

Woman Participation in Kuwait Politics: A Study of Gender Representation in Islamic Countries

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ABSTRACT

In 2005, the government of Kuwait finished the amendment process of Election Law No. 35 the Year 1962 which gives more space and opportunity for Kuwaiti women to participate actively in politics by becoming a member of the legislative body of the government. This situation clearly shows a positive vibe and prospect of woman's acknowledgment in Kuwait politics. Moreover, it also signals the gender representation awareness in Kuwait. However, the practice is not as smooth as it seems as there is a lot of hindrance in the process which comes from the woman and also from the Kuwait society and culture. This paper will examine the journey of gender representation in Kuwait politics. Qualitative methods and library research will be used to support the analysis. In the later stage, it can be known that the gender representation in Kuwait politics are still undeveloped regardless of affirmation from the government's regulation.

Keywords: *Woman's Political Participation, Kuwait, Gender Representation*

1. INTRODUCTION

Like other Middle Eastern countries, Kuwait has a patriarchal culture. In this case, there is an impression that women are seen as socially lower than men. The supremacy of the role of men in society is very high. All decisions on something that concerns social life, decided by men. As a result, women tend to have roles as mothers, wives, and other roles that primarily evolve around domestic affairs. These things have been sustained through times in Kuwait. Fortunately, this patriarchal culture does not make the Kuwaiti state neglect the democratization process that exists in Kuwait in modern times. This is inseparable from the influence of modernization and transformation that affects the economy and social development in Kuwait [1]. The factors of democratization that exist in Kuwaiti society has an important role. It should be born in mind that in this case, the democratization process in Kuwait does not mean to change the monarchy (Emirate) system whatsoever, but more to the empowerment of the society to accentuate their aspirations towards the government.

Currently, there are five factors of democratization in Kuwait, namely election public and opposition, public opinion and political culture, gender, media, and international influence [2]. The existence of gender as one of the factors indicates that the role of women in gender factors somehow also determines (and at the same time affected by) the process of democratization for equality in Kuwait. It matched with the democratization process done through the attention of the Kuwaiti government towards equality between men and women, in particular in the realm of politics. The government is trying to make this happen through recognition of women's political rights stipulated in the Amendment Election Law No. 35 of 1962. These laws and

regulations have given way for Kuwaiti women to play an active role in the politics of the Kuwaiti government. However, although the government of Kuwait has legalized these laws and regulations, the support for women in Kuwait does not occur in full, even there is opposition from certain groups of people. The opposition exists based on various reasons, such as politics and culture. In another point of view, the inactivity of the woman in Kuwait regarding political activity also can become another obstacle.

Constitutionally, Kuwaiti women have the right to political participation, but in practice are still hampered by various factors. Al Mughni then explains the reality that occurs in Kuwaiti society, in his book entitled *Women in Kuwait: Politics of Gender*, which explains that although the Kuwaiti constitution has declared that women and men have equal positions in eyes of the law and have the same rights in education and wages work, but this is not accompanied by equal opportunities[3] The intended equality is not just about equality of rights, but also about equality to get that same opportunity. In practice, the basic principle of equality is not implemented in Kuwaiti government policies. For more or less than 50 years, discrimination and marginalization of Kuwaiti women in the realm politics have been carried out systematically through institutionalized regulations. The paradox between the existence of the law and the unsupportive environment for democratization, or specifically for gender representation, in this case, does exist.

This study tries to analyze how Kuwaiti women face challenges in politics with a social point of view accompanied by an analysis of the lack of legitimacy of Law No. 35/1962. Kuwaiti political culture that has been embedded in Kuwaiti also chosen because of its status as one of the countries in the Middle East region that are quite open to values global where the influence of traditional values is also still inherent in the community. This article aims to discuss the struggle of Kuwaiti women obtains political rights amid Kuwaiti social norms that affect the role of women. By observing women participation in Kuwaiti politics as a materialization of gender representation in a bigger study, this research tries to broaden the scope of similar studies in a designated region. The Middle East is chosen because of the dimensions it has which somehow provides a unique environment towards this research and the observations within. Gender representation also becomes a focus in this study. Generally taken as 'the way how man sees/perceive woman' or even 'how society expects the woman to behave', this study will examine that women can represent themselves in the parliament as a part of the government, in a patriarchal-Moslem country.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This paper conducted mainly using library research. Data searching and examination of woman participation in Kuwait politics, as well as the development of gender representation in Kuwait, become the backbone of this research. Qualitative methods also used to support the analysis. In the later stage, all research step has the objective to examine gender representation in Kuwait politics, and whether it is still undeveloped regardless of affirmation from the government's regulation.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Women's representation in Kuwait's political system doesn't come overnight. It took three decades for women to finally have a right to vote since the women's suffrage campaign started in 1971. The amendment of Election Law No. 35 Year 1962 in 2005 is the opening door that change and stimulate women's political participation in Kuwait's public sphere. The new law

has paved the way for women to claim their rights to vote and run for office. [4] It also becomes a stepping stone that led women to be able to get more roles in Kuwait's parliament. The June 2006 Election was the first time Kuwaiti Women used their rights to vote. 28 women also ran out of a pool out of 250 candidates even none won. It was not until 2009 that women were finally elected into parliament for the first time. It was the year when Kuwaiti women obtained their political rights through the approval seat of 8 percent of Kuwait's 50 seats though it did not necessarily show a significant increase in the following years.

It can be seen in the 2012 Election when women got only a 6 percent seat in parliament. Even in 2013 and 2015, Kuwaiti women did not get any seat in government at all. There was a woman named Safa al-Hashem who won a vote in the 2013 Election, but she resigned from her post in 2014 [5]. There are several reasons why there is no representation of women in the Kuwaiti parliament in the early years after the amendment of Election Law implemented. In short, the preparation time for candidates is one of the main obstacles. The failure that occurred in the 2006 Election can be examined chronologically.

Women's political rights were officially obtained and legalized by the government on May 19, 2005. On the other hand, the dissolution of the parliament was carried out on May 25, 2006, which was faster than the scheduled time. General elections were then held on June 29, 2006, which were participated by 28 female candidates though none were unable to obtain any parliamentary seats [6]. The short period forced women to not optimally prepare their campaigns. They had to adapt to the drastic change in just five weeks. Ideally, candidates need two years of preparation before parliamentary elections begin. The two years are used to build an image, introduce candidates to the community, and invite the public to participate in supporting the success of Amendment to Law No. 35 of 1962. Besides, the relatively short time made it difficult for Kuwaiti women to restructure the Kuwaiti women's movement to make it more defensive against a male-dominated government.

The failure at the 2008 general election was also driven by the same obstacle. In this case, female candidates have enough time to prepare for the election, but they have not been able to effectively utilize the time available to win parliamentary seats. In 2009, four women were elected to the Thirteenth National Assembly for the first time in Kuwait's history. They are Massouma al-Mubarak from 1st district, Salwa al-Jassar from 2nd district, Aseel al-Awadhi from 3rd district, and Rola Dashti from 3rd district. Even though there was a fewer female who ran for office, 16 compared to 27 in the 2008 Election, women managed to accomplish a historic victory. They were also given limited time to prepare for elections which took place only a few weeks after the abrupt dissolution of the Twelfth Assembly by the Emir. Women were unable to win any seats in the February 2012 election even though more female candidates ran for office encouraged by women's 2009 victory. Furthermore, the four women who previously won seats in the Thirteenth Assembly were unable to secure their seats. This situation shows that parliament in Kuwait often suffers political gridlock and crises that contribute to its frequent dissolution. According to Khalil Khaled, a sociologist at Kuwait University, "women have so far struggled in politics partially because of the 'stalling' aspect of Kuwait's political life." [7]

Later on, women managed to win three seats in the December 2012 elections despite a declining voter turnout and the opposition's boycott of the elections. Those three winners were Massouma al-Mubarak, who won 2.317 votes in the first district; Safa al-Hashem, who won 2.622 votes in the third district; and Dhikra al-Rashidi, who won a seat as the minister of social affairs and labor. The Emir called for a new round of elections in July 2013 following the cancellation of the December 2012 elections. Six candidates ran for office but Safa al-Hashem became a sole female member in the parliament, winning 2.036 votes in the third district.

Massouma al-Mubarak also won a seat in the first district. But she lost it after the constitutional court approved a vote re-count in her district.

In May 2014, al-Hashem, the only female MP in the Assembly at the time decided to resign along with four other MPs following the rejection of their request to question Prime Minister Sheikh Jaber al-Mubarak al-Hamad al-Sabah, a senior member of the ruling family, over corruption allegations. In the next round, elections were held in June 2014 to replace the five resigned MPs, however five female candidates who ran for the positions lost. The voter in Kuwait's political sphere struggled to raise the women representative's parliamentary share. Fifteen women ran for the 50 open seats in Kuwait's 65-member parliament in 2016 elections held in November, but only one won: Safa Al-Hashem, whose reelection holds her as the only female in the legislative body, and it continues to this day [8].

In addition to the lack of preparedness to win votes as discussed above, Shalaby noted in her 2015 research that the marginal of women in the Kuwaiti political arena are primarily linked to social, institutional and structural factors. [9] Former MP Rola Dashti, one of the first four women to be elected to parliament in Kuwait, even said there was a conflict between a modernizing and development-oriented perspective and a religious-tribal based perspective. Citing the statement of several scholars, Shalaby also stated that low levels of confidence in women's abilities as political leaders and the lack of faith to their abilities — combined with current attitudes about the role of women in the public sphere and implemented patriarchal norms — have contributed to the high gender disparity in Kuwait's political system. According to the World Economic Forum (WEF), women represent more than half of Kuwait's work force and are highly trained or educated. However, the nation has a poor record compared to others when it comes to women's representation in parliament.

In 2018, Kuwait was ranked 126th globally in the Global Gender Gap Index and 4th highest for the Middle East area. It only loses to Israel, Tunisia, and the United Arab Emirates respectively. In its report, Kuwait records notable narrowing of gender gaps in professional and technical workers, moving the country up several ranks with score 0.63. However, Kuwait also sees a widening gender gap in healthy life expectancy and the modest improvement is not driven by an increased share of women legislators and senior officials as they are ranked 146th out of 149 countries with, scoring only 0.027 for political empowerment.[10]

Courtney Freer, a researcher at the Middle East Center at the London School of Economics, told Fortune in an interview that women who engage in public activity are constantly marginalized because they have not done so much. She also mentioned that Kuwait's parliament is a "boy club" which makes it harder for the newcomers to join. Shalaby also argued separately that Kuwait lacked both an established political party system and clear quota mechanisms — two factors that led to women's political representation in other states in the region. [9]

Unlike Tunisia and Jordan that applied women quotas in the election, the choice is not under consideration in Kuwait since women are not a priority for the ruling regime or the competing political elites. It also happened that Kuwait's electoral system doesn't provide easy access for women to be included in the political process. Women are forced to go it alone as independent candidates that are exceedingly difficult for women to break into leadership roles in politics.

However, the absence of a political party system with clear agendas and the domination of traditional structure of the Kuwaiti constituent scene have complicated women's ascension to important positions [11]. This can be seen from the inability of female candidates to win any seat during the first years after the Election Law amendment. As gender inequality in Kuwait is culturally and structurally shaped, Kuwaiti women tend to have low confidence among female

candidates. Not all of them support the idea of women's leadership which leads to their preference during voting. Women may be overjoyed with their inclusion in the campaign. They proceeded, however, to display little self-confidence and support for their candidate to win parliamentary seats. Some appear content with their election participation instead of being optimistic enough to secure at least one seat in the assembly.

Furthermore, female legislators' absence of political skill and financial support, alongside little coordination among women's associations and other female government officials, has adversely affected their capacity to assume a progressively substantive position in the political field.

As a country in which the inclusion of women in the political process is yet mature, Kuwait needs more than just a revised law. There needs to be a strong political will to guarantee that women could make it to decision-making positions. Kuwait would probably look up to its neighboring countries such as Saudi Arabia that enforcing a 20% quota for women on the Shura Council despite a long resistance in 2013. [12] Kuwait may also emulate the United Arab Emirates' commitment to gender parity in government posts. [13] Although it comes with controversy, it would take an estimated seventy years for governments to achieve gender parity without quota, compared to twenty years when they use quotas. Nevertheless, it must be noted when it comes to the quota system, women are also in charge of selection. Without an inclusive mechanism, the quota will only be made by the network of the old boy. Formalization and transparency in the nomination process, electoral gender quotas will lead to democratization processes throughout the world, including Kuwait. [14]

4. CONCLUSIONS

Gender representation in parliament, in this case, the representation of women in government seats is crucial. The existence of the woman in parliament symbolizes that the policymaking process includes the voices of woman, thus their rights will also be taken into account. However, reality shows that Kuwait still harbors some obstacles for the stability of woman representations. Factors regarding the political environment that is not in favor of woman representation, as well as the lack of initiative and skills from the woman, have taken its toll towards the development of gender representation in the Kuwaiti parliament.

It should be taken into account that Kuwaiti people, both the government, organizations and Kuwaiti women themselves need to work together to seriously implement the amendment of Law No. 35 of 1962. All of the stakeholders should also realize that gender representation is not a simple thing that can be achieved by giving the woman some quota and chance to become part of the government. In other words, things that need to be considered in realizing political equality are not only about equality of rights, but also about the fulfillment of these political rights, and the empowerment towards the group whom the rights are equipped. Only if these things are fulfilled, gender representation can be implemented.

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