number of parties and Rae’s fragmentation index.<sup>11</sup> Examining the case of Kuwait, we add the linkage between party and society because of its importance in this context.

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<sup>8</sup> Giovanni Sartori, *Parties and Party Systems: a Framework for Analysis*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 44.

<sup>9</sup> S. Mainwaring and T. R. Scully eds., *Building Democratic Institutions: Party System in Latin America*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Anna Gwiazda, “Poland’s Quasi-Institutionalized Party System: the Importance of Elites and Institutions,” *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 10/3 (2009): 353.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 354; M. Laakso and R. Taagepera, “Effective number of parties: A measure with application to Western Europe,” *Comparative Political Studies* 12, (1979), 3-8; D. Rae, *The Political Consequences of Electoral Laws*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 53.

It is useful to examine the Kuwaiti party system at the second level. The ICM and other prominent political associations in Kuwait are sometimes regarded as quasi-parties. We agree with this view, but treat them, here, as substantial organisations, because the associations are micro-parties comprising all MPs who belong to an association smaller than the sum of independents. From 1999 to 2008, interparty competition was stable among the parliamentary blocs, which exist at the second level, but the number of votes changed inside the ISB. We can see this shift among the ICM and other associations and independents. This shows us that the Kuwaiti party system can be explained by analysing the second level (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Laakso and Taagepera Index (LTI) based on seats of independents who support the government as one bloc

1999	6.63 (3.75)
2003	8.90 (3.89)
2006	4.27

Figure 2: Number of votes for each bloc

	1999	2003	2006	2006*
Islamic Bloc	50,898	51,358	112,948	48,228
PAB	19,802	19,743	32,029	13,676
LG/NAB	13,596	13,752	33,737	14,405
Independent Bloc	-	-	52,718	22,529
Voters	112,882	136,715	340,248**	
Turnout	81%	81%	67%	

\* Referential numbers of male votes derived from the male to female ratio (m:f = 1:1.34)

\*\* Female suffrage enacted.

Figure 3: Percentage of seats (left column) and votes (right column)

	1999		2003		2006		Average	
Islamic Bloc	28.0	55.9	28.0	46.5	34.0	49.5	30.0	50.6
PAB	20.0	21.7	12.0	17.9	16.0	14.0	16.0	17.9
LG/NAB	18.0	14.9	12.0	12.3	16.0	14.8	15.3	14.0
Independent Bloc					26.0	23.1		

Figure 4: Proportionate number of votes within the Islamic bloc

	1999	2003	2006	2008
ICM	19,907	15,940	19,154	28,220
SIA	8,591	14,121	33,386	36,872
Salafi Movement	759	2,315	2,840	
Independent	21,641	18,982	57,568	
Total	50,898	51,358	112,948	

Analysing the competition among parliamentary blocs, we see that each bloc has maintained a stable number of votes (see Figure 2). This implies that every bloc has a stable support base. Secular liberals (LG), renamed NAB in 2006, and populists (PAB) have core constituencies on the basis of their strong personalities within specific non-overlapping districts (*munṭaqah*). The ISB competes with NAB and PAB in urban districts, and with tribal representatives, who support the government, in outlying districts. Compared with other blocs, the ISB shows a significant gap between the percentage of seats won and the percentage of votes received (see Figure 3). This means that they have few seats relative to their share of votes, which is almost half of the votes nationwide.

Inside the ISB, only ICM shows no change. However, the Salafi Islamic Alliance (SIA), which is more dogmatic and radical, has been receiving an increasing number of votes (see Figure 4). Remarkably, the ICM won a record six seats in the 2006 election, although the actual number of votes was the same as in 1999, despite women obtaining suffrage and voting for the first time in this election. The ICM did well, electorally, in cooperation with others and pared down its number of candidates in the 2006 election. This implies

that the ICM has cooperated effectively with other Islamist groups. MPs belonging to the ICM mainly come from outlying tribal districts, because in urban districts the ICM is losing in competition with Salafists (SIA and Salafi Movement). As previously mentioned, the ISB receives many ineffectual popular votes. It seems that this is a cause of the ICM's weakness in urban areas. Therefore, the ICM supported electoral reforms that would reduce the number of wasted votes by merging electoral districts.

#### **4. The effects of the electoral reforms in 2006**

The electoral reforms of 2006 redrew Kuwait's electoral districts and cut the number from 25 to 5. The 25 districts of the old system were the result of gerrymandering implemented by royal order to ensure a majority for tribal representatives, who supported the government in 1980 during the first dissolution and suspension of parliament. Under the old system, every district had two seats and voters chose two candidates. This caused a disparity in the relative importance of single votes and encouraged vote buying in some districts. Opposition MPs criticised this situation and supported electoral reforms to reduce the vote-value disparity, vote buying and corruption, and influence peddling in small districts. Opposition MPs won electoral reforms after a difficult political contest during the first half of 2006.

In the new five-district system, every district has ten seats and each voter chooses four candidates. This system requires organisational strength, financial ability, or public popularity to win a seat. The ICM supported the new system enthusiastically, attempting to organise and transform the ISB into a parliamentary party, and to prepare a bill to legalise the party in accordance with the new system, thereby aiming for a large proportional representation system in the future. At the time, it seemed that the new system would favour the ICM because it was well-organised and had broad though shallow support throughout the country.

Contrary to the expectations of observers and the ICM, the ISB was disorganised from the start because of the political activities of tribes pursuing their own interests and organisational modes. MPs who came from tribal districts organised themselves

according to tribal lineages. Each tribe formed an electoral list composed of four members and competed according to these lists. This system made it difficult for the ICM to obtain seats in tribal districts. The background factors behind the disarray were as follows. First, the large constituency system increased the value of the proportional vote, which increased the number of viable parties. Second, the incentives for Islamist MPs to unite within one bloc no longer existed. Islamist parties had lost many elements of their common agenda, such as their objections to suffrage for women and political reform. The parties agree on social Islamisation, but they disagree on the path to it. The loss of a common agenda highlights the difference between economic policies that benefit urban areas and those that benefit peripheral tribal areas. This difference is also a basis for social division in Kuwait between urban and peripheral tribal areas. MPs from peripheral constituencies resisted the leadership of urban MPs. Additionally, the ICM's indecisiveness about supporting the government made it difficult for them to cooperate with other parties during the 2008 and 2009 elections.

So far, we have seen that the outcome of the election for the ICM was determined by structural factors of inter-party competition. The ICM's position was weak in electoral competitions for urban districts before electoral reforms took place in 2006, despite its origins in the urban middle class (see Figure 5). Candidates from the ICM have competed with those of many groups: not only secular-liberal and populist candidates, but also candidates from other Islamist groups such as the Islamic Salafi Alliance within the ISB (see Figure 6). Although its MPs mostly came from peripheral tribal districts, the ICM faced difficulty in obtaining support from tribal clans after the 2006 electoral reforms.

In contrast to earlier years, the February 2012 election saw the revival of the ICM. Remarkably, the ICM won seats in urban districts, mainly because it succeeded in forming an opposition coalition and coordinating candidates and votes. Of course, the government corruption scandal and resulting public demonstrations spurred the opposition to include the ICM, but the basic structure of interparty competition did not change much before the February 2012 election. The election results indicate that the ICM adapted well in reforming its strategies and structure. From what has been mentioned above, we can tentatively conclude that a determining factor in the outcome of an election for the ICM

is whether it can form a coalition among opposition candidates and coordinate both candidates and votes.

Figure 5: ICM candidates and winners from urban and tribal constituencies

Election	Candidates (urban /tribal)	Winners (urban/tribal)
1992	10 (5/5)	4 (2/2)
1996	12 (6/6)	5 (1/3)
1999	12 (6/6)	4 (1/3)
2003	11 (7/4)	2 (1/1)
2006	6 (2/4)	6 (2/4)

Figure 6: Competing ICM and Salafis (SIA and Salafi Movement) constituencies

Election	Competing constituency urban/tribal	Result for the ICM: win/lose
1992	2/0	0/2
1996	2/1	1/2 (1win from tribal)
1999	3/0	0/3
2003	3/1	1/3 (1win from tribal)
2006	0/0	

## 5. Strategic adaptation and the impact of the Arab spring

As a result of the elections in 2008 and 2009 after the electoral reforms, the ICM lost its seats and influence in parliament. Its defeat in the elections was a turning point for the ICM. Since ex-MP Nasser al-Sane assumed the position of secretary-general in 2009, the

ICM seems to have undertaken a comprehensive review and restructuring of its strategy. It stepped back and refrained from taking up a leadership role among the Islamist MPs. During the Assembly of 2009, three prominent independent Islamist MPs, who represented their tribes and were at the forefront of the opposition, unified and established the Development and Reform Bloc (DRB). The ICM became a subsidiary of DRB and was committed to supporting it. This means they took a more clearly adversarial stand against the government. This strategic change helped the ICM to take back seats in the election held in February 2012. They rode a wave of popularity based on the prominence of DRB members and public opinion during the Arab Spring. After the election, all of the elected members of the ICM joined the DRB.

This strategic change and clearly adversarial stand against the government on the part of the ICM has been ongoing. During the Assembly of February 2012, when the opposition occupied a two-third majority, they called for amendments to the Constitution to limit the power of the ruling family and to enhance Islamic principles. The Assembly was dissolved by the order of the Constitutional Court which declared the election invalid. The emir then called a fresh election but ordered a change in the electoral law. The opposition, including the ICM and DRB, reacted sharply to these processes and decided to boycott the elections. They signed a pact among themselves to continue to boycott elections. The government has increased oppression of the opposition, especially the populists. While the ICM has avoided direct oppression, it has been forced to keep a low profile.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper has focused on the structural changes and collapse of bloc-based cooperation, triggered by the negative impacts of the electoral system. The lessons drawn from the consequences of electoral reform reveal the dilemma of institutionalisation: between a lack of reliability and the necessity for parliamentary life. The more the opposition remained in sharp conflict with the government, however, the more cohesive it became, re-forming parliamentary blocs during the Assembly of 2009. PAB was renewed and DRB was formed by prominent independent tribal Islamist MPs. The ICM joined after the

February 2012 election. This initiative by Islamist MPs to re-unify signified a changeover.

In the case of Kuwait, while the activities of the local organisation of the Muslim Brotherhood were allowed, they were subject to indignities or forced to keep a low profile to survive. Political participation of the ICM in Kuwait seemed to offer a successful example of the Muslim Brotherhoods' political participation before the time of the Arab Spring. However, they have now failed and withdrawn from the political process. They claim that they will return if the emir agrees to form a government of elected members in the parliament. However, they have no way of getting back to where they were before.

\*This work is based on the research findings of IDE-JETRO research project in FY2013-2014 entitled "The Society of the Muslim Brothers and International Linkage of Islamic Movements."