



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Kuwaiti women struggle for suffrage (Blue Revolution), 2002–2005

- Colour Revolutions (2000s)

Time period notes: The start date is not clear for this campaign because there had been a movement for women's suffrage since Kuwait's independence in 1961. It is not clear when the nonviolent action campaign specifically began.

2002

to: May 17,
2005

Country: Kuwait

Goals:

Suffrage for women of Kuwait

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 2nd segment:

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 4th segment:

- 017. Mock elections › Mock ballots were staged so that women could vote for real candidates
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

Methods in 6th segment:

- 047. Assemblies of protest or support › in front of Parliament building

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 170. Nonviolent invasion › of polling places

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- women's groups and male sympathizers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Kuwaiti Women's Cultural and Social Society

Lulwa Qattami, Kuwait's leading feminist and head of the Women's Cultural and Social Society of Kuwait

Partners:

Not known

External allies:

Islamic Constitutionalist Movement - A group of Muslim fundamentalists supporting women's suffrage, a free press, modernization and Western influence

Kuwaiti Islamist Ummah Party

Involvement of social elites:

The emir, Sheik Jaber Ahmed Sabah, and the Prime Minister, Crown Prince Saad Sabah decreed that Kuwaiti women should have the right to vote.

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

Groups in 2nd Segment:

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

- Kuwaiti Islamist Ummah Party

Additional notes on joining/exiting order:

Joining order of other groups not known

Segment Length: *Approximately 7 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Kuwaiti Parliament

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

An anti-women rights campaign was started in 2005 and held a few rallies.

Campaigner violence:

Not known

Repressive Violence:

Not known

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

The Bill was passed by 37 MPs, with 21 voting against it and one abstaining.

The country of Kuwait acquired independence from the United Kingdom in 1961. With the country feeling a sense of liberation, the women in particular seized the moment to seek further liberation. As an act of defiance, many women burned their robes. In doing so, they rejected notions of female dress and began to adopt a more Western wardrobe. A year later, a significant obstacle to their campaign appeared; the Kuwaiti parliament passed new election laws in 1962 that limited the electorate to a select few. Precisely, only men over the age of 21 whose families lived in Kuwait prior to 1920 were eligible to vote. Additionally, the election laws stipulated that members of the police and military could not vote. The result of the laws was a very exclusive electorate that excluded all groups of women from participation in the political process.

In an attempt to organize, women from the first graduating classes at Kuwaiti universities decided to form the Women's Cultural and Social Society (WCSS) in 1963. The WCSS, as the first women's organization, strove to raise awareness about women's rights issues and promote the advancement of Kuwaiti women in particular. Thanks in part to the presence of the WCSS and in part to Western influence, women in Kuwait had relatively more freedoms, perhaps most importantly the access to higher education, than in neighboring countries.

In an ostensibly Westernized society, Kuwaiti women remained persistent in their campaign for more rights, particularly the right to suffrage. In 1973, Kuwait's all-male parliament reviewed a bill that intended to grant women the right to vote and run for elected office. With much pressure from the conservative, Islamic populations, the bill was rejected and never really had a chance to be passed. This theme of rejection would become a trend in the years that followed.

In 1982, the women of Kuwait secured a victory when Kuwait became the first Arab country in the Persian Gulf to legalize abortion. The same night that the announcement was made, several women marched in demand of suffrage. A week before the legalization of abortion, the all-male parliament had once again rejected a bill that would have granted Kuwaiti women suffrage. A female member of the faculty at a Kuwaiti university dismissed parliament's action as "an unreligious verdict to bury women alive."

Later, in 1984, the suffrage movement appeared to be gaining momentum. The emir of Kuwait, Jaber Sabah, and the Prime Minister, Crown Prince Saad Sabah both publicly voiced support for a women's suffrage bill. At this point in Kuwait's history, women made up 52% of the Kuwaiti population, and thus, would have a slight majority in the electorate. Though victory seemed more feasible, Lulwa Qattami of the WCSS recognized the strength of the opposition. Qattami, the leader of the WCSS,

acknowledged “They are very organized...We as liberal women are not so organized.” Qattami and others called for suffrage again in 1985 and a poll by Kuwait University suggested that 58% of the eligible men opposed suffrage for Kuwaiti women and only 27% supported it. The Kuwaiti parliament rejected a similar bill the following year, in 1986. Consequently, the highest position in government accessible to Kuwaiti women was assistant secretary.

During the 1980s, Kuwait began to experience some diplomatic problems with other countries in the Middle East. Kuwait decided to help fund Iraq’s war with Iran and refused to absorb the resulting Iraqi debt. In retaliation, Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait in 1990 and occupied Kuwait until 1991. Though many women feared that the Iraqi occupation would be a hindrance to their campaign for suffrage, some historians argue that the occupation did much to gather support for the campaign. Throughout the occupation, women played vital roles as hospital volunteers and others were more active in the resistance and smuggled food and weapons across checkpoints. Following Iraq’s exit from Kuwait, the Kuwaiti government made several promises to the women of Kuwait, assuring them that they would be recognized for their efforts with greater participation in the political process. Accordingly, the government appointed Nabila al-Mulla as the first female ambassador in the Persian Gulf in 1993. Suffrage, however, was still extended.

The WCSS continued to develop support for the suffrage movement and at times support came from unlikely areas of the population. After the occupation, a group of male Islamic fundamentalists announced their support for the campaign and other Western influences. The group, which called itself the Islamic Constitutionalist Movement, was born during the Iraqi occupation and assumed a role similar to those played by the Kuwaiti women. In May of 1999, the emir issued a decree granting women the right to vote and run for elected office. Under the constitution, however, parliament could overrule the emir and it did, rejecting the suffrage bill.

Following the parliament’s decision to overrule the emir, the campaign began to take more risks and demonstrate more. The movement first experimented with more risky nonviolent action in 1996 when 500 women stopped working for an hour to demand suffrage. In 2002, several women held a demonstration near two voter registration centers in Kuwait. The demonstrators waved banners outside the two centers, but were eventually asked to leave. Kuwaiti women continued to be aggressive in 2003. There were reports of demonstrations involving over 1,000 women in a country with a total population of 2 million. The campaign also unsuccessfully sued both the minister of the interior and the speaker of parliament. During the elections of 2003, women established mock ballots that allowed hundreds of women to cast symbolic votes for real candidates.

Building on the energy of previous years, the campaign really captured the attention of the entire nation in 2005. So much so that a nonviolent anti-women’s rights campaign came into existence in Kuwait. Mostly consisting of staunch Islamists, the campaign organized rallies and criticized foreign influence. The women’s campaign, however, also received some new support in 2005 from the Kuwaiti Islamist Ummah Party, which became the first Sunni Muslim group in the Persian Gulf region to publicly support women’s suffrage.

In March, 1,000 demonstrators gathered peacefully outside of the Kuwaiti parliament to reinforce their demand for suffrage. A small group of male anti-suffrage protesters made their presence felt at the demonstration, but were largely overshadowed by the pro-suffrage group. Many of the women involved in the demonstration wore pale blue to represent the struggle for suffrage. On May 17, after relentless resistance from conservatives, the Kuwaiti parliament passed a bill, granting the women the right to vote and run for elected office. The final vote in parliament saw 37 votes in favor and 21 votes against.

Research Notes

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Additional Notes:

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