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Kuwait Islamists: From Institutionalized to Informal Opposition

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Abstract

This article analyses the evolution of the Islamist political associations and groups, both Shiites and Sunnis since the independence of Kuwait in 1962 to the last legislative elections which was held in 2016. It tries to assess the roles which the Islamist groups played in a relatively open political environment established by the constitution and the popular support these groups obtained along the interrupted electoral history in which the country witnessed.

It also assesses the transformations which the Sunni Islamist groups suffered from the institutionalized opposition role they played until the Arab Spring events to the more informal opposition style since then.

The article concludes by stating that this transformation negatively affected the popular support granted to the Islamists and hindered their influence in the policy making process in Kuwait, losing the opportunity that the Arab Spring uprisings provided for them.

Keywords

Kuwait, Islamists Group, Informal Opposition

Introduction

In Kuwait, while political parties are not legal, political associations are permitted to participate in elections and also to form parliamentary groups. Islamist associations have been present in Kuwaiti politics even before the official creation of the Emirate and the promulgation of the constitution in 1962. Moreover, since the reestablishment of the al Sabah rule after the

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liberation from Iraq in 1992, there has always been representation of Islamists in the National Assembly, which is the most influential and representative among the GCC states. The most active Islamist associations have been the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM) – the Kuwaiti branch of the Muslim Brotherhood - the Salafi Islamic Alliance (SIA) and the Shia National Islamic Alliance (NIA). The three groups have pivoted back and forth between opposition and pro-governmental positions throughout history, but the two Sunni associations have become visibly opposed to the Sabah government since 2006, while the Shia group has become clearly pro-government. The opposition, together with tribal resistance to the implementation of some governmental policies, generated an almost permanent deadlock between the government and the legislature. The National Assembly was dissolved seven times between 2006 and 2016, following controversial electoral reforms and judicial resolutions that seemed to have served the government's interests and reform agenda. While the ICM and Salafists, joint together in the 'Islamic bloc', have held an average 10-12 seats in the assemblies elected between 1992 and 2009, this figure reached 23-25 after the February 2012 election, providing this assembly with the strongest Islamist presence ever, and certainly representing a challenge to the government. The dissolution of this assembly and the call for two consecutive elections in December 2012 and July 2013 – amidst massive street demonstrations somehow fueled by the Arab Spring- caused both groups to boycott the electoral processes and to change their opposition strategies toward the government, moving to an open confrontation that ended with several former members of the assembly in jail, such as the prominent and controversial Musalam al Barrak, who stands accused of having insulted the Amir.[1] These two elections were also held amidst the regional turmoil provoked by the victory and fall of Mohamad Morsi in Egypt and the Syrian war, that influenced to some extent the Kuwaiti Islamists political behavior, moreover since the neighboring countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and United Arab Emirates took direct measures banning MB or Salafist groups activities.

Unexpectedly, the electoral boycott of the Kuwaiti Islamists came to an end

in the November 2016 elections, proving another change in the political strategy of Islamist associations that seemed to be aimed at recovering popular support through electoral means.

This article will focus on the strategies implemented by the Islamist associations in order to increase/preserve their presence within the National Assembly. It will identify the strategic changes that occurred mainly since, and as a consequence of the Arab Spring within the Islamist camp in order to capitalize the social discontent without endangering the regime survival, and avoiding being outlawed by the government, as it happened in neighboring GCC states. It will also highlight how the regional context affected the local developments.

Islamists associations and politics in Kuwaiti context

The Article 4 of the 1962 Constitution (reinstated in 1992), established that the Kuwaiti political system is an "hereditary Emirate held in succession in the descendants of the Mubarak al Sabah." It also states that the appointment of the Heir Apparent should be done with the consenting majority of a National Assembly,[2] elected by universal suffrage.[3] Elections were held since 1963, although barely in regular periods since the assembly was dissolved in numerous occasions and anticipated elections were called. There is no specific law governing the formation of political parties or political associations to participate in the electoral processes. The constitution specifically states 'associations'[4] rather than 'organizations', allowing for further interpretation that may permit the eventual legalization of political parties.[5] This is a common debate in *diwaniyas* and the written press, and among its stronger advocates is the Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM) group. Yet, there has not been any formal discussion at parliamentary level. Unlike other countries, the Kuwaiti law does not state any constraint on the religious character of the associations. The lack of proper party legislation did not, however, prevent the appearance of associations that behaved as '*de facto*' parties, taking part very actively in the parliamentary and electoral life of the country, and in some cases, organizing themselves, and electing their candidates, as organized parties, such as the

ICM. Some also included the term 'party' in their definition like the Salafi *Ummah* Party *(Hizb al Ummah)*. These '*de facto*' parties represent the key political tendencies in the country, Nationalism/Liberalism, Populism, Sunni Islamism and Shia Islamism. The development of all these political tendencies during the first half of the twentieth century was possible due to Arab migrants, mainly from Egypt and Palestine, who came to the Emirate, and fostered by the liberal policies implemented by Sheikh Abdullah al Salem al Sabah.[6] Most of the political trends that existed in newly established Arab regimes, including the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, opened their branches in Kuwait. The same is applicable to the Islamist groups during the second half of the century. Following the decline of Arab nationalist and leftist parties, as a consequence of the Arab defeat in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, and the geopolitical shifts that occurred after the Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, Shia Islamist and Sunni Salafi movements were able to take root, penetrating the Kuwait's economic and political elite.[7]

For this author Islamism is defined as a political movement that favors reordering government and society in accordance with laws prescribed by Islam. All the associations mentioned in the article falls under this definition despite the tools and mechanisms used to achieve their programmatic goals.

The Islamist associations before the Arab Spring

The best organized and most recognized political association in Kuwait is the Muslim Brotherhood-MB (*Jama'at al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin*), established unofficially in 1947 as the first Islamist group in Kuwait, after Abdul Aziz Ali al Mutawa met Hassan al Banna in Mecca and formed the first local cell. The formal creation of the branch came several years later, in 1952, with the registration of the Islamic Guidance Society (*Jamiyat al Irshad al Islamiya*), which pledged to spread Islamic culture among the new generations of Kuwaitis.[8] The Kuwaiti branch was heavily influenced by its Egyptian counterpart until the 1980s, including in its organizational efforts and networking activities. Egyptian teachers and other officials sought refuge in Kuwait when Nasser started to take action against the organization after 1954,

thereby spreading their ideology in the emirate.[9] Despite their increasing presence in Kuwaiti society, the MB failed to obtain a seat in the first legislative elections held in 1963, in which they presented four candidates. In the following two elections, in 1967 and 1981, their sole candidate got elected, but it was only in 1985 when the MB started to obtain a bigger representation in the National Assembly by gaining four seats from the nine candidates that ran under the MB banner.

In 1989, the Constitutional Movement (CM) was established bringing together all political groups that believed in the Kuwaiti Constitution as the legal system of legislation and governance, including the MB. The MB did not participate in any protests or rallies during this period so as not to upset the government, showing their strategy of political engagement with the current institutional system rather than a more rejectionist or radical reformist approach. Moreover, during the Iraqi occupation, Brotherhood members were very active in organizing civil resistance and supplying assistance to citizens, showing their support to the ruling elite who were exiled during the occupation, and obtained recognition for their actions.

After the liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation in 1991 the MB established the Islamic Constitutional Movement-ICM (*Al Haraka al-Dustoria al-Islamiya*), or HADAS, following the Arabic acronym. The ICM became the political wing of the MB to take part in the renewed National Assembly, although it also included non-MB members.[10] Although the MB did not disappeared as an organization, the use of ICM acronym represented the breakup with the main Egyptian branch, due to the lack of direct support to the Kuwaiti cause during the occupation. It also served to eliminate the uneasy name (*Ikhwan*) that recalled the Saudi Wahhabist group and its attempts to conquer the emirate in the 1920s.

Initially, the ICM focused on a more 'religious' agenda, stressing the need to adapt the legislation to Shari'a, and to protect the Islamic character of Kuwaiti society. In this regard, they concentrated their efforts in amending Article 2 of the Constitution and pushing for a more conservative agenda at the social level. The article states that "the Islamic Shari'a shall be *a* main source of

legislation." The ICM, as well as the Salafis, wanted that sentence to be amended as "the Islamic Shari'a shall be *the* main source of legislation." After failing to get this amendment approved due to the lack of parliamentary support, and also realizing that too much emphasis on this would risk votes in further electoral contests and would also reduce the chances of the opposition imposing their agenda on the government, the ICM changed its strategy. By 2009 they focused their attention on Article 79 of the Constitution,[11] asking for the inclusion of a clause prohibiting any law violating Shari'a.[12] In that same year the MP Hayef Al-Mutairi requested the amendment of the article but he failed in getting enough support in the chamber.[13]

The change in the ICM agenda was linked to their participation in the assembly by his president, Dr. Badr al Nashi, in an interview in August 2008, when he stated:

> "I also believe that participating in the legislature has increased ICM interest in issues of political reform and development. Previously we focused more on general issues of morality and societal reform, but now we focus on specific issues such as educational reform, employment, the economy, and political issues such as electoral redistricting and reforming laws on publications and political parties."[14]

Thus, the ICM moved its priority to the consolidation of an opposition bloc, trying to negotiate between Salafists and Shi'a Islamists common proposals, criticizing governmental corruption and demanding more democratic reforms, such as having a Prime Minister elected by the National Assembly, a single electoral district to eliminate electoral gerrymandering and the legalization of political parties.[15] In electoral terms, the ICM has had an agreement with the ISA to support their candidates in each district while the 'four-votes rule' was still possible. With the transformation to the 'one man-one vote' rule in 2012, the trans-Islamist support came to an end. However, these tactics were not always successful, due to the difficulties for both associations –Salafists and Shi'a Islamists- in overcoming their sectarian differences. While this strategy benefited ICM's image as an 'opposition' group, making it the most powerful

and consolidated group in programmatic and organizational terms, the change towards a more democratic and institutionalist strategy made them a 'normal political actor', integrated in the institutional political life and using the democratic tools provided by the system. As Nathan Brown concluded in 2008, the ICM leaders felt that they had "become more democratic than the political system in which they operate –and perhaps more than Kuwaiti society is ready for."[16] For some Kuwaitis, this change in the priorities, from religious ideological principles to institutional ones, converted the ICM into an 'establishment' party, rather than a group that advocated a reform of state and society. The fact that Ismail al Shatti, prominent figure of the ICM had been appointed Ministry of Communications in January 2006, may be an example of that. This may explain to some extent the inconsistent amount of seats the group obtained since 2008. While in 2006 they obtained the maximum number of seats in relation with the candidates nominated, six out of six, they were only able to obtain three out of eight in 2008, one out of six in 2009 and four out of five in February 2012.

The second most important Islamist political group in Kuwaiti politics is the Salafis. Unlike the ICM, the Salafists have been unable to consolidate into a single grouping, being divided into several branches. The first is the Salafi Group (SG) (*Al-Jama'ah al-Salaifah*) established in the mid-1960s as an extension of the Wahhabi movement with prominent figures such as Nashmi al-Nashmi, Mosaa'd al Abdul Jader and Khalid al Khadir. Similar to other political groups at that time, Arab immigrants contributed to the organization of the SG, one of them being Sheikh Abdul Rahman Abdul Khaliq, a Palestinian-Egyptian religious scholar residing in Saudi Arabia. The SG engaged in fierce competition with other religious groups (such as the MB-ICM) in Kuwait. As opposed to the ICM, the organizational structure of the group is not public, and names and identities of leaders remain anonymous. There is a Shura Council that acts as a supreme command and is responsible for the creation of group's policies. The SG membership is restricted to those who regularly attend lectures and camps. The SG aims to create an Islamic state through legitimate channels including constitutional methods and without violent means.[17]

Following Abdul Khaliq ideals, the Salafists created the *Society for the Revival of the Islamic Heritage* (RIHS) in 1981, with the support of the state and wealthy Kuwaiti merchants who adopted the Salafi ideology. The RIHS served as an umbrella for political activities that included, apart from proselytism in mosques and *diwaniyas*, the presence in labor and student unions, where SG competed with MB activists.[18] In the same year, the SG became the first Salafi political group in the Islamic world to nominate candidates for parliamentary elections.[19] In the context of a strong Saudi influence, this Salafi trend, and the lack of interest in political and electoral involvement in their activists, was a demonstration of how different the political strategies were within the Kuwaiti institutional framework, where Islamist groups were able to actively participate in social and political activities without constraint. Since the creation of the SG, Salafist activists were aware of the influence that electoral engagement would have on the governmental decisions to Islamize the Kuwaiti society. In that 1981 election, the two candidates nominated by the SG, Jassim al 'Oun and Khalid al Sultan, won their seats.[20]

The Iraqi occupation and further liberation also had a significant effect on the Salafists. As a result of an internal debate on their position towards the presence of American troops in the Arabian Peninsula, as well as obedience to the rulers, the Kuwaiti SG split into two different groups. A 'purist' branch split from the SG and gathered those who believed in the necessity of absolute obedience to the ruler, focusing on the "minute details of belief and worship".[21] This group, Salafi Islamic Alliance-SIA (*Al Tajammu al Salafi al Islami*), participated in the 1992 elections for the first time and placed three out of eight candidates in the elected chamber. In that legislative term, the SIA proposed a law for the establishment of Public Authority for Propagation of Virtue and Prevention of Vice that faced strong criticism from liberal and Shi'a groups. While SIA MPs eventually withdrew the draft law, they succeeded in the adaptation of certain religious laws, such as preventing co-education in public schools, and also continued to push hard for the implementation of their religious agenda.[22]

In 1996, an 'activist' trend that split from the SG emerged from within the

educated Islamist Bedouin population, and formulated a modern party program calling for a "thorough constitutional reform in the direction of a popularly elected government, free party formation and peaceful rotation of power between competing political tendencies."[23] These Salafi activists, calling themselves Salafi Movement-SM (*Al-Harakah al-Salafiah*), were followers of Abdul Rahman, who seceded from the RIHS in 1997. The most important figure among the young generation of Kuwaiti activists was Hakim al Mutairi, who studied in Mecca during the Iraqi occupation and returned and remained within RIHS establishing a *haraki* platform. He later left this group and contributed to the creation of, and led, the SM.

The SM was very active against the alliance with the United States and advocated for a reform of the political system, including for the appointment of a Prime Minister by the elected parliament instead for the Amir.[24] Walid Tabtabai, an outspoken member of the assembly, is considered to have close ties with the SM, although he does not officially belong to the group. The SM never developed a sophisticated institutional structure, but they managed to place their candidates in the chamber in all elections between 1996 and 2006, although their representation was always very low- one MP- with the exception of 2006 when they held two seats. Perhaps because of this failure in attracting popular support, one of the key figures of the SM, Hakim al Mutairi, decided to leave the SM to create a new group with the aim of becoming a well-structured and organized Islamist party. In 2005, Mutairi created the Ummah Party-UP (*Hizb al Umma*), which was the "was the first political group in Kuwait unequivocally to call for the sovereignty of the people as expressed in the power of the national assembly to decide who should form the government."[25] While maintaining an Islamic agenda –the UP advocated for the establishment of Islamic State and the implementation of Sharia in all aspects of life, ending foreign military presence in the Gulf. The UM also supported the Kuwaitis' right to choose and supervise the government, as well as the right to create formal political parties within a multi-party political system, and supported women's political rights- in contrast to the positions of the purists Salafists or even ICM members. These political positions seemed to be oriented toward

preventing the electoral failure of the recently created organization. The UP did not participate in the 2006 elections due to their belief that the electoral process was corrupt, but participated in the 2008 elections, yet failed to get any of their candidates elected.[26]

Despite the differences that provoked the division within the Salafist camp, the members of the different groups, as well as independent Salafists that did not belong to these groups, managed to participate in the diverse Islamic blocs that were created in order to push for an Islamic-oriented legislative agenda. For example, during the 2003-2006 legislative term, the SIA MPs Faisal al Muslim, Ahmad Baqer and Fahd Saleh Nasser, together with the SM MP Waleed al Tabtabai, and the independent Salafists, Abdullah Akash and Awad Barad, joined the 'Islamic bloc' led by the ICM, and voted for the reform of the electoral law within the '29 bloc'. They also voted together against granting women's political rights, with the exception of Barad. Their collaboration also extended to some petitions signed to question the Prime Minister in 2008 and 2009.

The Shi'a Islamists, who represent around 15 percent of the Kuwaiti population, were significantly affected by the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979. While some groups officially followed the teachings and leadership of the Republic's founder, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and his successor, Ali Khamenei, facing strong rejection and criticism within the Kuwaiti society, they had to reaffirm their loyalty to the Sabah ruling family and Kuwait by showing an absolute pro-government position within the National Assembly. The Shi'a Islamists organized mainly around the National Islamic Alliance-NIA (*Al-Tahaluf al-Islami al-Watani*) and the Justice and Peace Assembly-JPA (*Tajammu al Adala wa al Salam*). The NIA was created in 1998 as an alternative to a previously existing group, the Islamic National Coalition-INC, which appeared after the liberation of Kuwait and had participated in the 1992 elections, obtaining at least one seat.[27] This group had been previously the Hezbollah of Kuwait, created in the 1980s following the Islamic Republic rhetoric. Thus, members of NIA follow the Iranian leader Ali Khamenei.[28] This ideological cleavage did not prevent the strong support provided by NIA to the

Sabah ruling family during the Iraqi occupation, and the collaboration on specific issues and governmental policies. Although some Shi'a Islamists supported the electoral reform in 2005 that reduced the electoral districts from twenty-five to five and were very active in the so called 'Orange movement' in 2006, the NIA remained broadly supportive of the ruling family.

Justice and Peace, a group composed by followers of the Ayatollah Sadiq al Shirazi, was active in Kuwait since the 1970s with a clear pro-governmental position, that granted them the reputation of being the 'yes men' within the parliament.[29] The JPA had a very low representation in the assembly, just one seat in the 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012 and 2013 elections.

The Kuwaiti Islamist Associations after the Arab Spring

When the Arab Spring erupted in Tunisia in November 2010 making the whole Arab world to tremble, with thousands of people, mainly youngsters, demanding for change in the streets, the ICM, along with other opposition groups, were already engaged in an agenda focused on institutional reform and fight against corruption. Earlier in the Spring of 2006, a movement demanding an electoral reform demonstrated in the streets of Kuwait wearing Orange t-shirts.[30] The movement translated into the 'Bloc 29' within the National Assembly, referring to the 29 MPs that voted for the electoral reform. This previous experience can explain, on one hand, why the most violent protests took place only one year later on 17 November 2011 when the National Assembly was stormed by protesters, after corruption accusations formulated against at least 16 MPs because of irregular multimillion dinar deposits in their banks accounts. On the other hand, it can also explain why, despite that event and the following demonstrations and repression, neither the demonstrators nor any political group demanded for regime change nor the Emir's resignation, but just the government resignation. Following the storming of the assembly the Prime Minister Nasser al Sabah and his cabinet resigned, forcing the dissolution of the legislative chamber on the 7th December and anticipated elections by 2 February 2012. The experiences of May 2006 and November 2011 somehow proved that the combination between public demonstrations and

coordination between political groups contributed to get the popular demands fulfilled without endangering the regime stability.

The Islamist groups were able to capitalize the spontaneous demonstrations and popular unrest to obtain electoral gains. The tone of the whole electoral campaign and debates in January 2012 was very aggressive. Tension was evident when the campaign tent of Mohamad al-Juwaihal, a pro-governmental candidate, was burned by members of the al Mutairi tribe, who felt insulted by him.[31] The al Watan television was also stormed by tribal supporters while a candidate, Nabeel Al Fadhl, was being interviewed.[32] Massive rallies were held in numerous tents, mainly key figures such as Musalam al Barrak, where strong anti-governmental speeches and slogans were proclaimed.[33]

The results of the polls showed an increase of the ICM presence in the assembly with four elected members, Osama Issa Majed Saleh, Jamaan Herbish, Hamad al-Matr and Mohamad Hussein. Faysal al Yahia, Mohammad Dalal and Falah al-Sawag al-Azami and Khalid Shajir al-Mutairi were considered closed to the ICM as well, although they did not run under their banner officially.[34] This relative victory encouraged the ICM, jointly with the Salafists and independent Islamists, to create the 20-member 'Islamic bloc'. Together with other tribal members and MPs from the Popular Action Bloc,[35] the 'majority bloc' formed the most oppositional parliament since the establishment of the emirate, with 35 members.[36] With that majority, the Islamist MPs were able to force some decisions from their own religious agenda, such as passing a law imposing the death penalty for blasphemy and insulting the prophet.[37] In this case the Shi'a Islamists voted against the law, since their request of including the penalty for insulting the twelve Imams in the bill was not accepted.[38] The Sunni Islamists felt strong enough to follow their own reformist agenda, without compromising with non-Sunni allies with which they might agree upon other issues such as institutional reform and fight against corruption or Islamizing the society.

Following a temporary suspension of the assembly in June, and after the February 2012 elections being declared unconstitutional by the Supreme Court, the 2009 parliament was reinstated amidst an increasing popular discontent and

a legal battle between the government, the MPs and the Constitutional Court. Finally, the reinstated assembly was dissolved by the government in October, calling for new elections by December 2012 with an amended electoral law. As a result, the ICM, jointly with most of the country's opposition groups (the Islamic Salafi Alliance; Islamic Ommah Party; Popular Action Bloc; The National Action Bloc; The Democratic Forum and the Bedouin tribes Awazem and Ajmans) decided to boycott those and July 2013 elections, declaring them unconstitutional.[39] The ICM and some other groups went to the streets to protest against the governmental policies, with dozens of protesters sent to jail after security forces intervened to dissolve the demonstrations. During that period, the ICM seemed to have moved towards a more confrontational strategy against the government, literally taking the street with massive protests along October and November 2012. The most important demonstration took place on 15th October, when Musalam al Barrak warned the Amir about driving Kuwait into the abyss of autocracy. The slogan 'We will not allow you' then became the symbol of this delayed Kuwaiti Arab Spring during the demonstrations that took place for several months.[40] As a result of this, a court sentenced in February 2013 three former MPs – Falah al-Sawwagh; Bader al-Dahoun (Islamists), and Khaled al-Tahous (Popular Action Bloc)- to jail terms for insulting the Amir, in addition to the prosecution of Musalam al Barrak on the same charges. Later, in January 2015, an ICM member, Mubarak al Duwaila, was also detained for charges against security of the state.

At this point, the presidential victory and mandate of the Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammad Morsi in Egypt became an influential factor in the regional politics, mainly affecting the intra-GCC relations. Even though the ICM and the KMB had cut their ties with the Egyptian branch in the 1990s, the ascension and fall of the Brotherhood in barely one year –June 2012 to July 2013, and the following declaration of the MB as a terrorist organization by Saudi Arabia, undoubtedly affected the ICM and the KMB relation with the government and other political forces.

By September 2012 an effort to unify the opposition failed in attracting the Salafists to the National Front to Protect the Constitution, formed by the ICM

and the Popular bloc.[41] In November 2012 some pro-government MPs, such as Nabil al Fadhl had launched campaign with the slogan "Loyalty to the homeland, enmity to the Brotherhood" to discredit those protesters linked to the brotherhood, and accusing them of looking to replicate the Morsi's model for Kuwait.[42] The ICM positioned themselves strongly criticizing the coup against Morsi in July 2013 and the Kuwaiti government support to the military in Egypt.[43] Under a crossfire and without parliamentarian presence due to the electoral boycott the ICM started to become isolated from positions of influence and also from the Kuwaiti society.

The designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization by Saudi Arabia government on 7th March 2014,[44] jointly with diplomatic rift within the GCC on the Internal Security Agreement,[45] and the deepening of the regional sectarian confrontation, only aggravated the situation of the ICM and the brotherhood in Kuwait. Clearly, the government benefited from the ICM disgrace and previous boycott electoral strategy that weakened the whole opposition.

After almost four years of boycott, and following the dissolution of the National Assembly in October 2016, the ICM, as well as most of the opposition groups, decided to re-enter the institutional arena by presenting candidates in the December elections. According to scholars interviewed in Kuwait, the dissolution was unexpected and without justification, since the assembly was controlled by pro-governmental groups and MPs. The only explanation provided was that the government had anticipated the opposition's decision to end their boycott in time for the elections to be held in July 2017. With upcoming elections, the ICM and ISA would have less time to organize themselves. The government's strategy was partially successful since the ICM was only able to get three of its candidates elected to the chamber.[46] However, the ICM remained well positioned bearing in mind the difficulties the faced since the beginning of the Arab Spring. According to Cafiero, this is due to the 'pragmatism' that the ICM was able to exercise in the demands to the government, abandoning the strictest religious agenda focusing on the liberalization of the political system, and negotiating with non-Islamist forces.[47]

In the Salafi camp, the SIA has had almost a permanent presence in the Kuwaiti parliament since 1981, with the exception of the assembly elected in December 2012, when they boycotted, and November 2016, when they got no seat. However, their presence in the chamber never exceeded four representatives, and this highest number only occurred in the 2008 and February 2012 elections. Moreover, although officially the SIA boycotted the elections in December 2012 and July 2013, two rogue members, Abdulrahman Saleh Salem Abdullah and Ali Saleh Mohamad al Omair, contested and won their seats in 2013 elections. This move, together with the general trend of division among the Salafi cadres, showed the different approaches toward electoral engagement within the movement. The move, however, seemed to have backfired against the SIA, as in 2016 they lost all their seats in the National Assembly. Most analysts and scholars interviewed after the November 2016 election agreed that the main losers of this last electoral process were the SIA activists.

In 2013, and perhaps after learning about the Egyptian Brotherhood failure and the increasing regional pressure against Salafi movements, the Kuwaiti Salafists seemed more willing to collaborate with opposition groups and to push for a limited political reform with a pragmatic rather than ideological approach.[48] In that sense, Waleed Tabtabai and Hakim al Mutairi were very active in the anti-governmental demonstrations along 2012 that ended with the UP member Mutairi (and others) condemned to jail terms.

After the Arab Spring the Salafists joined the demonstrations and electoral boycott coordinated with the other opposition movements, trying to benefit from the popular unrest and looking for a meaningful presence in the assembly in order to push for their own religious agenda. But, the Salafists gradually changed their strategy to one less confrontationist with the government, and distancing themselves from the ICM, mainly after July 2013 when the Morsi experiment in Egypt arrived to an end. The Salafists joined in the boycott of the December 2012 and the July 2013 elections, with the exceptions of Abdullah and al Omair in 2013 elections, and also voted in favor of some governmental proposals along the term. As well as ICM and other opposition groups, the

Salafists decided to reappear in the November 2016 elections, as they considered that they had failed in preventing a bigger deterioration of the country, in abolishing electoral reform, and in avoiding the government corruption. They also considered that boycotting the election would undermine their options in the future, something that proved to be true, since Salafist groups failed to obtain any seats in the new chamber. For some analysts, the Salafists failed to fill the gap left by the MB. The fact that key Salafist figures had participated in 2013 elections, and that in January 2014 Ali al Omair had accepted a position as Minister, meant that the Salafists has shifted to more pro-government positions, something that diminished their appeal among young tribal-Islamist voters.

The main difference of the impact of the Arab Spring in comparing the ICM and Salafists, is that while the ICM remained united along the whole process, from the street demonstration to the return to the elections, the Salafist suffered from a strong fragmentation, mainly due to the different approach the purists and activists portrayed in face of the revolts. For Pall, the Salafism was 'radically [] restructured' as a result of the Arab Spring since the purists and 'reformist' revised their positions regarding the obedience to the rulers and the right to protest.[49] As a result of this post-Arab Spring fragmentation, the electoral strategies of the diverse Salafist candidates proved to be an absolute failure, since no seat was achieved in November 2016.

On the Shi'a Islamist camp, the NIA did not participate in the electoral boycott promoted by the opposition in 2012 as a result of the massive street protests, thereby benefitting in the December elections, obtaining five seats in the chamber out of five candidates nominated. In this case, the impact of the Bahrain uprising demanded a clear pro-regime position in order to prevent distancing from the government and the other political groups. However, this did not contribute for a better understanding with Sunni Islamist MPs in pushing for political reform. The sectarian divide following the Arab Spring, raised the suspicion of Shi'a politicians. While in December 2012 the NIA was clearly benefited from the boycott, obtaining five seats out of five candidates, the performance in the 2016 election was modest, obtaining only two seats out

of four candidates nominated. Prominent former MPs Faisal al Duwaisan and Hussein al Qallaf were among the losing candidates. It is possible to assess that apart from the electoral reform that implemented the 'one man-one vote' rule, the end of the opposition boycott and divisions within the Shi'a groups drastically reduced the chances of the Shi'a Islamist groups in elections.

It is possible to speculate that the Shi'a Islamists, much more than their Sunni Islamist counterparts, put aside their ideological principles in order to preserve their political influence in the decision making process, or at least to remain visible within the National Assembly in order to reinforce their position within the system, in order to overcome the challenges that being Shi'a represented post-Islamic Revolution and post-Arab Spring. However, this strategy seemed to fail in the electoral process if the 2013 and 2016 elections are considered.

Conclusion

The characteristics of the electoral system that allows religious oriented candidates to run for office even without legalizing political parties promoted a very active participation of several Islamist groups, that groups to adapt their strategies to fit within the existing system and downgrade their ideological convictions to gain more support from voters and survive at the electoral and parliamentary level.

As it was shown, before the Arab Spring the Islamist groups focused more on electoral goals than in programs, and once within the chamber, they tended to form alliances to push for changes but without disregarding the future electoral impact of their positions. Despite their influence in society through their activity in charitable organizations, and that the ICM and the Salafists groups prioritized participation in electoral processes, they proved to be unsuccessful in their bids for participation in the chamber. The electoral strategies implemented by all groups have failed to obtain a significant representation in any of the elected chambers since 1963 to the Arab Spring. Moreover, it was proved that neither the ICM, nor the Salafists or Shi'a Islamists were able to influence the decisions made by the chamber on their

own, nor was it always necessary to reach compromises to push for a common agenda.

The need to set aside ideological differences to concentrate on pragmatic objectives, that were eventually detrimental to their own electoral aspirations, as proved in November 2016 elections. Moreover, the more substantive collaboration among Islamist groups, mainly the ICM and Salafists, were related to institutional and pro-democratic reforms, rather than to Islamizing the Kuwaiti society. When the opposition was able to control the chamber, as it had in 2006 and 2012, the government dissolved the assembly and called for new elections.

The Arab Spring represented an opportunity for the Islamists groups to capitalize the social discontent and to become relevant in parliamentarian policy making. The experience of February 2012 parliament proved to be satisfactory mainly for those included in the opposition bloc, including ICM and Salafists, but it lasted very short to prove to be successful long term, moreover having in mind the regional events that indirectly affected Kuwait.

Being an outsider to the chamber and the electoral processes demonstrated two things to the opposition. First, non-institutionalized opposition would be drastically repressed by the government. Second, without representation in the chamber visibility within society and capacity to influence policy making is greatly reduced. The fear of losing social influence seems to be the reason behind the decision to end the electoral boycott and to participate in the November 2016 elections, disregarding the fact that there was disagreement with the electoral framework that ruled the process, even though they were unsuccessful in obtaining the expected results. This last point seems to demonstrate that ICM, Salafists and Shi'a Islamists seemed to have lost their capacity to influence the society outside the electoral system, to the benefit of a younger and proactive generation of activist/Islamist candidates. However, the Islamists groups seemed to have little choice but to abide with the institutional and electoral framework set by the constitution and to work within the system to maintain the opportunity of influencing at least to some extent governmental affairs. Given the fact that they have had to adapt to this situation since their

creation, they are hostages of their own strategies that privilege the electoral outcomes in spite of constrains imposed by the government.

Sunni and Shi'a Islamists, candidates and seats obtained 1963-2016

	Sunni Islamists							
Group	MB/ICM		Close to MB		SIA		Umma Party	
Election	seats	cand.	seats	cand.	seats	cand.	seats	cand.
2016	3	4	1	1	0	1		
2013					2	2		
2012/12								
2012/2	4	5			4	4		
2009	1	6	1	1	2	5		
2008	3	8	1	1	4	5	0	8
2006	6	6			2	6		
2003	2	11			3	6		
1999	4	12	0	1	2	7		
1996	5	12	1	1	2	4		
1992	4	9	0	1	3	8		
1985	4	9			1	2		
1981	1	1			1	1		
1967	1	1						
1963	0	4	0	1				

	Sunni Islamists				Shi'a Islamists					
Group	Salafi Mov.		Indep. Salaf.		NIA		**Justice & Peace**		Other	
Election	seats	cand	seats	cand	seats	cand	seats	cand	seats	cand
2016			0	1	2	4				
2013					1	1	1	1		
2012					5	5				
2012					2	2	1	1		
2009			0	1	1	2	1	2	2	4
2008					1	1				
2006	2	2			2	2	0	1		
2003	1	1	2	3	0	2	1	1		
1999	1	1	0	2	1	2				
1996	1	1	2	5						
1992			0	1	1	1				
1985			1	4						

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[1]Habib Toumi, 'Kuwait opposition leader jailed for 5 years for insulting Emir', *Gulf News*, 15 April 2013. Available at <***http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/kuwait-opposition-leader-jailed-for-5-years-for-insulting-emir-1.1170537***> (last accessed 1 December 2016).

[2] Article 51 of the constitution states that "legislative power shall be vested in the Amir and the National Assembly," meaning they should approve the legislation proposed by the government and shall also propose laws. The National Assembly also has the right to question ministers and Prime Ministers (Articles 99 and 100), granting it the most vast-ranging legislative powers among the Arab countries and a relatively extensive level of control over the executive.

[3] The right to vote to women was granted by the law, Law No. 17/2005.

[4] The association right is recognized in Article 43 of the constitution, which states that "freedom to form associations and unions on a national basis and by peaceful means shall be guaranteed in accordance with the conditions and manner specified by law. No one may be compelled to join any association or union". Law No. 24 of 1962 established the first legal text dedicated to associations, which was then modified on several occasions (Law 28 1965; law 75 of 1988; law 12 of 1993 and law 14 of 1994).

[5] ***FIDH***, 'Freedom of Association in the Arabian Gulf: The case of Bahrain, Kuwait and Yemen'. Available at: < https://www.fidh.org/IMG/pdf/etude.pdf> (last accessed 1 December 2016).

[6] Falah Abdullah al-Mdaires, ***Islamic Extremism in Kuwait*** (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 10.

[7] Zoltan Pall, 'Kuwaiti Salafism and its growing influence in the levant', ***Carnegie Endowment for International Peace***, (2014). Available at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/05/07/kuwaiti-salafism-and-its-growing-influence-in-levant-pub-55514> (last accessed 1 December 2016).

[8] Falah Abdullah al-Mdaires, ***Op.Cit.*** 11.

[9] Nathan Brown, 'Pushing Towards Party Politics? Kuwait's Islamic Constitutional Movement', ***Carnegie Endowment for International Peace***,

(2007). Available at: < http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cp79_brown_kuwait_final.pdf > (last accessed 1 December 2016).

[10] According to the ICM Political Relations Director Mohammed Al-Dallal, "the ICM and the KMB are "the same thing: ICM members are all Muslim Brothers, but not necessarily vice-versa". ***Cited in a Wikileaks cable***, American Embassy in Kuwait, 06KUWAIT1637, May 2006. Available at: <https://archive.org/stream/06KUWAIT1637/06KUWAIT1637_djvu.txt> (last accessed 15 February 2017).

[11] The Article 79 [Exclusive Legislation] states: 'No law may be promulgated unless it has been passed by the National Assembly and sanctioned by the Emir'.

[12] Nathan Brown and Amr Hamzawy, 'Between Religion and Politics', ***Carnegie Endowment for International Peace***, Washintgon, 2010, p.121

[13] Available at: <http://www.arabtimesonline.com/news/article-79-amendment-will-step-extremism-need-tackle-challenges-now/> (last accessed 25 February 2017).

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[15] Courtney Freer, 'The rise of pragmatic Islamism in Kuwait's post Arab Spring opposition movement', ***Brookings***, (2015). Available at: < https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Kuwait_Freer-FINALE.pdf > (last accessed 1 December 2016).

[16] Nathan Brown, 'Kuwait's 2008 Parliamentary Elections: A setback for Democratic Islamism', ***Carnegie Endowment for International Peace***, (2008). Available at: <http://carnegieendowment.org/files/brown_kuwait2.pdf> (last accessed 1 December 2016).

[17] Falah Abdullah al-Mdaires, ***Op.Cit.*** 33-34.

[18] Zoltan Pall, 'Kuwaiti Salafism and its growing influence in the levant', ***Carnegie Endowment for International Peace***, (2014). Available at: < http://carnegieendowment.org/2014/05/07/kuwaiti-salafism-and-its-growing-

influence-in-levant-pub-55514 > (last accessed 1 December 2016).

[19] Zoltan Pall, Kuwaiti Salafism after the Arab Uprisings MEI Insight No. 124 (April 2015): 1.

[20] While al-Mdaires is labeling al-Oun and al-Sultan as Salafi Group members (***Op.Cit.*** 35), Michael Herb is not attributing group affiliation to any of them in his Kuwait Politics Database, available at <http://www.kuwaitpolitics.org/maj198100.htm> (last accessed 1 December 2016).

[21] Zoltan Pall, ***Op.Cit.*** 9

[22] Falah Abdullah al-Mdaires, ***Op.Cit.*** 47-49.

[23] Bjorn Olav Utvik, 'The Ikhwanization of the Salafis: Piety in the Politics of Egypt and Kuwait', ***Middle East Critique***, 23:1 (2014): 23.

[24] Zoltan Pall, ***Op.Cit.*** 11

[25] Bjorn Olav Utvik, ***Op.Cit.*** 22.

[26] There is a discrepancy in the figure of candidates the UP nominated in 2008 elections. While Michael Herb's database mentioned 8, Falah Abdullah al Mdaires stated 11 (***Op.Cit.***, 75), and Bjorn Olav Utvik 12 (***Op.Cit.***, 23).

[27] There is a discrepancy in the figure of candidates and seats obtained by the INC-NIA 1992 elections. While Michael Herb's database mentions one candidate and seat obtained, Falah Abdullah al Mdaires stated two seats out of four candidates (***Op.Cit.***, 98).

[28] Hamad Albloshi, 'Sectarianism and the Arab Spring: The Case of the Kuwaiti Shi'a', ***The Muslim World***, 106: 112.

[29] Luarence Louer, ***Transnational Shia Politics: Religion and Poitical Networks in the Gulf*** (New York: Columbia Univesity Press, 2008), 126, cited in Hamad Albloshi, ***Op.Cit.*** 111.

[30] According to Fatiha Dazi‑Heni, "[t]he 2011 movement very much resembled that of 2006. Many of the political activists involved in the "Nabīha khamsa" movement were at the forefront of the 2011 demonstrations and sit-ins. As early as November 2010, they launched a campaign on the Internet to demand the ousting of Prime Minister Nāṣir Muḥammad, using "al-sha'b yurīd isqāt Nāṣir" (the people wants the fall of Nāṣir) as their main slogan."

https://cy.revues.org/2868.

[31] ***http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/kuwait/insult-leads-to-violence-in-kuwait-pol l-campaign-1.974015***

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[33] Personal observations of the author in Kuwait, February 2012.

[34] ***http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/tr/politics/2012/10/who-are-kuwaitsopposition.html*** and Zaccara, p. 96-97.

[35] The Popular Action Bloc was a nationalist group created in 2001 and headed by former parliament speaker Ahmed al-Saadoun, that included members from both tribal and urban, as well as Sunni and Shi'a background.

[36] ***http://www.kuwaitpolitics.org/positions51.htm***

[37] ***http://www.kuwaitpolitics.org/positions50.htm***

[38] ***http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/ar/politics/2012/05/islamists-takeadvantage-amid-ri.html#ixzz4avjAZCTr***

[39] Available at: <***http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsPrint/59470.aspx***> (last accessed 1 December 2016).

[40] ***http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-19964068***

[41] ***https://www.iiss.org/en/iiss-middleeastarabic/latesttranslations/kuwaitssdeepening-s-political-s-turmoil***

[42] ***http://www.egyptindependent.com/opinion/kuwait-loyalty-homeland-enmity-brotherhood***

[43] ***http://carnegieendowment.org/2013/11/20/kuwait-s-muslim-brotherhood-under-pressure-pub-53670***

[44] ***http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-26487092***

[45] ***http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/saudi-arabia/gcc-security-pact-divideskuwait-11297430***

[46] There is a discrepancy in the information found on ICM members that obtained their seats. While Michel Herb's Kuwait Politics Database mentioned only three, and one close to the ICM, Kuwait Times reflects six seats < ***http://news.kuwaittimes.net/website/tsunami-change-dumps-old-guard-waysi***

de/ > (last accessed 1 December 2016).

[47] ***http://www.mei.edu/content/article/kuwait-s-pragmatic-islamists***

[48] Courtney Freer, ***Op.Cit.*** 13.

[49] Zoltan Pall, 2015, ***Op.Cit.***