



SPRING 2005

DARTMOUTH-AUK INTERN NEWSLETTER



Part Two: Sawt al-Mar'a First-hand Observations and Reflections on 15 May 2005, the Day Women Won the Right to Vote in Kuwait.

At approximately 9:30am on May 15, 2005, we received a call from Mae Al-Hajjaj, head librarian at AUK and avid supporter of women's rights in Kuwait. "Ladies," said Ms. Al-Hajjaj, "I've been looking for you everywhere! Are you available? I wanted to take you to Parliament to see the debate on women's rights." Neither of us expected that today could be the day that the all-male parliament would vote to approve suffrage for Kuwaiti women.

We excused ourselves from our respective duties, and joined Ms. Al-Hajjaj for the drive down Gulf Road to the Parliament building. We met three male AUK students outside the parliament building, one of whom was dressed in his dishdasha, the male traditional dress, to signify the importance of the occasion.

After being turned away from four separate gates as women, as non-Kuwaitis, and as civilians, we walked three-fourths of the way around the Parliamentary complex perimeter and finally entered. The male students led the expedition. They explained to the guard why our ID cards looked so funny, asserting that Kentucky and New Jersey were in the United States and that our licenses were actually valid American IDs. At this point, we entered without trouble.

The building entrance had white marble floors and a metal detector. Immediately to the right were stairs leading up to the second floor of the building where the main assembly chambers were located. This auditorium housed the Parliament and the second tier housed the public spectators here to view the historic proceedings. The seating area was much like an old amphitheater. The spectator section was segregated by gender. We were told, however, that while women could sit in the men's section if they chose, it was the men who were barred from the women's section. As curious women, we chose to sit in the front row of the men's section, as it had the best view of the events and allowed us to sit with a male student translator.



Women demonstrating for political rights in front of the Parliament building in March 2005.

(from www.emmabonino.it/press/world/2277)



Parliament in session.

(Photo courtesy Jen Krimm and Hema Mohan.)

tion was suggested by a member of the Islamist party and some members of the audience suggested saw this as ploy to kill the proposal of women's rights altogether. They believed that the Islamist knew that many Members who would support women's rights would be uncomfortable voting for all these changes in the voting laws at once. The motion to vote on the inclusion passed and the Parliament took a 2 hour recess to discuss the inclusion of these other elements in committee. By this point, it was nearly 12:30, and many in the audience had thinned out, expecting Parliamentary procedure to postpone the issue once more.

A series of votes, motions and debates followed the recess. Finally, Parliament decided to postpone the other two issues, and to deal solely with the issue women's rights. At this point, the Speaker of the Parliament, Mr. Jassim al-Kharafi, issued a very serious warning: if the Parliament voted to address women's rights today, the session would not conclude until a vote had been taken and the issue was resolved. Since the end of the yearly session was drawing near, some Kuwaitis in the audience viewed the Speaker's statement as a way to block a practice similar to what Americans might regard as a "pocket veto", or letting Parliament adjourn for the summer, thus taking the issue off the table indefinitely.

Six speakers - three for women's rights, three against - then addressed the Parliament. Or rather, that was how it was supposed to have been carried out. The first "against" speaker talked about a woman's place in the home, and how women, according to social law, should not be allowed to attend the emergency late-night parliamentary sessions. He added (according to our translator) that women were more delicate than men and would be unable to face men who yelled at them in Parliament without crying. Each speaker was allotted ten minutes to make their arguments; however, their arguments continued long after the allotted time was exhausted. At several points in the debate, the Speaker turned off the microphone when an MP refused to finish his speech.

The Speaker of the Parliament had a higher, larger seat that faced the audience. The MPs who were seated in four curved rows facing him.

The proceedings on granting women the right to vote (sawt al-mar'a), were slated to begin at 9:00AM. By 10 o'clock, Parliament was still debating whether to even take up the issue. Over objections and motions to postpone the topic, the parliament voted to do so. However, an MP moved to change the content of the motion to vote not only on women's rights, but lowering the voting age to 18 and giving men in the armed forces the right to vote. This addition

We saw many political maneuvers during our day in Parliament. MPs continually interrupted one another and speeches devolved into shouting matches. At times the debate became so intense that the Speaker had to call for a 20 minute break.

Additionally, at each call to prayer, Parliament paused for roughly half an hour to give members of Parliament an opportunity to pray.

The “pro” speakers discussed equality and modernization. To counter the Islamists, they gave examples of Kuwait women who were martyrs (in resisting the 1990-1991 Iraqi invasion) as well as prominent Muslim women in history. The speakers noted the irony in allowing a woman to be the Kuwaiti Ambassador to the UN, but not allowing her to vote in her own country. The last “against” speaker repeated many of the previous arguments, with one interesting addition. He acknowledged that women should have the right to vote, but denied that they should be members of Parliament. He asserted that in Islam, women should be free to vote but not to lead, because it would be improper.

The arguments were vigorously presented. Then the most interesting part of the process began: the vote on women’s rights itself. However, during the preparation for the vote, an MP made a motion to vote on whether or not to vote on the wording of the new law. The motion passed, causing a few more hours of heated debate. MPs kept making suggestions and tangential motions to try to block the vote. Some MPs proposed that if women were allowed to vote, all soldiers should be granted the same right (rejected), that every person 20 years of age outside the military should be allowed to vote (rejected), and that women should be allowed to vote, but not be members of Parliament (rejected). Finally, a gentleman wearing the traditional dress of an Shi’i imam, with a turban to complement his dishdasha and bisht, or decorative floor-length robe usually lined in gold, stood and asserted that everyone knew the vote was going to pass, but to satisfy all parties, the clause “according to Islamic regulations” should be added to the new amendment. The vote on this suggestion was taken three times and it passed each time over the very vocal objections from the Islamist corner.



*Kuwaiti women at the moment of victory.
(Photo courtesy Jen Krimm and Hema Mohan.)*

At approximately 6:15PM on May 15th, 2005, the Parliament granted Kuwaiti women political rights for the first time. Some MPs began a rousing rendition of the Kuwaiti national anthem to celebrate the vote. A few women ululated and sang as loudly as the men, who by that point were leading a victory march through the building out onto the street. Cries of “Mabruk!” (congratulations!) and cell phone rings and conversations echoed through the halls out onto the front drive. Witnessing the Kuwaiti women leaving the Parliament building as full participants in the political process was one of the most moving and humbling events either of us had ever seen. We were honored to witness this historic occasion.



*In 1996, Kuwaiti women were already demonstrating for the right to vote. Note that even in 1996, numbers were perhaps less important than media presence.
(From www.newint.org/issue373/keynote.htm)*