

YOUTH IN THE ARAB WORLD

Background Paper | March 2013

“Nabiha 5”:

A Kuwaiti Youth Movement for Political Reform

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Abstract

Among Arab states Kuwait is a leader in terms of political freedoms and the importance of its civil society organizations. Thus it should not be surprising that one of the few successful Arab youth movements advocating political reform should have arisen in the country. The success of the “Nabiha 5” movement (Kuwaiti colloquial Arabic for “we want it to be five”) in bringing about the change in the Kuwaiti electoral system from a 25 district to a 5 district configuration certainly benefited from the strong civil society infrastructure in the country, but it did not emerge from it. On the contrary, it was a spontaneous, ad-hoc movement that highlighted both the strengths and the weaknesses of youth political activism. It was very skillful in using new technologies to mobilize support, was willing to try new tactics to achieve its goal and exhibited an enormous amount of energy over a relatively short period of time. That energy was, however, concentrated on a single goal. Once it was achieved, the movement melted into the existing political-civil society landscape, losing its distinctive flavor. Moreover, its great achievement, the reduction in the number of electoral districts in Kuwait, did not lead to the results the movement had hoped. Kuwaiti elections are still characterized by vote-buying (though perhaps less so than in the days of the 25 districts). Voting along tribal lines has not been reduced and might even have increased since the change. Kuwait’s still-illegal but generally accepted political groupings – proto-parties of the liberal, salafi and Muslim Brotherhood tendencies – have seen their political role reduced, not strengthened. The “Nabiha 5” movement was a short-term success, but it has had less long-term impact on Kuwaiti politics than might have been expected in the heady days of 2006.

The Issue: Electoral Reform

Kuwaiti elections had been run on a 25 district system, with the top two vote-getters in each district winning seats in the parliament, since 1981. This configuration replaced the earlier system of 10 districts, each returning the top five candidates to parliament. The 25-district system was imposed by the Al Sabah rulers during a period of parliamentary suspension, replacing a 10-district system that dated to Kuwait's independence in 1961. The rulers used the change to dilute the electoral strength of the Shi'a minority (in the immediate aftermath of the Iranian revolution) and the progressive, Arab nationalist opposition and to increase tribal representation. It was also widely assumed that the Al Sabah thought it would be easier to affect results in smaller districts.¹ The small size of many of these districts encouraged vote buying, which by the 2000's was becoming an open scandal, with newspapers reporting on the value of votes in different districts as if they were reporting on stock market fluctuations.

As early as 1998 a parliamentary committee approved a plan to convert the country into a single electoral district, but the plan was never brought to the full parliament for a vote (Al-'Anba, 1998, N). In 2003 a ministerial committee issued a report weighing three options: a return to the 10 district system, a 5 district system and a single electoral district including the entire country.² That report was forwarded to parliament in 2004 and investigated by a parliamentary committee, but once again the parliament did not take it up. Parliamentarians elected under the 25-district system were understandably reluctant to tamper with a format in which they had done well. However, the issue re-emerged in late 2005, with a number of reformist parliamentarians pushing for change (Al-Khalid, 2005). There were public meetings on the issue and a fair amount of media discussion.

Sometime in late 2005 or early 2006 the government appointed another ministerial committee to examine the redistricting issue. In February 2006 the parliament voted to request that its report be submitted to it by April 12 (Al-Qabas, 2006). In the meantime rumors and media leaks made the outlines of the report clear to the public. The committee studied 5, 10 and 25-seat configurations along 11 standards, including preventing vote buying, encouraging national unity, discouraging purely local concerns among MP's and achieving greater equality among voters across districts. It recommended a 5 district plan as the strongest option across those 11 standards³ (Al-Qabas, 2006). The government, however, was divided on the proposal, with some ministers supporting the 5 district system but others, worried about a backlash from tribal forces that had benefited under the 25 district system, encouraging the 10 district system as a compromise (Al-Jum'a, Abd al-Muhsin et al., 2006). In April 2006 a parliamentary group of 23 MP's was coalescing around support for the 10 district plan (Al Mutayri, Kahled et al., 2006). However, there was also opposition to any change mobilizing as well. On April 8 a parliamentary committee forwarded a recommendation that the 25 district system be maintained.⁴

1 On the 1981 restoration of parliamentary life, see Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 100-103; and Jill Crystal, *Kuwait: The Transformation of an Oil State*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992), pp. 97-98.

2 The report was published in *al-Qabas*, December 19, 2003.

3 The report was leaked to the media at the height of the political controversy in May 2006.

4 See Kuwait News Agency report reproduced in one of the leading blogs of the "nabiha 5" movement, in the entry for April 8, 2006: http://kuwaitjunior.blogspot.com/2006_04_01_archive.html.

Nabiha 5: The Campaign

It was against this background that the “Nabiha 5” movement began. The Kuwaiti blog “kuwaitjunior” (<http://kuwaitjunior.blogspot.com/>) was a focal point for the frustrations of young, reform-minded Kuwaitis on this issue. The first posting calling for a mobilization in favor of the 5 district plan was posted on April 16, 2006. On April 27 an orange logo with the words “5 li-’ajl al-kuwayt” (5 for Kuwait) was posted and a new website to collate material on the issue (www.kuwait5.org) was mounted.⁵ At this point, the organizers called on Kuwaitis to contact members of the Council of Ministers and urge them to support the 5 district plan within government deliberations, calling out their fellow Kuwaiti youth with the pointed question “Are you satisfied with silence... or are you ready to do something for your country?” They also directly criticized government ministers, including members of the Al Sabah family, whom they saw as opposing the 5 district plan.⁶

Through SMS messages, e-mail and the websites, the organizers called on Kuwaitis to demonstrate on May 5, when the cabinet was to meet to decide on the government’s position on the redistricting question, in front of the Sayf Palace, location of cabinet meetings. Organizers expected a few dozen people to attend. To their surprise, over 200 showed up, dressed in orange and waving signs with the “5 li-’ajl al-kuwayt” slogan.⁷ In a country where street politics has a very limited pedigree, this demonstration was widely noted.⁸ The movement tried to maintain momentum by publicizing meetings at the diwaniyyat (gatherings) of sympathetic MP’s, which enjoyed large turn-outs. Meanwhile, a counter-mobilization among tribal MP’s opposed, at a minimum, to the 5 district plan (and some opposed to any change at all) was also forming, with large gatherings in their diwaniyyas.⁹

The government adopted the 10 district plan and prepared to present it to parliament, but noted the opposition to any change among the tribal MP’s, many of whom were loyal government supporters. Seeming to bow to these pressures, the government formulated a new plan – to introduce the 10-district proposal and then immediately send it to the Constitutional Court for a ruling on its constitutionality, which could have had the effect of ending the prospects for political reform in their tracks.

This plan led the “Nabiha 5” organizers to take their next step – a rally outside the parliament building on the evening of May 14 and an all-night sit in, before the May 15 vote on the proposal to refer the 10 district plan to

- 5 This latter site became the focal point for communications during the “nabiha 5” campaign. Unfortunately, it cannot now be accessed because most security filters will not allow it to be brought up.
- 6 See the April 16, April 19 and April 25 postings at http://kuwaitjunior.blogspot.com/2006_04_01_archive.html. The organizers posted a picture of three of the cabinet ministers they believed were organizing opposition to the 5 district proposal with the slogan “The battle of the districts: either Kuwait or corruption.” [ma’arakat al-dawa’ir – takun al-kuwayt... aw yakun al-fasad]
- 7 The use of SMS messages as well as blog posts to mobilize the demonstration was confirmed by Khalid al-Fadala, one of the organizers of the movement, in an interview with the author on April 23, 2009. He cited 200 as the number of the demonstrators, which is also the figure cited by Mary Ann Tetreault, “Kuwait’s Annus Mirabilis,” *Middle East Report Online*, September 7, 2006, www.merip.org/mero/mero090706.html. The “kuwaitjunior” blog put the crowd that night at 400. See the May 6, 2006 entry, <http://kuwaitjunior.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2006-05-16T11%3A41%3A00%2B03%3A00&max-results=14>. The “nabiha 5” slogan first appears on the site in a May 5 entry, and it quickly replaced the “5 li-’ajl al-kuwayt” slogan as the rallying cry of the movement. The organizers called on demonstrators to wear orange, and the logos of both the old and new slogans were rendered in orange. Some saw this as a conscious imitation of the “Orange Revolution” in Ukraine which had recently brought down the government there. However, it seems it was more coincidental than a deliberate reference to Ukraine. Abd al-Latif al-Du’ayj, “al-lawn al-burtuqali sudfa,” *al-Qabas*, August 12, 2006. This was the sixth in a series of articles by the author on the “nabiha 5” movement.
- 8 There had been a popular mobilization just the year before in favor of changing the election law to allow women to vote and run for parliament. The paradigmatic Kuwaiti street politics movement, however, was the “Monday diwaniyya” movement of 1989-90, aimed at pressuring the ruling family to restore the constitution and parliament, which had been suspended in 1986. The “nabiha 5” organizers referenced the “Monday diwaniyya” movement regularly in their appeals for support. For short descriptions of the movement, see Crystal, *Kuwait*, pp. 117-121; and see Mary Ann Tetreault, *Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), pp. 69-73. For a complete account of the movement, with extensive documents, see Yusuf Mubarak al-Mubarak, *waqai’ wa watha’iq dawawin al-ithnayn 1986-1990*, (Kuwait: by the author, 2008).
- 9 See, for example, the following articles: “al-nawab al-mustaqilun yarfudun tasnif al-kuwayt li manatiq dakhiliyya wa kharijiyya,” *al-Watan*, May 7, 2006; “al-mustaqilun: al-taqsuma ‘al-baqiriyya’ lil-dawa’ir fitna wa thulm,” *al-Anba*, May 14, 2006.

the Constitutional Court. One organizer estimated that 1,000 people attended the May 14 rally.¹⁰ A number of MP's and political figures supporting the 5 district plan stopped by the rally to offer support, indicating that the youth mobilization had attracted the attention of the Kuwaiti political elite. That evening the next step was decided, to pack the galleries of the National Assembly (majlis al-'umma) the next day, when the vote was scheduled. As it became clear that all the government ministers (who under the Kuwaiti constitution are entitled to vote in parliament) would support the referral of the 10-district plan to the Constitutional Court, guaranteeing a majority and squashing the hopes for electoral reform, the "Nabiha 5" supporters began to disrupt the session. 29 MP's, supporters of electoral reform, walked out of the hall as the vote proceeded. Amidst the tumult, parliamentary speaker Jasim al-Khurafi, a supporter of the government's policy, suspended the session.¹¹ Press coverage of the disruption was mixed, with a number of critical articles appearing in the Kuwaiti press on May 16.¹²

The suspended vote on sending the 10 district plan to the Constitutional Court was rescheduled for the next day, May 16. When organizers of the "Nabiha 5" movement arrived to attend the session, they were blocked from entering the parliament by security forces, an unprecedented event in Kuwaiti history. The bloc of 29 MP's in favor of the 5 district plan boycotted the session, during which the motion to refer to plan to the Court was adopted. That evening the "Nabiha 5" movement staged the largest rally of the period, with estimates of over 4,000 in attendance.¹³ On May 17 three members of the bloc of 29 submitted a no confidence motion in the prime minister, Shaykh Nasir al-Muhammad Al Sabah, the first time such a motion was tabled in Kuwaiti parliamentary history, even as the government was signaling that it would withdraw its motion to refer the 10 district plan to the Constitutional Court if the bloc of 29 would agree to accept the plan (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 2006). The "Nabiha 5" movement organized another rally in front of the parliament building on May 19, during which members of the bloc of 29 pledged not to accept any compromise solution other than the 5 district plan. Meanwhile, opponents of change in the electoral system warned the government not to back down from its original position, and the Muslim Brotherhood tried to rally its supporters for a compromise solution, based on the 10 district plan, calling for their own rally on the evening of May 19 as well (*Al-Ra'i al-Am*, 2006).¹⁴

In the midst of the growing sense of crisis and facing the unprecedented confidence motion against the prime minister, a senior member of the ruling Al Sabah family, the Amir dissolved the parliament on May 20. New elections were held on June 29, 2006. Candidates supporting the 5 district plan won an overwhelming victory, with the support during the campaign of the "Nabiha 5" movement. On the evening of July 7, before the opening of the new parliament, the movement organized another rally in front of the parliament building, attended by 2,000 citizens, during which a number of the newly elected MP's committed themselves to making the 5 district plan their first legislative priority (*Al-Qabas*, 2006). On July 17 the new parliament voted 60-2 to adopt the 5 district plan, with government ministers joining the elected MP's in supporting the plan. Once again the galleries were packed with orange-clad "Nabiha 5" supporters, who cheered their victory (*Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, 2006). This time, the speaker did not suspend the session.

10 On that number, see Tetreault, "Kuwait's Annus Mirabilis." For pictures of the scene, which document the large turnout, the overwhelmingly youthful participants and the "orange" mood, see the May 15 and 16 entries on the following Kuwaiti blogs: http://www.ma6goog.com/2006_05_01_archive.html; http://altariq.blogspot.com/2006/05/blog-post_114764302615762751.html;

11 For videos of the event, see <http://kuwaitjunior.blogspot.com/search?updated-max=2006-05-16T11%3A41%3A00%2B03%3A00&max-results=14>, May 15, 2006 entry. The events discussed here, both the footage of the parliament "take-over" specifically and the larger story of the "nabiha 5" movement, are also chronicled in the documentary film "andama takallam al-sha'b – al-juz' al-thani," produced and directed by 'Amr al-Zuhayr, 2006. The first part of the two-part documentary deals with the movement supporting women's suffrage.

12 See, for example, the coverage in *al-Watan*, under the headline "Shouting and Singing and Commotion Unprecedented in Parliament," May 16, 2006, pp. 1, 61. The coverage in this pro-government paper termed the behavior of the demonstrators as "against democracy," quoting one MP as saying that parliament had been turned into "a football field."

13 This figure is from Tetreault, "Kuwait's Annus Mirabilis." See also the press coverage from the Kuwaiti dailies, including *al-Siyasa*, May 17, 2006, pp. 1, 13-17; and *al-Qabas*, May 17, 2006, pp. 1, 15-22, for pictures and accounts of the mass meeting.

14 A number of the MP's in the bloc of 29 approached "nabiha 5" organizers in this period, urging acceptance of the 10 district plan as a compromise, but they refused. Interview with Khalid al-Fadala, April 23, 2009. The "nabiha 5" organizers were particularly critical of the Brotherhood, which had earlier seemed to be in support of the 5 district plan but backed away as the political crisis intensified. See the posts on the "kuwaitjunior" blog of May 19 and May 24, 2006. http://kuwaitjunior.blogspot.com/2006_05_01_archive.html. On the Muslim Brotherhood's stance toward the movement, see also Abd al-Latif al-Du'ayj, "al-lawn al-burtuqali sudfa," *al-Qabas*, August 12, 2006.

Social Characteristics and Background of the Movement

The most significant and enduring image for Kuwaitis in general about the “Nabiha 5” movement was that it was a youth movement from start to finish and from top to bottom. The organizers were young – in their twenties or, at the outside, early thirties. The demonstrators were young. It was a mobilization of youth by youth.¹⁵ Their methods of mobilization were thoroughly modern (text messages, e-mail and blogs on the internet), though not unprecedented in the Kuwaiti context. These same modern communication tools had been used in the mobilization of support for the women’s suffrage movement, which culminated in women getting the vote in 2005. They had also been used in Kuwaiti election campaigns, though they became more ubiquitous in the campaigns from 2006 onward, after the “Nabiha 5” movement had demonstrated their utility. While the movement’s means of communication were new, the forms their public mobilization took had a long pedigree in Kuwaiti politics. Street demonstrations were certainly not unknown in Kuwait, though infrequent. The movement consciously harked back to the protests of the “Monday diwaniyya” movement of 1989-90. It also used diwaniyya meetings of supportive MP’s (most notably Muhammad al-Saqr) to build momentum.¹⁶

While the “Nabiha 5” movement was an ad-hoc coalition, its leadership core did share common experiences and a common political outlook. They were from the more liberal groups within the Kuwaiti political scene, particularly the National Democratic Alliance (al-tahalluf al-watani al-dimuqrati), as opposed to the various Islamist groups (Muslim Brotherhood, salafi, Shi’a) active in the country. They had cooperated in their university days in campus campaigns (against Islamist groups) at Kuwait University and among Kuwaiti students in the United States for control of Kuwaiti student organizations. Some of the organizers had been volunteers in American political campaigns during their studies in the U.S. (Al-Fadala, 2009) (Al-Du’ayj, 2006) (Al-Du’ayj, al-tahalluf al-muthmir, 2006) (Al-Du’ayj, al-lawn al-burtuqali sudfa, 2006). A number of the organizers had been active in the campaign for women’s suffrage and had helped to organize a major demonstration in 2005 in front of the parliament in support of that cause (Al-Fadala, 2009) (Al-Du’ayj, burtuqaliyun qabl al-uwkran, 2006).¹⁷ The core of the movement was certainly liberal, but it is interesting to note that as the movement gained momentum, it attracted support from across the political spectrum, with tribal and Islamist MP’s and Islamist groups pledging their support.

The movement cut across important social dividing lines in Kuwaiti politics. At both the organizing and at the participant levels, Sunni and Shi’a Kuwaitis were represented. There was no hint of sectarianism in the movement, unlike in Kuwaiti politics more generally. While tribal political forces were generally against the 5 district plan, some youth from tribal areas did participate in the movement, motivated by the reform and anti-corruption message (Al-Fadala, 2009) (Al-Du’ayj, al-jasad kuwayti wa al-dam burtuqali, 2006). And, as the photographs and videos of the demonstrations indicate, the “Nabiha 5” movement was not gender segregated. Women played a major and very visible role in both the organizing and the mass levels.

15 The youth element of the movement was emphasized in every interview I conducted in Kuwait during the early months of 2009: Amer al-Tamimi, Kuwait Society for Human Rights (February 25, 2009); Shafeeq al-Ghabra, Kuwait University (March 24, 2009); Khaldoun al-Naqeeb, Kuwait University (March 31, 2009), Muhammad al-Saqr, former MP and businessman (May 19, 2009). The organizers of the movement with whom I spoke, Khalid al-Fadala and Jasim al-Qamis, also emphasized the youth element. The contemporary press coverage, cited both above and below, stressed the distinctive youth character of the movement. On this score, see also Muhammad Abd al-Qadir al-Jasim, *akhr shuyukh al-hayba*, (Kuwait: Maktabat al-’Ujayri, 2006), pp. 388-89, 395-96; and Tetreault, “Kuwait’s Annus Mirabilis.”

16 See notes 8 and 9 above.

17 The connection between the women’s suffrage campaign and “nabiha 5” was also emphasized by filmmaker Amr al-Zuhayr, who produced and directed a documentary on the women’s suffrage campaign entitled “andama takallam al-sha’b” (2006) and followed it with the documentary on the “nabiha 5” movement referenced above, using the same title and appending “al-juz’ al-thani,” [Part Two].

Conclusion: Long-Term Impacts?

The “Nabiha 5” movement had enormous short-term success, but like many movements fueled by the enthusiasm of youth and concentrated on a single issue, it disappeared almost as quickly as it appeared. Its organizers found niches in existing political and civil society organizations and/or pursued their own professional careers. The demonstrators who were the foot soldiers of the movement went back to their classrooms, their jobs and their families. Its single-issue nature made it difficult to imagine continuing it as an institutionalized social movement. Had it adopted a broader liberal platform within the Kuwaiti political context, it would have certainly lost at least some of the support it garnered with its simple and direct message against corruption and for electoral reform – issues of “good government” that can cut across ideological lines. The very success of the movement in achieving its goal of the 5 district plan drained away most of the righteous anger that fueled it. It was a perfect storm of circumstances that led to the success of the “Nabiha 5” campaign, but even the most powerful storms end relatively quickly.

Perhaps more disturbing to the driving forces behind the movement and those who followed their lead is that their success in changing the Kuwaiti electoral map did not lead to the results they had hoped and expected. It is difficult to gauge whether there is more or less vote-buying in Kuwaiti elections since the shift from 25 districts to 5 districts, but no one would say that vote buying has disappeared from the scene. One of the implicit goals behind the campaign was to reduce the importance of tribal affiliation and tribal bloc voting in Kuwaiti elections, and redirect citizen involvement to more “national” platforms and issues. However, the elections of 2008 and 2009 saw no reduction in the importance of tribal identity in mobilizing voters. Tribal primaries, though illegal, still generate tribal tickets which get the support of most of their fellow tribal voters. The 5 district system has not, at least in the short term, strengthened ideological and party affiliations either. Most of the organized political groups in Kuwait have seen their parliamentary fortunes decline since 2006. The Muslim Brotherhood (Islamic Constitutional Movement) won 6 seats in the 2006 elections and only 1 in the 2009 elections. The Islamic Salafi Grouping went from 5 seats in the 2008 elections to 2 seats in 2009. Independent Islamists did very well in the 2006, 2008 and 2009 elections, but organized Islamist political groupings have lost ground. Likewise on the liberal side, the Democratic Platform went from 3 seats in 2008 to one seat in 2009, while other liberals running as independents did well.¹⁸ Assumptions that fewer, larger districts would lead to less tribal voting and more success for candidates affiliated with proto-political parties turned out to be wrong.

The “Nabiha 5” movement was a success, no doubt. The energy it generated, its mobilization of the youth, the pressure it put on Kuwait’s political elites and its ability to change the electoral system will be remembered as a distinct episode in Kuwait’s political history. Much like the “Monday diwaniyya” movement of 1989-90, to which it harkened, “Nabiha 5” will be an historical memory to which Kuwaiti reform movements in the future will look for inspiration. But in terms of long-term effects, it is hard to say that the movement changed the trajectory of Kuwaiti politics.

18 On the electoral trends, see my posting on the 2009 election at the ForeignPolicy.com blog, http://lynch.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2009/05/17/kuwaits_elections_dont_solve_its_political_crisis; Mary Ann Tetreault and Mohammed Al-Ghanim, “The Day After ‘Victory’: Kuwait’s 2009 Election and the Contentious Present,” *Middle East Report Online*, July 8, 2009, <http://www.merip.org/mero/mero070809.html>; Nathan Brown, “Kuwait’s 2008 Parliamentary Elections: A Setback for Democratic Islamism?” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 2008, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/files/brown_kuwait2.pdf.

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