
THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

THE ELLIOTT SCHOOL
OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

THE INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EAST STUDIES

IMES CAPSTONE PAPER SERIES

**ENGAGING YOUNG CITIZENS OR PERPETUATING DISILLUSIONMENT?
STUDENT BODY POLITICS IN KUWAITI UNIVERSITIES**

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MAY 2017

**THE INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EAST STUDIES
THE ELLIOTT SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
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Foreword

The process of conducting “original research” was new to both of us. After conducting preliminary research, we arrived in Kuwait expecting that student body politics fostered sectarian tensions, and had formulated our thoughts and interview questions accordingly. By our third day in Kuwait, however, we discovered that our entire framework was incorrect. Time and again, we heard from professors, students, and former participants in university politics that religion had to be taken as a given in politics, but the effects were not what we had anticipated. The focus of our research evolved significantly over our week in Kuwait as we gradually understood that the root of the problems with university politics was not religion at all, but the structure of the system itself, and it was heavily influenced by the flaws in Kuwait’s parliamentary system. This project reflects that new understanding: a turning point we never would have reached without the opportunity to conduct research in the field as well as the library, to speak with Kuwaiti professors and students who challenged our assumptions, to learn and grow as students and researchers. We are grateful to the Institute for Middle East Studies, especially Dr. Nathan Brown, Dr. Mona Atia, and Dr. Shana Marshall, for giving us the opportunity to travel and providing guidance throughout this process, especially framing (and reframing) our research. We are grateful to the Kuwaiti professors who alerted us to our false assumptions: Dr. Hamad Albloshi, Dr. Bodour Behbahani, Dr. Ali Alkandari and others from Kuwait University, and Dr. Fahad Al-Sumait, Dr. Raghad Al Kazemi and others from the Gulf University for Science and Technology. We are grateful to current and former students for their openness in talking with us. We are especially grateful to Dr. Kristin Diwan, our advisor, for her advice and expertise, and for helping us to make connections from our first day in Kuwait. Our project has evolved tremendously since our first meeting with her, and much of that is thanks to her guidance.

Introduction

Elections are a Kuwaiti national pastime. As one Kuwait University professor described, in Kuwait, “We breathe elections. There are elections everywhere.”¹ Kuwait is indeed known for its political openness and its emphasis on participatory politics, especially relative to the rest of the region. In recent decades, Kuwait has become a success story among the Arab Gulf States in terms of governance and political openness. Despite its fractured population and the historical influence of Islamic fundamentalism, Kuwait strives to integrate its Shi’a minority (nearly one-third of the population)² into national politics and has created an environment where even controversial political issues are freely debated. Youth activism and the increasing participation of women since the 2005 suffrage movement also contribute to the growing number of interests that seek a place in Kuwaiti politics. As Gause noted, “Everywhere else in the Arab world, soccer is the national sport. In Kuwait, the national sport is politics.”³ This begins at the university level, with a uniquely robust system of student body politics. In this system, student candidates campaign for their peers’ votes and elections are, in some cases, more hotly contested (and more closely observed) than their counterparts in Parliament. It would seem, then, that student body politics would function as a sort of “varsity team,” preparing students to be active participants in Kuwait’s politics.

For all Kuwait’s political openness, however, it suffers from many of the same problems as its neighbors: entrenched political elites, sectarian and tribal affiliations, ultimate authority vested in the Emir rather than elected members of Parliament, and resulting political apathy plague Kuwaiti politics. Unsurprisingly, these issues are reflected in the system of student body

¹ Dr. Ghanim Alnajjar (professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

² Hamad H. Albloshi, “Sectarianism and the Arab Spring: The Case of the Kuwaiti Shi’a”, *The Muslim World*, (2016): 109.

³ Dr. F. Gregory Gause, III (professor at Texas A & M University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

politics. While the students learn and embrace civic culture and democratic values, their political activism on campus is not echoed beyond university grounds. Students are not motivated to engage with national politics and, instead, focus on internal student life matters. This is a departure from the historically prominent role student political activists played in shaping the debate on political ideology⁴ in Kuwait. Students are disillusioned, skeptical of democracy, and resigned to live in a society where their voice does not matter. This paper examines the relationship between student body politics and Kuwait's national politics, determining that student body politics—though it has the potential to promote engaged citizens and political activism—may have the opposite of the intended effect.

Background

Student Body Politics

At its best, student body politics had been a way since the 1960s⁵ for university students to meet their peers from different backgrounds, religious ideologies, sects and tribes, and to come together over their political ideas about what was best for Kuwait. Students grew to mix with those who were different than they were, and to coalesce around ideas rather than be divided by superficial differences. Particularly before 2012, student body politics offered a venue for students to learn about democracy and to effect real change in their universities and Kuwaiti society, and former students who participated in the process during this time wistfully spoke of these days. As national politics in Kuwait became less free, however, and Kuwaiti citizens grew disillusioned with the parliamentary process, student body politics became less active. It has taken one of two routes, depending on the university. At some universities, such as Kuwait

⁴ The authors choose to use the word “ideology” instead of “identity” here and throughout the paper for two reasons. The first is that this is the word Kuwaitis use. Many Kuwaitis speak English fluently, and they always chose the word “ideology” over “identity.” Secondly, it became clear early in the interview process that Kuwaitis view these ideologies as just that: opinions and ideas, rather than as indicative of who they are as individuals. For more discussion of this concept, please refer to the discussion of survey question responses.

⁵ Dr. Ghanim Alnajjar (professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

University, student “lists” (political parties are illegal in Kuwait, and this is reflected at the university level) are unduly influenced by parliamentary groups, so they become mouthpieces for members of Parliament solely based on their financial or tribal support. Islamist political currents are most deeply felt on the Kuwait University campuses, manifesting through Muslim Brotherhood-, Shi‘a-, or Salafi-leaning student unions. At other universities, such as Kuwait’s Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST), most student political leaders are focused *only* on issues of student satisfaction. Students and professors alike rail against the trivial issues they choose to emphasize (increasing allowable class absences or the number of student parking spots) because they feel they have no stake in ideas of greater significance. Students at GUST seldom comment on the political happenings at the national level.

Kuwaiti Politics

Political Climate

Student body politics must be placed within the context of Kuwait’s fractured sectarian and tribal population, relatively young constitution, and relations with neighboring states. Kuwaiti national identity is strong, but cleavages in its societal fabric are gradually widening. Kuwait ratified its constitution in 1962 after declaring independence from Britain the previous year.⁶ The constitution established a 65-member Parliament, 50 of which are popularly elected (15 cabinet ministers are appointed by the Prime Minister and they are considered “ex officio” Parliament members).⁷ Parliament can propose legislation, but any law must be ratified by the Emir.⁸ Since 1962, the Emir has dissolved Parliament at least six times: constitutionally in 1992,

⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, “Kuwait,” *The World Factbook*, 2017, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ku.html>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Dr. Fahad Al-Sumait (professor at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

2006 and 2016, and unconstitutionally in 1976 and 1986.^{9,10,11,12} Although the 2011 dissolution was constitutional, the Kuwaiti Constitutional Court ruled it to be unconstitutional in a controversial 2012 decision.^{13,14} Later in 2012, the Emir unilaterally decreased the number of votes each Kuwaiti could cast from four to one.^{15,16} This drastically changed the political landscape, affecting the outcome of elections and angering many Kuwaitis, who saw it as yet another example that their vote could always be overruled. Political parties are prohibited by the Kuwaiti constitution, compelling candidates for Parliament to run as individuals. To gain political and financial support, some candidates affiliate with political or ideological “currents,” (“*tiarat*”) or coalitions, many of which are linked to Kuwait’s many sects or tribes. The relationship between religion and politics is complicated in Kuwait. Many Kuwaitis describe their country as socio-politically “conservative”—and therefore “religious”—though they often reject any notions of sectarian tensions. Many see sect and tribe as equal components of Kuwait’s political and social landscape, often citing the heavy influence of tribal politics as more damaging to a free electoral process than sectarian divisions. Kuwait’s Parliament, as a result, is fractured along both sectarian and tribal lines, making it difficult for elected members of Parliament to represent Kuwaitis to the ruling Emir with a unified voice.

Changing Election Law

⁹ Paul Salem, *Kuwait: Politics in a Participatory Emirate* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2007), http://carnegieendowment.org/files/cmec3_salem_kuwait_final1.pdf, 1, 4-6.

¹⁰ Fred Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 170-172.

¹¹ Sara Ahmed, “Kuwait Parliament Dissolved,” *Kuwait Times*, October 16, 2016, <http://news.kuwaittimes.net/website/kuwait-parliament-dissolved/>.

¹² Albloshi, “Sectarianism and the Arab Spring,” 113-114, 119-120.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ George Sadek, “Kuwait: Supreme Constitutional Court Dissolves Parliament,” *Global Legal Monitor* (Library of Congress, 2012), <http://www.loc.gov/law/foreign-news/article/kuwait-supreme-constitutional-court-dissolves-parliament/>.

¹⁵ Dr. Hamad Albloshi (Professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁶ Albloshi, “Sectarianism and the Arab Spring,” 114, 119-120.

Kuwaiti election law is stretched in many directions: the Emir's desire to maintain power and order, a proud tradition of participation in elections, an elected Parliament, a tribal society, and a conservative political tradition, to name a few. The law has changed several times throughout the twenty-first century, a reflection of these myriad influences, but the changes often foster disillusionment: Kuwaitis see the changes as further evidence of a system where their voice can be overruled by an unelected leader.

Kuwaiti laws attempt to mitigate the influence of both sectarian and tribal divisions, at least nominally. Tetrault notes that while "Kuwaiti standards for political correctness in 1992 required candidates to avoid sectarian issues in public forums," a debate between candidates at Kuwait University for that election "grew so heated [when sectarian issues were addressed] that university officials discussed canceling the remaining debates".¹⁷ Later, in 1996, sectarian politicians used *diwaniyya* politics (voters in a particular tribe or family discuss and agree to vote for specific candidates ahead of elections) and held a primary election to ensure Sunni victories.¹⁸ In response, Parliament passed a law in 1998 making all primaries illegal, but tribes and sects found ways to circumvent this law in the 1999 elections.¹⁹

In another historic change in election law, electoral districts were reduced from 25 to five in 2006 to increase the number of constituents in each district, potentially reducing government influence in elections.^{20,21} Youth activists supported this change in what would later be known as the "Orange Movement" or "Nabiha 5" ("We Want It 5"), their tactics—protests organized by

¹⁷ Mary Ann Tetrault, *Stories of Democracy: Politics and Society in Contemporary Kuwait*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 120.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 118, 223.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 223-224.

²⁰ Hamad Albloshi and Faisal Alfahad. "The Orange Movement of Kuwait: Civic Pressure Transforms a Political System," in *Civilian Jihad: Nonviolent Struggle, Democratization, and Governance in the Middle East*, ed. Maria J. Stephan (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 219.

²¹ Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 170-172.

text message and internet-based information sharing—foreshadowing the 2011 Uprisings.^{22,23}

The Orange Movement was successful, but as Albloshi and Alfahad noted in 2009, “the new National Assembly [was] overwhelmingly Islamists and tribal.”²⁴ Furthermore, by 2008, the redistricting deepened societal divisions.²⁵

Sectarian divisions are not exploited in Kuwait the way they are in neighboring Gulf countries. Nonetheless, political Islam remains an important thread in Kuwaiti politics. Much like other states in the region, Kuwait has its own brand of political Islam, though its appeal crosses sectarian lines in a way uncommon to other states. After Iraqi troops withdrew from Kuwait in 1990, many of the younger Islamist leaders that had once been a part of the Islamic Guidance Society (the historic Kuwaiti branch of the Muslim Brotherhood) broke from the organization to form HADAS, (*al-Haraka al-Dusturiyya al-Islamiyya*), which almost immediately became a highly structured political group with relatively broad appeal.²⁶ Due to the tribal nature of Kuwaiti politics, HADAS must compete for votes in both Salafi and Shi'i contingents as well, and adjust its strategies accordingly.²⁷ After struggling in the 2003 elections, HADAS had sought a new strategy and new leadership, looking mainly to alumni of the Islamist contingents in university politics, drawing both its new Secretary-General and Head of the Party's political office from that pool.²⁸ This new leadership emphasized politics over religion, and modified party platforms in the years that followed to appeal to women and even Shi'i voters.²⁹ In the wake of the 2008 elections, however, Parliament became increasingly divided,

²² Ibid.

²³ Albloshi and Alfahad, “The Orange Movement of Kuwait,” 219, 223, 226.

²⁴ Ibid., 229.

²⁵ Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 185.

²⁶ Nathan J. Brown, “Kuwait's Islamic Constitutional Movement: A Model or a Warning for Democratic Islamism?” in *Interpreting Islamic Political Parties*, ed. M.A. Mohamed Salih, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 119.

²⁷ Ibid., 120.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 121, 123-124.

with many factions falling back on religious arguments over the role of Shi'i citizens and women in the government, the *badu-hadhar* struggle, and allegations of corruption.³⁰ Factions emphasized religious legislation in attempts to garner support with their conservative base.³¹ In response, the government restricted "civic and media freedoms," once a hallmark of Kuwaiti society.³²

Political Activism

Post-2008 tensions coupled with the regional atmosphere brought the Arab Uprisings to Kuwait by 2011, and on November 16 ("Black Wednesday"), more than 15,000 Kuwaiti protesters occupied Parliament to demand the resignation of Prime Minister Nasser al-Sabah al-Muhammad.^{33,34} By the end of the Youth Movement of 2012 (also known as *Karamat Watan* or "Dignity of the Nation") more than 100,000 Kuwaitis participated, the Prime Minister resigned, and the Emir dissolved Parliament, calling for new elections.³⁵ Thirty-five out of 50 elected seats in the new Parliament were filled by the opposition.³⁶ In October 2012, however, after dissolving Parliament, the Emir decreed that the number of votes each citizen could cast in parliamentary elections would decrease from four to one.³⁷ This hampered candidates' ability to form coalitions and ultimately limited the power of any opposition movement.^{38,39} The 2012 movement had attempted to emphasize overcoming sectarian and tribal differences, but a primarily Sunni

³⁰ Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 191.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 192, 196.

³⁴ Alblosi, "Sectarianism and the Arab Spring," 119.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 120.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Dr. Kristin Diwan (Senior Resident Scholar, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington) in discussion with the authors, April 2017.

Islamist boycott of the December 2012 elections had sectarian implications nonetheless: Sunni and major tribal families won far fewer seats than previous elections, while Shi'i seats doubled.⁴⁰

Youth and Universities

National Union of Kuwaiti Students

As elsewhere in the Middle East, students and youth played a key role in the Arab Uprisings of 2011. But Kuwait's youth also had a unique legacy of political participation that long preceded the regional movement, thanks to its system of university politics. Student body politics (generally referred to as "*intikhabat jam 'aiyya*", or university elections, though oddly there seems to be no one precise term that Kuwaitis use for the phenomenon) is almost as old as Kuwait's constitution itself. The National Union of Kuwaiti Students (NUKS) was founded in 1964 to represent the interests of Kuwaiti students studying at universities abroad.⁴¹ NUKS represented a conglomeration of several individual, less formal student unions in Cairo, Alexandria, Beirut, and London.^{42,43} Cairo was initially chosen as NUKS headquarters, as it housed the largest branch at the time.⁴⁴ In 1969, when the first class graduated from the newly founded Kuwait University, the main branch of NUKS was established in Kuwait.⁴⁵ Since then, NUKS has grown to include chapters in the United States, Canada, Australia, France, the United Kingdom, and Egypt, among others, which are now established for each country rather than at the municipal level.⁴⁶ (See Appendix 3 for the organizational structure of NUKS.)

Kuwait University

⁴⁰ Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 192, 203.

⁴¹ National Union of Kuwaiti Students, "*Man Nahnu*," *Al-Hay'a al-Tanfiziya l-al-Itihad al-Watani l-al-Taliba al-Kuwait*, 2015, <http://www.nuks.info/pages/menu1.php#.WNQeAYWcFPY>.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Dr. Ghanim Alnajjar (professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

⁴⁴ National Union of Kuwaiti Students, "*Man Nahnu*," <http://www.nuks.info/pages/menu1.php#.WNQeAYWcFPY>.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Dr. Ali AlKandari (professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, April 2017.

This paper focused specifically on two universities, Kuwait University (KU) and Gulf University for Science and Technology (GUST). As Kuwait's only public university and its oldest private university, respectively, these two universities demonstrate two nearly opposite approaches to their equally robust systems of university politics. KU was founded in 1966, only four years after the Kuwaiti constitution was ratified.⁴⁷ Its mission is "to prepare a prominent human capital characterized by their exceptional knowledge, to meet the development requirements, to keep pace with the latest information and technology in higher education, and to lead in scientific research while upgrading in serving the community."⁴⁸ It is comprised of 17 colleges, offering majors and degrees in a wide variety of fields.⁴⁹ Specifically, KU offers 76 undergraduate and 71 graduate programs.⁵⁰ There are six campuses across the country, all minutes away from downtown Kuwait City.⁵¹ The university as a whole hosts nearly 40,000 students and 1,560 faculty members.⁵² It is the largest and oldest university in Kuwait. With more than 100,000 alumni serving the country and region, KU's impact on the country and the Middle East cannot be overstated.⁵³

Gulf University of Science and Technology

Alternatively, GUST is a private university founded in 2002 with the intention of establishing a modern university equaling the prestige and quality of top-ranked universities abroad.⁵⁴ Its main purpose is to "prepare generations of young leaders and professionals for the

⁴⁷ Kuwait University, "Brief History Kuwait University," *Kuwait University*, 2015, <http://kuwebcont.ku.edu.kw/ku/AboutUniversity/BriefHistory/index.htm>.

⁴⁸ Kuwait University, "About Kuwait University," *Kuwait University*, 2015, <http://kuweb.ku.edu.kw/ku/AboutUniversity/AboutKU/index.htm>.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Gulf University for Science and Technology, "About GUST," *Gulf University for Science & Technology*, 2017, <https://www.gust.edu.kw/about-us>.

demands of a new global technological era.”⁵⁵ The targeted mission statement is reflected in the small number of colleges and majors offered: the College of Arts & Sciences and College of Business Administration.⁵⁶ The university is also small in size, with one main campus in the wealthy Mishref neighborhood and roughly 3,600 students enrolled, nearly 470 (or 13%) of which are international students,⁵⁷ making it one of the most diverse university student bodies in Kuwait.⁵⁸ Admission is competitive and English is the main language of instruction.⁵⁹ Both KU and GUST are segregated by gender, with males and females learning in separate classrooms, with few exceptions.

Literature Review

Despite Kuwait’s vibrant—if troubled—political climate, research on the Gulf that does not concern oil is difficult to find. While research on Kuwait’s political system exists, the dearth of research on university politics necessitates reviewing literature in three related fields: Kuwait’s politics (particularly challenges to Kuwait’s democracy), post-secondary education theory, and the presence of politics on Kuwaiti and regional university campuses.

Kuwaiti Politics

Kuwait is known for its political openness relative to the rest of the Gulf region. In 2014, Gause noted the strength of what he called “state-society relations,” noting that effective governance in Kuwait helps to emphasize loyalty to the state: “[Kuwaiti] citizens are generally loyal to the Kuwaiti state; their identity as Kuwaitis is not trumped by tribal, sectarian, or Arab nationalist affiliations. Those other identities are important in understanding how Kuwaitis behave politically, but they do not supersede Kuwaiti identity as the primary political loyalty of

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ghazi Al Mutawa (student at GUST and former GUST Student Association President) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

⁵⁹ Dr. Raghad Al Kazemi (GUST Dean of Student Affairs) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

the citizens.”⁶⁰ Brown calls Kuwait’s system “the most democratic...in the Gulf.”⁶¹ At the same time, he discusses the highly fragmented nature (both by sect and tribe) of Kuwaiti Parliament and the power of the ruling family to act unilaterally.⁶² In Kuwait, HADAS is “integrated as a normal political actor more than any other Islamist group in the world”, and clearly favors an Islamist bloc as a part of the solution to a fragmented and impotent parliament.⁶³ Additionally, in 2015, Freer wrote that “with the rise of radical organizations like ISIS, Kuwait’s Islamists appear to have tempered their traditional demands, as secular and Islamist groups are increasingly working together to advance democratic aims.”⁶⁴ Faced with little competition in Kuwait’s conservative society, this moderation was enough to help Islamists maintain a broad appeal.⁶⁵

Tetrault discusses some of the historical challenges to Kuwait’s democracy, at both the parliamentary and university levels. She argues that the Iraqi occupation of 1990 caused Kuwaitis to rally around nationalism and a common Kuwaiti identity, lessening the importance of divisions like sectarianism and tribalism—a position she shares with Wehrey.^{66,67} She posits that this “unified national community” exposed under Saddam’s occupation influenced political strategy heretofore, but emphasizes that clear tensions between democracy and what she calls “antidemocracy” still exist in Kuwait.⁶⁸ She recounts the tribal and sectarian effects of a 1980 electoral redistricting, which intentionally marginalized both the Shi’a and *hadhar* populations.⁶⁹

Tetrault also points out that electoral results in Kuwait are the result of a complicated mix of

⁶⁰ F. Gregory Gause, III, “Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War,” *Brookings Doha Center Analysis Paper* (Washington: Brookings Doha Center, 2014), 8.

⁶¹ Brown, “Kuwait’s Islamic Constitutional Movement,” 117.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 117-118, 127.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁶⁴ Courtney Freer, “The rise of pragmatic Islamism in Kuwait’s post-Arab Spring opposition movement,” (Washington: Brookings Institution, 2015), <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/Kuwait-Freer-FINALE.pdf>, 15.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶⁶ Tetrault, *Stories of Democracy*, 10.

⁶⁷ Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 7.

⁶⁸ Tetrault, *Stories of Democracy*, 10, 12.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 108.

sectarian and *diwaniyya* politics.⁷⁰ While Kuwaitis recognize the importance of religious issues in Kuwaiti politics, sectarianism is important to Kuwaiti politics as a political—rather than a religious—issue: “The salience of sectarianism as an electoral issue is connected to the policy positions of explicitly Islamist candidates.”⁷¹ Furthermore, Tetrault notes that the districting of Kuwait is such that Shi’as and Sunnis living in predominantly Shi’a districts both feel they have no influence in Parliament, as their vote is not enough to influence the winning candidate in Kuwaiti elections.⁷² This is again a question of influence rather than sect per se. Tetrault and others point to both secondary and university education as the most important recruitment bases for Kuwait’s Islamist political groups: “...education policy is such a point of contention and the one most likely to bring Islamists of all stripes together in a single bloc. In Kuwait, secondary schools and postsecondary institutions are primary venues for recruitment into the movement. Political Islam claims the student body at Kuwait University as one of its strongest bases.”⁷³

Wehrey examines the activism of the 2012 uprisings, arguing that activists, especially Kuwaiti youth and Shi’a citizens, crossed sectarian and tribal lines to address class-based and other grievances, and to argue for citizens’ common rights.⁷⁴ He posits that the most effective way to combat this from the regime’s perspective is to maintain a divided citizenry, whether through emphasizing Sunni-Shi’a differences or the *hadhar-badu* dichotomy.⁷⁵ The movements of 2012 demonstrated both a desire (largely youth-based) to move beyond sectarian and tribal politics, as well as the government’s successful attempts to dilute the power of these cross-sectarian movements.⁷⁶ Against a backdrop of such varied forces working *against* Kuwaiti

⁷⁰ Ibid., 118.

⁷¹ Ibid., 119.

⁷² Ibid., 224-225

⁷³ Ibid., 160.

⁷⁴ Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf*, 4, 19, 192.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 192, 203.

democracy, many citizens—including university students—feel their voices are not heard at the national, or even local, levels.

Post-Secondary Education Theory

There is a growing body of work on the importance of the university experience, particularly extracurricular activities, as a catalyst for individual growth. These authors' views highlight the importance of universities with opportunities to learn civic culture and democratic values. Donn and Al Manthri argue that in their emphasis on creating knowledge-based economies, many universities in the Gulf have abandoned other key tenets of higher education such as fostering critical thought and “humanitarian principles”⁷⁷—the very principles that student body politics can foster, at its best. They cite John Pape, contending that “the ‘core business’ of education is not job training - it is educating human beings to be fully human - to practice democracy, to be non-racist and non-sexist, [and] to learn to work well with others”.⁷⁸ Nearly every interview subject echoed Vasilescu et al’s belief that the university had a social responsibility to strengthen civic commitment and promote ethical approaches to issues among students,⁷⁹ and they all maintained that student body politics promoted these very principles. Many authors contend that the purpose of higher education is twofold: to develop technical and professional expertise and to foster critical thought, open-mindedness, and a propensity for respectful intellectual disagreement, all hallmarks of a vibrant civil society. As Shapiro, former President of the University of Michigan and Princeton University, commented in his book *A Higher Sense of Purpose: Higher Education and Society*, the most important focus in higher

⁷⁷ Gari Donn and Yahya Al Manthri, *Globalisation and Higher Education in the Arab Gulf States* (Oxford: Symposium Books Ltd., 2010), 94.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁷⁹ Ruxandra Vasilescu, Ruxandra, Cristina Barna, Manuela Epure, and Claudia Baicu, "Developing University Social Responsibility: A Model for the Challenges of the New Civil Society," *Procedia Social and Behavioral Sciences*, (2010).

education should be “what students learn, what they come to care about, and what they themselves become.”⁸⁰

Karelis cautions against abandoning what he calls “educational values” for “consumer satisfaction” (the consumer in his case is the student, though the influence of material support from Parliament and influential families in Kuwait certainly qualifies).⁸¹ These values could include broader learning outside of one’s specific field, “independent social criticism” and the responsibility of the university to provide “critical perspective [for society] in times of change.”⁸² His concludes the most appropriate undergraduate university experience is one that exposes college students to differing viewpoints,⁸³ an advantage of student body politics cited by nearly every interview subject. Universities should provide an environment which allows the individual student to choose which of the competing ideologies best explains his or her world.⁸⁴ Even the World Bank, in its 2002 report *Constructing Knowledge Societies*, emphasizes the importance of “the norms, values, attitudes and ethics that tertiary institutions impart” as “necessary for constructing healthy societies and cohesive cultures.”⁸⁵ Student body politics in Kuwait provides such an opportunity for students, provided it is not compromised by undue influence from external entities or political apathy.

Politics on University Campuses

The historical presence of politics on the Kuwaiti University campus is so strong that some authors look to trends on university campuses as a bellwether for national politics.

⁸⁰ Harold G. Shapiro, *Harold G The University and Society: A Larger Sense of Purpose*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 2005), 7.

⁸¹ Charles Karelis, "The Used Car Dealership and the Church: On Restoring the Identity of the University," In *Globalization and Higher Education*, edited by Jaishree K. Odin and Peter T. Manicas, (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 141.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 141-142.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 145-146.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ World Bank, *Constructing Knowledge Societies: New Challenges for Tertiary Education*. (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 2002), 23.

Boghardt, for example, refers to the results of student body elections in the 1980s at Kuwait University as “indicators” of coming national political trends (in this case, the decreasing influence of Islamic fundamentalism).⁸⁶ Hanan al-Qaisi conducted an annual survey of Kuwait University students’ views on student body elections for several years, and her results (published in 2000) seemed to support this hypothesis, showing increasing investment in the outcome of elections for each year that students progress through the university.⁸⁷

Since student body politics are heavily influenced by existing political parties,⁸⁸ even used as proving grounds for Kuwait’s future political leaders, current political groups may unintentionally foster sectarian divisions in the next generation of Kuwaiti leaders. This decreases the quality of competition of Kuwait’s elections, which run the risk of being driven by identity relationships rather than an individual’s conviction to a political ideology. Wills notes that in the Kuwaiti polity, democratization in Kuwait has been limited.⁸⁹ “The existence of a sphere [for] meaningful public contestation” is incomplete given deeply entrenched national political groups that disallow spaces of open contestation.⁹⁰ The heightened focus that national political groups have on students renders students susceptible to manipulation by national political groups. In 2003, for example, when HADAS looked to reinvigorate its leadership, it called upon those who had been most active in Kuwaiti student politics in the past.⁹¹ The emphasis placed on student body politics at Kuwaiti universities may cultivate such attitudes in

⁸⁶ Lori Plotkin Boghardt, *Kuwait amid war, peace and revolution: 1979-1991 and new challenges*. (Basingstoke, England: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 100.

⁸⁷ Kuwaiti News Agency, "Comparative Study Between Kuwait University Students, Political Behavior." *Kuwaiti News Agency (KUNA)* (December 23, 2000), <http://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticlePrintPage.aspx?id=1133455&language=en>.

⁸⁸ Dr. Kristin Diwan (Senior Resident Scholar, Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington) in discussion with the authors, November 2016.

⁸⁹ Emily Regan Wills, "Democratic Paradoxes: Women's Rights and Democratization in Kuwait," *The Middle East Journal* (2013), 174.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Brown, "Kuwait's Islamic Constitutional Movement," 121.

the whole student body, regardless of students' political aspirations or active participation in campus political groups. Gandhi and Lust-Oskar note that in literature on authoritarian elections, particularly in the context of "hybrid" and "electoral authoritarian" governments in the Middle East, authors have overlooked the *purpose* of authoritarian governments' willing calls for elections.⁹² One reason is that electoral competition is "a means by which [they] hold onto power"—elections can actually cement patronage relationships between the people and the elite as their dominion is reinforced in the eyes of the electorate.⁹³ The quality of elections, then, is reduced in rigor and authenticity, since the purpose of elections is to crystallize the ruling party's control.

Lastly, university politics interact with national politics because both institutional forces shape the political discourse of the country. Mohammadi notes that university students' politics foster political discourses on schisms in Iranian society such as inequality, discrimination, and tension between secular and Islamist ideologies.⁹⁴ The political discourse on campus, then, is powerful enough to extend to and influence Iranian political society. Mohammadi proves this by describing the students' capacity for debate, campaigning, outreach, and perception as the new elite.⁹⁵ The university campus offers a space for heightened political discourse. Dr. Albloshi of Kuwait University and Dr. Al-Sumait of GUST both contend that Kuwaiti students are afforded the opportunity to be critical and politically active because the worst punishment that could come out of their political activism is suspension or expulsion, not imprisonment.^{96,97} In this sense, university politics in Kuwait play an instrumental role in shaping political discourse in Kuwait.

⁹² Jennifer Gandhi and Ellen Lust-Oskar, "Elections Under Authoritarianism," *The Annual Review of Political Science* (2009), 404.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Majid Mohammadi, "Iranian University Students' Politics in the Post-Reform Movement Era: A Discourse," *The International Society for Iranian Studies* (2007), 623-634.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Dr. Hamad Albloshi (Professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

⁹⁷ Dr. Fahad Al-Sumait (professor at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

University politics present a formal channel for youth movements to challenge the state and to learn how to effectively participate in politics. Student politics are entrenched in the Middle East's history of reform—from Turkey to Iraq, they have been at the center of social and political unrest in the region.⁹⁸ While student politics in most Middle Eastern states have been subject to ongoing depoliticization from the state, Kuwait seems to encourage student politics. Minimal state interference into the affairs of student body politics affords students the ability to be politically active. Consequently, the university has become a “microcosm” of Kuwaiti politics and a “testing ground” for political parties and political movements in Kuwait.⁹⁹ The direct link between student body politics and national politics thus cannot be ignored.

Analysis

Research Methods

The research project examines the extent to which student body politics affects the political attitudes and political participation of Kuwait's newest citizens, its university students. The researchers' initial methods included academic research into Kuwait's political history, youth movements, and universities. Although scholarly literature in the subject is scarce, this research created a foundational understanding of Kuwait's political norms and processes, including the established respect Kuwaiti society has for electoral processes and democratic dialogue. The preliminary research was preliminary and less influential than the field research.

Field research followed the “snowball method” where researchers arranged pre-scheduled interviews with professors and former student political activists and allowed the initial contacts to suggest further subjects. The “snowball method” carries with it the risk that interview subjects will naturally introduce researchers to others who think like they do, providing a dangerously

⁹⁸ Jordi Tejel Gorgas, "The Limits of the State: Student Protest in Egypt, Iraq and Turkey, 1948–63," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2013), 359-377.

⁹⁹ Dr. Fahad Al-Sumait (professor at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

homogenous sample. This is compounded by the fact that students who were involved in university politics likely hold similar views on the subject, reflecting the reasons they became involved in university politics in the first place. Researchers recognized this inherent risk, and attempted to mitigate it through seeking out both professors and students from two very different universities. However, the homogeneity is likely reflected in our survey responses (only three out of 20 respondents answered that university elections were anything less than “important” to them, or 4 out of 5 points on a Likert scale).

Interview subjects included former and current students as well as professors from both KU and GUST that had knowledge about and experience with both student body and national politics in Kuwait. Twenty different people were interviewed in total, answering open-ended questions about general impressions on the nexus between university and national politics. Most—but not all—interviews concluded with Likert Scale questions to create quantifiable data. The Likert Scale questions reflected the initial purpose of the research project: to discern whether there is a direct influence on sectarian identity through participation in student body politics. After the initial interviews, though, the shift away from sectarian attitudes and toward exploring the structure-based nexus between student body politics and national politics necessitated a change in the focus of open-ended questions. Interviewees were excited to discuss the impact that student body politics has on developing the students’ ability to participate in politics and the de facto support that national political “parties” provide to student unions. While the structure of the research methodology did not change, the kinds of questions asked and the types of conversations held evolved with the project.

Additionally, an online, anonymous survey was distributed to current and former KU and GUST students containing the same Likert Scale questions mentioned above, though only two

students responded who had not also been interviewed. Researchers significantly decreased the number of survey questions from 32 to 12 (three were demographic, nine were related to the research topic) to encourage responses. The survey was initially designed to determine the link between student body politics and religious identity, and this modification was designed both to make the survey more succinct and to gauge attitudes students hold towards the relationship between student body politics and national politics. Although the survey was anonymous and included links to both an Arabic and English version, only two respondents submitted their answers electronically. Researchers believe this is partially linked to whether students fully understood the purpose of the research and trusted researchers' methods and intentions (an interview setting allowed for a more thorough explanation of all three). Given the dearth of survey responses *outside* of an interview setting, researchers depended more heavily on interview responses than survey responses, though survey responses provided quantifiable data to complement the interviews.

Survey Analysis

While opinions on student body politics are inherently complex, researchers attempted to use Likert scale questions to quantify students' and professors' opinions (for a complete list of questions, see Appendix 1). Although opinions on student body politics vary across individuals, universities and even class year, these questions revealed some opinion trends regarding a relatively controversial subject. Twelve respondents gave answers to the nine Likert scale questions (some interview subjects did not respond to survey questions), with the majority of respondents (nine) affiliated with Kuwait University. Respondents were a mix of current and former students and professors. Six respondents were professors, two of which had been active in student body politics during their time as undergraduate students at Kuwait University. The

widest variance in opinions came when identifying the importance of student body politics and national politics. When asked to rate the importance of student body politics, the average rating was 4 out of 5, or very important, although one former Kuwait University student responded that student body politics was very unimportant to her (1 out of 5). Another respondent who had been very involved in student body politics during his time at university from 1998 to 2001 now rated its importance only 3 out of 5, adding that he thought it had the potential to be very important (5 out of 5) but not as it was currently run. Interestingly, the importance of Kuwaiti national politics was rated *lower* than student body politics, at an average of 3.7 out of five, slightly above neutral. Although most respondents rated student body politics and national politics within one point of each other, two respondents gave a three-point difference between the two. Respondents from GUST rated the average importance of both student body politics and national politics higher than respondents from KU, but this could be due to the small sample size from GUST. Although there was only a one-point difference, students who entered university prior to 2006 tended to rate national politics as less important than their post-2006 counterparts (3 versus 4), The reverse was true of student body politics, though the difference here was less than one point. These responses point to the potential importance of student body politics, particularly in a climate where national politics is perceived to be of decreasing relevance.

Responses to other survey questions have less variance than those regarding the importance of student body politics and national politics. The lowest variance in responses as well as the highest average score (4.6 out of 5, standard deviation of .67) was associated with whether respondents agreed that they had friends with whom they disagreed on political matters. This was followed closely by respondents' assertions that they had friends with whom they disagreed on religious matters (4.4 out of 5, standard deviation of .79). Perhaps most telling, the

average score that respondents gave to their agreement with the statement “It is possible to agree on politics but disagree on religion” was also 4.4 out of 5, and the standard deviation was only .78. When coupled with Kuwaitis’ willingness to openly discuss politics, the general agreement with and low degree of variance in these responses had important implications for both political participation in Kuwait and the specific research focus.

Perhaps the most important conclusion from these survey questions was to confirm the political openness in Kuwaiti society and the potential for future political engagement. In theory, Kuwaitis are free to vote for the candidate they most strongly agree with, without fear of rejection from their friends (the same may not be true among their family and tribe). Respondents self-reported friendships with those holding diverse political and religious beliefs, meaning that they are theoretically exposed to a multitude of opinions on a regular basis, and are open to relationships with others with whom they disagree. Furthermore, the relative importance of student body politics potentially demonstrates more confidence in the university system than the parliamentary system. This may be a troubling assessment of national politics, but it also indicates exciting potential for the university to impact society through some of its most impressionable citizens.

Notably, when Likert scale survey questions were administered in person, giving the participants the opportunity to ask clarifying questions of researchers, respondents often had trouble evaluating the extent to which they agreed with the statement, “I would vote for someone who I disagreed with on religious matters if they had good ideas about what was best for Kuwait.” More than one respondent explained that politics and religion are intertwined in Kuwait, and several explained that Kuwait is a “conservative country,” emphasizing that religious matters—gender segregation in classes, religious dress codes or norms—are inherently

political. For this reason, one respondent argued, she could not separate the religious from the political (and had difficulty imagining a candidate who could do so successfully). Other respondents proudly followed their categorical responses (strongly agree) with “I did” or “and I already have.” Despite initial confusion with the question, all but one respondent (the woman mentioned above, who later expressed concern the project’s initial focus on religion, which she felt was too narrow a scope) answered “agree” or “strongly agree.” These trends indicate a much more holistic and complex issue than sectarianism at play. Strong sectarianism would likely have resulted in significantly lower scores regarding friends with different religious opinions and whether political agreement was possible given religious disagreement. It seems that while religion is linked with politics, this link does *not* foment sectarianism in Kuwaiti society, nor is religion’s influence on politics particularly noteworthy (especially in the regional context). This data all influenced the shift in research focus. The data and interviews point to a more interesting question: why, despite all the political openness in Kuwaiti society, did Kuwaitis feel their vote did not matter? And when did this sentiment begin? These questions both informed the basis for this paper and indicated exciting potential for further research.

Kuwait University

Kuwait University Elections System and Process

Discussion with several professors and students at KU illuminated the university elections process. KU has varying degrees of leadership to account a larger population and number of colleges. Student politics in KU is divided into two primary levels: annual general student union elections and college-specific elections. Participation in the college-specific elections is higher and more competitive because students have a vested interest in seeing their college-specific demands met. In the general student body elections, participation tends to be

lower—roughly 40 percent—with competition also declining because the student population perceives the student unions’ actions to be largely based on predictable ideological lines. The major student unions in Kuwait University represent different ideologies, with Islamist-leaning groups appearing to have the most political capital on campus. *Al-I’tilafiyya*, which means coalition, is the de facto Muslim Brotherhood-supported student union, and has dominated KU’s student politics for the past forty years. The second largest union, *Mustaqilla*, (“independent”), literally calls for independence from any political influence or ideology. Third is *al-Wasat al-Dimuqrati*, or democratic circle,¹⁰⁰ which advances the interests of the liberals and is believed to receive outside support from the national political body *al-Minbar al-Dimuqrati*. While these three are the strongest, there are also other student unions that represent smaller groups on campus. *Al-Qa’ima al-Islamiyya* primarily represents Shi’i students and is rumored to be affiliated with *al-Tahaluf al-Islam al-Watani*, a group that is ideologically connected with Hezbollah. *Al-Itihad al-Islami* represents the Salafis on campus. Dr. Albloshi, a professor at Kuwait University, notes that this is because Kuwait is a conservative society: oftentimes, newly-enrolled students with conservative upbringings will join the Islamist student unions because they do not agree with the liberals.¹⁰¹ He also notes that the more sectarian tensions there are in the country, the more Shi’i students will rally behind the Shi’i *Al-Qa’ima al-Islamiyya*.¹⁰²

Benefits and Influence

Kuwait University undeniably plays an instrumental role in shaping the national political discourse in Kuwait. Former political activists, KU professors, and KU students recognize KU’s

¹⁰⁰ Interviewees emphasized to the authors that the correct English translation for KU’s *al-Wasat al-Dimuqrati* is democratic “circle” rather than center, which is different than GUST’s group with the same name.

¹⁰¹ Dr. Hamad Albloshi (Professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁰² Ibid.

critical role given its historical prominence in Kuwait's political life. As the oldest major public university, KU molded the nation's first group of educated elites. Their political attitudes influence KU's own politics given that Parliamentarians and other top political leadership began their political careers on campus. Historically, student body politics at KU has also been known for its activism outside campus walls. For example, they were heavily involved in the Nabiha 5 movement of 2006, organizing KU students' participation in rallies and issuing statements.¹⁰³ One such statement, published on April 29, 2006, was signed by 39 separate entities, including NUKS and the three student political "lists" at KU.^{104,105} The statement encouraged the Kuwaiti government to enact a five-district electoral plan in accordance with the Nabiha 5 movement's demands.¹⁰⁶

Although activism outside campus has decreased in recent years, this process of politicization holds true today. The leaders of student body politics in KU, whether at the college or general student union level, are aware that their political activities on campus are practice for politics after graduation. Students at KU begin to build their networks and learn the strategies of politicking in university. Unlike GUST, the major student unions at KU are motivated more by ideology than by process. The three major student unions represent Islamist, liberal, and independent strains of political ideology. Lately, however, there has been a slow distancing between political ideology and student life on campus. How this may impact the national political discourse is a concern for KU professors and former political activists.

Students and professors alike recognize that one ultimate benefit for a student becoming politically active is growth in personal development. Current students at KU believe that all

¹⁰³ Dr. Hamad Albloshi (Professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors via email, April 2017.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Albloshi and Alfahad. "The Orange Movement of Kuwait," 223.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

students have the right to participate in student body politics and that elections represent an ideal means of participation. They feel that university politics develop the character of individual students throughout the four years, fostering student awareness of issues that are outside of their comfort zone. Specifically, they note that by virtue of a student entering university, he or she is exposed to Kuwaitis hailing from different socioeconomic backgrounds and belonging to different tribes. Interviewees—both students and professors—believe there are benefits to interacting with individuals that are distinct. The student leaders also value serving the interests of the student body.

Several KU professors emphasized that political activism among students is ultimately beneficial: despite the drawbacks, bearing the responsibility of representation enables students to grow their personality and feel connected to the needs of their fellow citizens.¹⁰⁷ Therefore, while general election turnout tends to only include around half of the student body population, the student elections and the campaigning process coupled with the lively political environment creates political awareness at the university—whether as candidates, participants, or merely astute political observers. Professors and students at KU note that this awareness is most apparent at the beginning of the school year when campaigns are launched, elections are planned, and student political leaders reach out to impressionable new first-year students. Similar to GUST, in lieu of a formal orientation organized by the university administration, it is the student political leaders that connect with freshmen and help them register for class, find their classrooms, and give them an initial sense of belonging to the university.¹⁰⁸ This ties into the general consensus in Kuwaiti society that strong social relations supersede toxic political antagonism—Dr. AlKandari notes that people will “sit together in *diwaniyya*, but vote differently

¹⁰⁷ The majority of the information gathered in this section emanates from the general impressions and remarks made by professors of Kuwait, a number of whom do not wish to be directly quoted or referenced in this paper.

¹⁰⁸ Dr. Hamad Albloshi (Professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

in elections”.¹⁰⁹ The capacity for university politics to be representative of the political aspirations of Kuwaiti citizens is made most clear by the active role played by NUKS. NUKS influence in KU is viewed both negatively and positively by onlookers—it tends to be dependent on whether the onlookers trust political Islam.

NUKS and Kuwait University

NUKS serves as an umbrella organization for student body politics. While it is not active on private Kuwaiti university campuses such as GUST, it nevertheless has an acute presence in KU and universities around the world. Its leadership is broken up into two parts: the high executive committee and campus leadership. The strongest NUKS presence is at KU, but they are also active in other countries worldwide. Dr. AlKandari believes that NUKS has been the best avenue for political representation in Kuwait: in the 1980s, it was the only fully elected body in Kuwait and continues to represent different constituents of Kuwaiti society.¹¹⁰ NUKS served as the sole elected body that could “maneuver, work, and have a free, loud voice in society; the Kuwaiti government would not really punish them.”¹¹¹ NUKS is a special feature in Kuwaiti politics. It is not licensed and does not belong to any legal space: it is not a legitimate NGO nor is it specifically affiliated to any one university. It is critical of the government, yet the government partially funds its activities, despite the organization’s presence outside the scope of legal authority.¹¹² NUKS has historically refused to be officially considered as an NGO for fear of abrupt dissolution by the government.¹¹³ Currently, the NUKS leadership is working with Parliament to formalize its operations and proactively prevent the government from suddenly

¹⁰⁹ Dr. Ali AlKandari (Professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Dr. Ghanim Alnajjar (professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017; Dr. Ali AlKandari (professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, April 2017.

¹¹³ Dr. Ali AlKandari (professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

delegitimizing the body.¹¹⁴ The most important article in the proposed legislation would be to remove the Minister of Education's right to dissolve NUKS.¹¹⁵ Some of the professors interviewed were skeptical that the legislation would be passed, but the NUKS leadership is optimistic that, through several drafts and rewritings of the legislation, it can be passed before Ramadan of this year.¹¹⁶

NUKS' amorphous character is indicative of its wide reach in university campuses, particularly in Kuwait. The organization's slant towards Islamist political ideology is denied by NUKS leadership but evident in the eyes of observers. Dr. AlKandari wishes that students had a "higher voice, but it's not normal—what's normal is to have political parties. [Students] are 18 to 22 and manipulated by 'parties'...in big political issues, they are influenced by political groups."¹¹⁷ In other words, although student body politics operate as a representative electoral body with its own legitimate electoral processes and clear political weight, it should not compensate for the actual, legitimate national political parties. Student body politics have the structural backing and societal legitimacy to be politically representative, but the burden should not be placed on the shoulders of young students. On the other hand, KU professor Dr. Haila Al-Mekaimi believes that, given the Muslim Brotherhood's remarkable influence over certain student unions, that student body politics are too politicized to be representative of the whole student population.¹¹⁸

Kuwait University and Parliamentary Politics

Kuwait University has enjoyed relative immunity from government interference, despite its status as a public university. The government has allowed students to engage in controversial,

¹¹⁴ Mohammad Alotaibi (President of NUKS Executive Body) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Dr. Ali AlKandari (professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March and April 2017.

¹¹⁸ Dr. Haila Al-Mekaimi (professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

heated debates about political ideology because, in its view, it is better to contain political debate on campus than to let it spread to national politics.¹¹⁹ The political ideology debates of the three major KU student unions has greatly influenced the national political discourse in the past: until sometime between 2006 and 2011 (respondents differed in the exact year), former political activists and current KU professors and students recalled the lively ideological debates that exemplified university politics in KU. Specifically, the critical debate between the Islamist and liberal political schools of thought dominated in KU and campuses abroad. This is largely because the student unions are affiliated with Kuwaiti national political movements through ideological and financial support. External support received from national political bodies fuels the student lists' ideological paths. One KU professor notes that although external affiliation into student body politics is not explicit, it is clearly felt among onlookers who know it is otherwise impossible for student lists to have such a robust organizational capacity and financial means.

Both Dr. Al-Mekaimi and Dr. AlKandari recall a major event that best exemplifies the schism between the Islamist and liberal political ideologists among student leaders. In 2002, in the annual NUKS elections in the United States, the liberal student leaders broke the Islamists' winning streak and won the top leadership positions in NUKS' US branch.^{120,121} Dr. Al-Mekaimi notes that liberals greatly benefited from the negative image that 9/11 painted of Islamists; Islamists lost popularity, propelling liberals to easily take over the elections.¹²² However, liberals lost the most recent elections in November 2016, and the Islamists regained dominance of the top leadership of NUKS' US branch.¹²³ This is reflective of the most recent Parliamentary elections as well: students and professors alike noted the shock and surprise among citizens following the

¹¹⁹ Dr. Ali AlKandari (professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Dr. Haila Al-Mekaimi (professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

2016 election results. Politicians (often with family connections) that in the past were guaranteed victory lost in 2016 to new political leaders, some of whom were Islamist-leaning.¹²⁴ Perhaps more significant, large minorities of candidates chose to run completely as individuals, eschewing any affiliation with even unofficial political bodies—and they won.¹²⁵ The parallel between the NUKS conference elections and the recent national Parliament elections reflects the gradual shift occurring in Kuwaiti society, demonstrating how university politics are representative of the general attitudes and leanings of the Kuwaiti political climate.

Eschewing Ideology

Despite a history of involvement in national politics, former political activists and student body leaders such as Khaled Alfadala and Mohammed Hayat note that there has been an evolution in KU away from ideology and into matters of student affairs.^{126,127} Current students see this as a positive shift because they feel that, regardless of the “tensions” between student unions, their “goal is clear and direct: to serve the interest of the student.” The current students and former political activists agree that there is a clear shift towards student life and away from political ideology, but they diverge on whether this is positive or negative. Mr. AlFadala and Mr. Hayat recognize that their disapproval of the shift is because they know the value of university politics in shaping national political discourse.^{128,129} They worry that the absence of debate and import given to political ideology could foment further chaos and apathy in the national political scene.^{130,131} Alternatively, current students understandably care more about their immediate

¹²⁴ Sarah Alturki (graduate of Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Mr. Khaled Alfadala (activist and graduate of Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹²⁷ Mohammad J. Hayat (Kuwaiti media personality and graduate of Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹²⁸ Mr. Khaled Alfadala (activist and graduate of Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹²⁹ Mohammad J. Hayat (Kuwaiti media personality and graduate of Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹³⁰ Mr. Khaled Alfadala (activist and graduate of Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

needs than they do about grander political debates—accessible bus stops, more parking spaces, and better class offerings matter more to the average student than do debates about liberalism versus political Islam. The former political activists romanticize a time when KU was both involved in larger political movements and host to intense political debates among students on what direction Kuwait should take: students debated whether political Islam or progressive tenets of liberalism should be assumed by the country’s leadership. Mr. Hayat believes that *Mustaqilla*, the student union that is supposedly independent of ideology and indifferent to political Islam, could not truly influence campus political debates because it represents too many diverse interests without a unifying ideology.¹³²

Former political activists desire university politics to return to political ideological debates because they believe that without a unifying ideology, Kuwaiti society is deteriorating. Mr. Hayat fears that Kuwait is becoming too complacent and materialistic, and that the quality of university politics has waned because so has the quality of society.¹³³ His most remarkable opinion is that he believes the government does this intentionally: for the government, buying off the complacency of the Kuwaiti population for guaranteed (albeit fragile) stability is preferable to bursts of political activism and fervor among ideologues.¹³⁴ His concern is that this downward spiral away from ideology will deteriorate the national political discourse.¹³⁵ Mr. Alfadala also believes that ideology is “diluted” and that people worldwide are becoming more populist.¹³⁶ In his mind, Kuwaitis seek material benefits more than ideological battles.¹³⁷

¹³¹ Mohammad J. Hayat (Kuwaiti media personality and graduate of Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Mr. Khaled Alfadala (activist and graduate of Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

The use of emotive language and the tendency to resort to intrinsic group identities can negatively impact the national political discourse. In this regard, university politics can play a role in reversing this process. Mohammad Aloraiman, a businessman and recent graduate of KU who was also active in university politics, laments that student body politics' role in politics is diminishing when it should be increasing.¹³⁸ Sarah, a recent graduate of the KU College of Law, highlights that Kuwaiti students today are passionate and have a strong entrepreneurial spirit.¹³⁹ She is amazed by the insistence of Kuwaiti students to innovate, create, and contribute, but she notes that political apathy and structural barriers inhibit students from realizing their true potential.¹⁴⁰ The potential for students to become more politically active and engage, then, is to foster their innovative energy and link it to the national political process.¹⁴¹ Demonstrating that political engagement can reap dramatic results could foster a transformation on campuses, reviving political ideology in student body politics as students begin to realize the role they can play in shaping the national political discourse. Across town, on the GUST campus (and despite a much more insular student political culture), students have already seen such an example.

GUST

GUST Student Association

The Islamist presence on Kuwait University's campus is the stark opposite of student body politics in GUST. Student body politics in GUST is relatively new, given the university did not open until 2002. Whereas university politics in KU is distinguished by its historical role in Kuwaiti national politics, university politics in GUST is primarily focused internally, eschewing any role in the Kuwaiti parliamentary system. The mission of the Student Association at GUST,

¹³⁸ Mohammad Aloraiman (graduate of Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹³⁹ Sarah Alturki (graduate of Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

which is the official title of the body that runs student elections, is published on the university's website: "to provide a voice for students and represent therein the University and community. The Student Association at GUST is the student governance body, composed of elected student representatives from each college. Its role is to contribute to a healthy academic and democratic atmosphere. The Student Association also arranges athletic, cultural, religious and other activities."¹⁴² The Student Association, as with any student group at GUST, falls under the purview of Dean of Student Affairs, Dr. Raghad Al Kazemi. While Dr. Al Kazemi explained that the GUST Student Association as a whole receives a stipend of 17,000 Kuwaiti Dinars (about \$55,000) per year, she emphasized that the quality and number of campaign materials distributed by candidates each year during student election season demonstrates a far higher amount of actual funding.¹⁴³ This is particularly true since only the student leader currently in office has access to these funds.¹⁴⁴ Unlike at Kuwait University, however, funding likely comes not only from current members of Kuwaiti Parliament, but also from wealthy or influential members of the community.¹⁴⁵ In addition to paraphernalia, the Student Association also runs an ASK ME campaign, similar to the orientation services offered by political associations at Kuwait University. This campaign provides kiosks throughout the school staffed by Student Association representatives where students can ask questions on class or major selection, have a tour of the university, and even receive advice on which professors are easy graders.^{146,147} As part of this process the Student Association acquires the names and phone numbers of incoming students, and although they do provide a useful service, Dr. Al Kazemi admits "their motives are clear":

¹⁴² Student Association of GUST, "Student Association," *Gulf University for Science and Technology*, 2017, https://www.gust.edu.kw/student_life/student_association.

¹⁴³ Dr. Raghad Al Kazemi (Dean of Student Affairs at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁴⁴ Dr. Raghad Al Kazemi (Dean of Student Affairs at GUST) in discussion with the authors via email, April 2017.

¹⁴⁵ Dr. Fahad Al-Sumait (professor at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Dr. Fahad Al-Sumait (professor at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

recruiting the university's newest students as future voters.¹⁴⁸ Both Dr. Al Kazemi and Dr. Al-Sumait, GUST Professor and Head of the Mass Communications Department, emphasized that student politics at GUST was a microcosm of Kuwaiti politics in this regard, subject to political, social and tribal influence.^{149,150}

GUST Electoral Process

Ideology is less pronounced in GUST. Instead, as several professors described, GUST is distinguished by its robust electoral process for the Student Associations. There are three main student associations. The most dominant one is *Mustaqilla*, (“Independent”), which, similar to KU, is popular for its strong stance against ideology and external political influence. It has never lost an election.¹⁵¹ The second student association is *al-Wasat al-Dimuqrati*, or (“Democratic Center”), that seeks equality for its diverse student population along liberal lines: slightly more than 10% of students are foreign nationals. It also calls for gender equality: GUST has more women than men and therefore there are fewer classes offered for men. The third and least popular student association is *1962* in reference to the year of Kuwait's first constitution. As the name suggests, this association yearns for a return to Kuwait's more conservative past. It has a democratic orientation and frequently uses symbolism from the past, including pictures of the Emir and other historical figures. The remarkable element of university politics at GUST is not the principles of the student associations, but rather, its prioritization of a thorough and fair electoral process.

¹⁴⁸ Dr. Raghad Al Kazemi (Dean of Student Affairs at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Dr. Fahad Al-Sumait (professor at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

Dr. Al Kazemi and Dr. Fahad Al-Sumait emphasize that GUST boasts a fair, transparent electoral process.^{152,153} First, the three aforementioned student associations come to a consensus on when to hold the election, the duration and timing of campaigns, and a specific time and place for campaign rallies. They do this in consultation with the university management. Dr. Al-Sumait specified that the reason for the systematic process preceding the actual election is to “teach [the students] how it works,” referring to civic culture and respect for democratic practices.¹⁵⁴ He elaborated that students learn the “techniques of populism” and sharpen their “general strategies for politicking.”¹⁵⁵ Students also learn critical lessons in how to effectively mobilize and “be in touch with people on an emotive level.”¹⁵⁶

The actual voting and tallying of the votes is also transparent, heavily organized, and monitored. First, the university administration and leaders of the student associations make certain that the voters are active students: the names of voters are read out to the crowd before they cast their vote and voters are expected to provide both student and government-issued forms of identification.¹⁵⁷ The votes are then placed in a transparent box and locked away in the gymnasium.¹⁵⁸ The ballots are later strewn across a table for representatives from all three student associations, an external monitor, and a representative of the university management to manually count each vote, ensuring transparency and accountability.¹⁵⁹ If one person contests during the counting process to allege fraud or miscounting, the whole counting process begins again.¹⁶⁰ Any disputes in student body elections are taken very seriously. Although *Mustaqilla*

¹⁵² Dr. Raghad Al Kazemi (Dean of Student Affairs at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁵³ Dr. Fahad Al-Sumait (professor at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

has historically been victorious, the margin between it and *al-Wasat al-Dimuqrati* is slowly decreasing.^{161,162}

Insular Politics and Tangible Benefits

If Kuwait University's politics are often criticized for their inability to connect with students, the principal criticism of GUST's Student Association is its almost total focus on what some professors and students see as "insignificant" student issues at the expense of broader ideology or more significant issues. Interestingly, this does not help them increase student participation dramatically: during Dr. Al Kazemi's tenure, the highest turnout for student elections was only around 55 percent of the student body; the highest ever was only about 60 percent.¹⁶³

Among other issues, the Student Association has lobbied for higher numbers of excused class absences, extending the period to drop classes and university-wide class cancellations (such as after important events).^{164,165,166} There are even rumors of deceitful practices, such as organized cheating on graded assignments and association leadership collecting student identification badges to swipe them for other students to cover up absences. One recent student leader admitted his frustration with the students' narrow and self-interested demands, remembering that during his time as leader of the Student Association he often felt students saw him as "Harry Potter", expecting him to magically raise their grades or gain them extra time off from school, though he entered the position to effect real, meaningful change in society through

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Dr. Raghad Al Kazemi (Dean of Student Affairs at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁶³ Dr. Raghad Al Kazemi (Dean of Student Affairs at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Dr. Omar AlShehabi (professor at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁶⁶ Ghazi Al Mutawa (student at GUST and former GUST Student Association President) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

his work at GUST.¹⁶⁷ Even this focus on individual demands mimics external Kuwaiti politics, as student political leaders provide such services to grow their own *wasta*, assisting their fellow students in both legitimate and dubious ways in return for votes.

Professors and even some students bemoan the narrow focus of Student Association candidates. Although the candidates hold debates, particularly during election week, as one professor remarked “just like in Kuwait in general, there is a lot of show, not a lot of substance.” Talking points are often taken directly from local political candidates’ platforms, with very little connection to what candidates hope to achieve. Dr. Al-Sumait called any ideological orientation a matter of “building a brand” and obtaining financial support rather than a genuine affiliation.¹⁶⁸ However, he does contend that “there are those [students] that are genuinely motivated (and informed) by ideology (even if they are not a clear majority).”¹⁶⁹ As Dr. Al Kazemi laments, every year she asks students why they vote for one candidate or another and is dismayed to find that their reasons are largely personal or social, usually familial or tribal connection.¹⁷⁰ As in external Kuwaiti politics, personal connections and patronage are emphasized over substantive or ideological issues.

For all the negative aspects of student body politics at GUST, there are bright spots, just as in Kuwaiti national politics. Despite the narrow focus of student leaders’ campaigns, faculty and students alike emphasize that student body politics teaches important political and leadership skills. Student leadership learns to respond to its “constituents,” and these student constituents have influence over their university “political leaders,” a missing link in Kuwaiti national politics. While the scope of issues is limited, candidates’ direct responsiveness to the GUST

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Dr. Fahad Al-Sumait (professor at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁶⁹ Dr. Fahad Al-Sumait (professor at GUST) in discussion with the authors via e-mail, April 2017.

¹⁷⁰ Dr. Raghad Al Kazemi (Dean of Student Affairs at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

student body is an important contrast with the tribal cooptation that often occurs surrounding parliamentary elections. Dr. Al-Sumait remembered one Student Association leader who went to department heads the day after he won student elections with a list of suggestions and complaints he gathered from students in an attempt (if perhaps an idealistic and inefficient one) to address every grievance students brought to him, no matter how trivial.¹⁷¹ Furthermore, in a country where redistricting and changing election laws have repeatedly affected the Kuwaiti political process, there is inherent value in GUST's fully transparent and highly regulated elections. All three GUST professors interviewed also emphasized the power of student elections to bring together the student body in a way that at least attempts to mimic representative democracy.

The seriousness with which student leadership approaches their responsibilities is also beneficial to the GUST student body. Some of these benefits stem directly from the association's attempts to paint itself in an intellectual and sophisticated light: it often organizes guest lectures and cultural and artistic events for students.¹⁷² An Assistant Professor of Economics at GUST, Dr. Omar AlShehabi, also points out that in the past decade the Student Association has become more politicized, inviting Members of Kuwaiti Parliament to speak on campus and holding events that address issues like Palestinian statehood.¹⁷³ Dr. AlShehabi, who was involved in student politics during his time as a university student in the United Kingdom, wishes the Student Association would become more politically involved but recognizes that any political activism might also put them in conflict with existing university guidelines.¹⁷⁴ One former Student Association President claimed that the GUST Student Association held more ideologically-oriented (i.e. nationally focused) debates, but that sometime between 2005 and

¹⁷¹ Dr. Fahad Al-Sumait (professor at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁷² Dr. Raghad Al Kazemi (Dean of Student Affairs at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁷³ Dr. Omar AlShehabi (professor at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

2006 the focus turned gradually inward, and debates became “less ideological and more trivial”.¹⁷⁵ He believed that this shift occurred when students realized that although debates were “intellectually stimulating”, they gave students no tangible benefits.¹⁷⁶ When taken in a larger context, however, more powerful political factors may have been at play. Dr. Al Kazemi argues that as the Student Association matures, it has recently shifted away from directly providing benefits to individual students, other than during election season.¹⁷⁷ While candidates still attempt to “buy votes” through approaching teachers and lobbying on behalf of individual students, she says this is merely a ploy to gain these students’ votes, and the practice ends quickly after election day.¹⁷⁸

The Student Association is a powerful group: its leadership has direct personal access to the university leadership as well as the entire student body via e-mail, a power which has been used both for better and for worse. In November, for example, the US Presidential elections became a controversial topic on GUST’s campus (the President of the University is American, as are some of the professors, and all courses except for Arabic language courses are conducted in English).¹⁷⁹ After an e-mail chain was unintentionally leaked to the student body expressing differing views on then President-Elect Trump and the appropriateness of expressing personal political opinions in a university setting, the Student Association responded with its own email to the entire student body affirming employees’ and students’ rights to free speech—an unusually political statement, but one that, according to some professors, indicated its intentions to stand for democratic principles. This is the same e-mail access, of course, that allows the Student

¹⁷⁵ Ghazi Al Mutawa (student at GUST and former GUST Student Association President) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Dr. Raghad Al Kazemi (Dean of Student Affairs at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

¹⁷⁹ Gulf University for Science and Technology, “GUST announces new President,” *Gulf University for Science and Technology*, August 12, 2013, https://www.gust.edu.kw/event/gust_announces_new_president.

Association to notify students that classes are canceled for a day, whether or not the university administration espouses such an action (it usually does not).

Comparison and Implications

Student politics cannot be apolitical. In the absence of political parties, much of the candidates' material and financial support is channeled through student politics. This is evident in Kuwait University, where the Muslim Brotherhood and *al-Minbar al-Dimoqrati* provide material and political support to student unions, and at GUST, where campaign costs clearly far outweigh university-provided support. It is clear to students and faculty that there is tacit financial, material, and moral support from national political "parties" in Kuwait. Students at Kuwait University described the support as largely political, whereby student unions tend to follow prominent political "currents," but do not explicitly ascribe to these groups' platforms. At GUST, not only national political "parties," but also wealthy family members support student associations. Students are often hesitant to admit support from external entities because the perception would sour the student associations' image on campus in the eyes of the student population. As at Kuwait University, leaders of the GUST Student Association often go on to hold influential positions in Kuwaiti society, whether in politics or in the business sector. Many of the benefits of student body politics—promoting civic values, political awareness and responsive leaders—are also evident on both campuses.

The most significant difference is in the character of student body politics at each university. Although GUST's Student Association has existed since the inception of the university, its 13-year history in contrast with NUKS' nearly half century at Kuwait University gives a different character to both the issues and process at GUST. This is echoed in the

perceptions of its faculty and students, who describe student body politics at GUST as far more insular and focused on issues of student life than KU's more activist history.

GUST Student Association Case Study

Despite the generally narrow, insular focus of GUST's student body politics, the GUST Student Association also provided perhaps the most promising example of the potential of student body politics in Kuwait today, when Ghazi Al Mutawa served as the Student Association President in 2014 and 2015. His presidency proved the potential for university politics to play a vital role in Kuwaiti national politics, no matter the obstacles in university culture. Al Mutawa entered GUST in 2012, and was elected President of the Student Association in 2014.¹⁸⁰ Al Mutawa's victory was exceptional for two reasons: he earned 1,336 votes, an increase of 27 over the previous year¹⁸¹ (according to him the most ever earned by a student in GUST's history), and he ran during his third year at the university (most candidates, and certainly most presidents, are in their final year at GUST).¹⁸² During Al Mutawa's time as student body president, he focused on several controversial issues, both political and relating to student rights. These issues ranged from fighting a law proposed by Parliament that would have abolished all university student organizations to struggling against rising tuition rates, and Al Mutawa proudly talks of the results he achieved in each case. When Parliament threatened to pass the student organization prohibition, he led a group of students to write a paper (eventually published in Kuwaiti newspapers) protesting the legislation and later organized a protest on the steps of Parliament.¹⁸³ To protest rising tuition rates at GUST (already one of the most expensive universities in

¹⁸⁰ Ghazi Al Mutawa (student at GUST and former GUST Student Association President) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁸¹ 'Ali al-Fadala, "Nata'ij Intikhabat Rabita "Jami'a al-Khalij"... "Mustaqilla" Aktasab bi 1366 Sawtan." *Al-Ra'i*. September 25, 2014, <http://m.alraimedia.com/ar/article/academic/2014/09/25/531405/nr/nc>.

¹⁸² Ghazi Al Mutawa (student at GUST and former GUST Student Association President) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

Kuwait) he organized a boycott of classes for a day in June 2015, emailing university leadership to notify them of the reason.¹⁸⁴¹⁸⁵ Although university leadership warned him that some students would be suspended for skipping class, he responded that “that [fighting against unfairness] is what they voted for me to do.”¹⁸⁶ Eventually, GUST agreed to allow payment by installments, a partial victory but one that did not satisfy Al Mutawa.¹⁸⁷

No case makes him prouder, though—nor has received as much publicity—as his fight against gender segregation in classes. In 1996, Parliament passed Law No. 24, requiring male and female university students to be separated in classes (*Qanun Men ‘a al-Ikhtilat*, “Law for Prevention of Mixing [Genders]”).¹⁸⁸ Professors and students alike at both GUST and KU railed against this law in interviews, complaining that it strained university resources and was a detriment to students, since two classes had to be offered for each subject, one each for males and females. Professors noticed that since its implementation students are less open to interaction with their peers of the opposite gender, and worry that this translates into awkward and unproductive professional relationships after graduation. Professors who teach mixed gender classes (which were allowed in extenuating circumstances, as exceptions to the law) noted that class discussion is much less stimulating, with some students refusing to present in front of the opposite gender. Professors from both universities surveyed handle this obstacle in a myriad ways: one professor intentionally pairs students of opposite genders; another attempts to foster lively discussion but laments the absence of lively discussion compared with single gender classrooms; a third discusses it openly with his students, hoping to foster open-mindedness about

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Nasr al-Khamri, " *Itisam tulabi fi <<GUST>> li rafadh ziada al-rasum al-dirasia %20.*" *Aljarida*. June 8, 2015, <http://m.aljarida.com/articles/1462431656724185200/>.

¹⁸⁶ Ghazi Al Mutawa (student at GUST and former GUST Student Association President) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Huda Bitar, "*Rabita "GUST": Khidma Qanunia li-l-Mutadaririn min "Men'a al-Ikhtilat"*," *Aljarida*. June 2, 2015, <http://www.aljarida.com/articles/1462451253225247700/>.

the issue.^{189,190,191} Notably, the third professor found in these discussions that slightly more than 50 percent of students are in favor of the law, as are some prominent donors to the university,¹⁹² though an anonymous online survey on the GUST website lists 56% of student respondents against segregation and only 44% in favor.¹⁹³ Male students preparing to graduate are most affected by the segregation law, at least in the short term: since there are more female than male students at most universities in Kuwait (including GUST), fewer sections are offered of male classes than female ones, making it more difficult for male students to fulfill all of the graduation requirements in time to graduate.¹⁹⁴

Al Mutawa decided to make this a key issue during his presidency of the Student Association. Working with Dr. Al-Sumait and the GUST administration, Al Mutawa searched for legal counsel and—on his third attempt—found a lawyer who would help him bring the case to the Constitutional Court.¹⁹⁵ Finally on June 2, 2015, near the end of his term, the GUST Student Association announced that it was working with a lawyer to provide legal services for any Kuwaiti student, regardless of university, who felt he or she had been harmed by what many refer to as the “Segregation Law”, Law No. 24.¹⁹⁶ A bitter debate ensued, pitting the GUST Student Association, who argued the case discriminated against male students on the basis of access to educational opportunities, against opponents (including some professors at Kuwait University and NUKS leadership) who argued the law was not only constitutional, but beneficial

¹⁸⁹ Dr. Ghanim Alnajjar (professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁹⁰ Dr. Bodour Behbehani (professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁹¹ Dr. Fahad Al-Sumait (professor at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Gulf University for Science and Technology, “*Taswit: Hal Anti Ma'a aw Dud Qanun Man'a al-Ikhtilat?*” *MyGUST*, March 29, 2015, <https://mygust.com/vote-mixed-classes/>.

¹⁹⁴ Dr. Fahad Al-Sumait (professor at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁹⁵ Ghazi Al Mutawa (student at GUST and former GUST Student Association President) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁹⁶ Bitar, “*Rabita "GUST": Khidma Qanunia li-l-Mutadaririn min "Men'a al-Ikhtilat"*”, <http://www.aljarida.com/articles/1462451253225247700/>.

to students.¹⁹⁷ While the debate continued both on and off campus, the Constitutional Court delayed before eventually ruling in spring 2016 that the decision on whether to segregate by gender should be left up to individual universities.¹⁹⁸ KU brought a similar appeal to the Constitutional Court on grounds of students' capabilities and respect for one another, which was dismissed in March 2016.¹⁹⁹

Al Mutawa admits his hesitation to enter the legal struggle against segregation, and said that after bringing the segregation case to the court, some students at GUST refused to pray with him.²⁰⁰ But after discussing the issue with Dr. Al-Sumait and university leadership, he decided to pursue the anti-segregation case. From the beginning, his goal as Student Association President was to influence students to be more open-minded, and to fight for students' rights, and this case gave him the best opportunity to accomplish this.²⁰¹ When he entered GUST, Al Mutawa majored in business, planning on a career as a politician and Member of Parliament. He still plans on going to graduate school for law, but is unsure of whether he will run for Parliament (Kuwaiti law does not allow him to run until age 30).²⁰² Even after all he has accomplished, Al Mutawa admits, "At some stage you'll give up on the country. I don't know if I'll get there...I hope not."²⁰³

¹⁹⁷ Al Anba', "'Al-Dusturia': Tafasal fi Man'a al-Ikhtilat bi-l-Jami'a 8 Yuniu." *Al Anba'*, May 12, 2015, <http://www.alanba.com.kw/ar/kuwait-news/557803/12-05-2015-Ø§Û,,Ø`Ø³ØªÛ^Ø±ÛŠØ©-ØªÛ • ØµÛ,,-Û • ÛŠ-Û...Û†Ø¹-Ø§Û,,Ø§Ø®ØªÛ,,Ø§Ø-Ø`Ø§Û,,Ø-Ø§Û...Ø'Ø©-ÛŠÛ^Û†ÛŠÛ^>

¹⁹⁸ Dr. Fahad Al-Sumait (professor at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

¹⁹⁹ BBC Arabic, "Ikhtilat Bayna al-Jinsayn fi al-Jami'at Yuthir 'ala Jaldalan fi al-Kuwait," *BBC Arabic*, March 24, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/arabic/multimedia/2016/03/160324_kuwait_mixing_law.

²⁰⁰ Ghazi Al Mutawa (student at GUST and former GUST Student Association President) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ Ibid.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Despite a vibrant tradition of elections and political openness, Kuwaiti democracy continues to struggle under the weight of an Emir with disproportionate influence, tribal and sectarian power politics, and disillusioned citizens. Student body politics may offer the most potential to reform national politics by engaging Kuwait's youngest citizens in a well-established, highly organized system that offers a sort of "dress rehearsal" for civic engagement. This unique phenomenon is a microcosm of Kuwaiti society, and has proven useful throughout Kuwait's history as a way to engage university students—as candidates and political leaders, but also as citizens who exercise their rights to influence the government. Since 2006, however, increasing disillusionment with Parliament, among other factors, has led to a gradual decline in student engagement outside narrow student issues with tangible student benefits. Some students continue to participate in student body politics, learning the benefits of political participation and civic engagement. Student leaders still glean important leadership and political skills. But this narrow scope reinforces the idea that politics is about individual benefits, and perpetuates the belief that while voting is *theoretically* a way to make one's voice heard, in practice students' votes only matter inside a university campus.

Student body politics have the potential to gradually revolutionize national politics, but students first need to recognize, as Ghazi Al Mutawa did, the potential for action beyond campus walls. He could have been discouraged by a campus culture that would pressure him to remain politically disengaged and inactive. Instead, Al Mutawa demonstrated that, with the right tools afforded to him by a robust system for student body politics, he could politically engage beyond university grounds and create substantial change. The majority of students are less motivated than Al Mutawa, particularly in a culture which does not foster such actions.

University leadership already recognizes this issue, and some faculty members have ideas for change. Dr. Al Kazemi, for example, suggested that in an ideal situation universities would conduct training for candidates as well as for the general student population on democratic values, civic culture, and the significance of participatory government, in conjunction with election week.²⁰⁴ Classes for candidates taught by Political Science professors or experts in democracy and governance, for example, could focus on how to develop electoral platforms, emphasizing an appropriate balance between ideology and tangible benefits. Such training could elevate the level of discourse and campaigning beyond tangible benefits in a university setting to foster critical thought about Kuwaiti electoral politics as a whole. Sessions would also benefit candidates in the short-term, helping them to campaign more effectively and increasing their chances of being elected, incentivizing participation.

Some faculty members have also suggested purely individual elections, eliminating any affiliation with political lists or parliamentary bodies. This would decrease ideological and material influence from outside parties, freeing student body politics from the entrenched tribal and sectarian affiliations that plague parliamentary politics, but might also have the unintended consequence of perpetuating candidates' already narrow campaigns and ideology and further isolating them from the rest of Kuwait.

Finally, universities should emphasize the successes of student body politics both as a means of including more students and elevating the level of discourse surrounding the university political process. Stories such as Al Mutawa's anti-segregation case in the Constitutional Court or pre-2006 student activism at Kuwait University are excellent examples of the influence student body politics can have on society. Whether students agree with the outcomes in either case, publicizing these instances could demonstrate the significance of student body politics and

²⁰⁴ Dr. Raghad Al Kazemi (Dean of Student Affairs at GUST) in discussion with the authors, March 2017.

its potential to influence society, a powerful antidote to the political apathy endemic on university campuses.

In a region where truly participatory governments can be difficult to find, Kuwait has the potential to demonstrate the value of civic responsibility. Despite its flaws, Kuwait has a vibrant electoral climate, a proud history of participatory democracy, and—equally significant—a highly established system of university politics. This system of student body politics is uniquely Kuwaiti, and provides universities with immense potential to train future Kuwaiti political leaders in the arts of good governance, fair representation of citizens, and engagement with society. It also contains possibilities to engage future voters during their most impressionable years as young adults. Reforming student body politics may be the best way to spearhead the reform needed at the parliamentary level if Kuwait is to maintain its place in the region as an example of democracy and political openness.

In a time of rampant skepticism and even disengagement with Kuwaiti politics, are student body politics at Kuwaiti universities engaging young Kuwaiti citizens and preparing them for a life of political participation in Kuwaiti civil society, or perpetuating disillusionment with a flawed political system? Do graduates apply what they have learned in student body politics outside university campuses, or do they disengage and feel that their voice only mattered during their time at university? Kuwait desperately needs its universities to ask these difficult questions, and to engage young Kuwaiti leaders to shape the country's vast potential into a brighter political future.

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Appendix 1: Interviews

1. Dr. Hamad Albloshi, March 12, Kuwait University, English
2. Dr. Bodour Behbehani, March 12, Kuwait University, English
3. Professor, March 12, Kuwait University, English
4. Dr. Ali AlKandari, March 13, Kuwait University, English
5. Dr. Haila Al-Mekaimi, March 13, Kuwait University, English
6. Student, March 13, Arabic*
7. Student, March 13, Arabic*
8. Student, March 13, Arabic*
9. Dr. Fahad Al-Sumait, Gulf Institute for Science and Technology, March 13, English
10. Mr. Mohammad J. Hayat, 360 Mall, March 13, Arabic
11. Dr. Khaled Al-Fadala, Kuwait City, March 14, English
12. Dr. Ghanim Alnajjar, IBIS Sharq Hotel, March 14, English
13. Mr. Mohammad Aloraiman, IBIS Sharq Hotel, March 14, Arabic
14. Mr. Ghazi Al Mutawa, IBIS Sharq Hotel, March 14, English
15. Mr. Mohammad Alotaibi, NUKS HQ, March 14, Arabic
16. Dr. Raghad Al Kazemi, Gulf Institute for Science and Technology, March 15, English
17. Dr. Omar AlShehabi, Gulf Institute for Science and Technology, March 15, English
18. Sarah Alturki, Gulf Institute for Science and Technology, March 15, English
19. Professor, Kuwait University, March 16, English
20. Student, March 16, Arabic

*Interview subjects 6-8 held various roles in the Kuwait University Political Club and the Kuwait University Political Science Club.

Appendix 2: Survey Questions

English:

1. What university do you attend?
2. What year did you enter university?
3. What is your graduation year?
4. How important are university elections to you?
5. How important are Kuwaiti politics to you?
6. Do you think that student body politics are a good thing?
7. Do you think Kuwaiti universities should emphasize moving beyond religious differences?
8. Do you think Kuwaiti universities should emphasize moving beyond political differences?
9. It is possible to agree on politics but disagree on religion.
10. I would vote for someone who I disagreed with on religious matters if they had good ideas about what is best for Kuwait.
11. I have friends that I disagree with on religious matters.
12. I have friends that I disagree with on political matters.

Arabic:

1. في أي جامعة درست؟
2. في أي سنة دخلت بالجامعة؟
3. في أي سنة ستتخرج من الجامعة؟
4. ما هي أهمية الإنتخابات الجامعية بالنسبة لك؟
5. ما هي أهمية الشؤون السياسية الكويتية بالنسبة لك؟
6. هل تعتقد أن المشاركة في الإنتخابات الجامعية مفيدة؟
7. هل تعتقد أن جامعتك يجب أن يكون لها دور مهم في التغلب على الخلافات الدينية؟
8. هل تعتقد أن جامعتك يجب أن يكون لها دور مهم في التغلب على الخلافات السياسية؟
9. من الممكن أن نتفق في الأمور السياسية ولكن نختلف في الأمور الدينية؟
10. سوف أصوت لشخص أختلف معه في الامور الدينية اذا كان لديه أفكار في مصلحة الكويت.
11. لدي أصدقاء اختلف معهم في الامور الدينية؟
12. لدي أصدقاء اختلف معهم في الامور السياسية؟

Appendix 3: Organizational Structure of NUKS

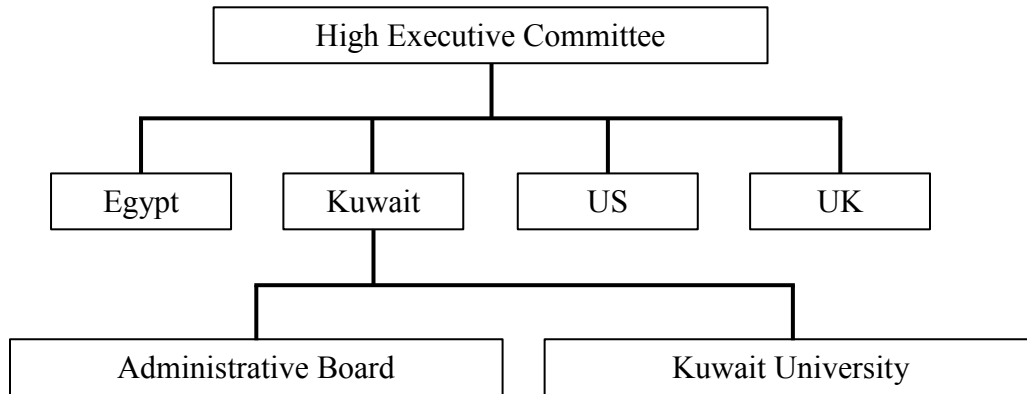


Figure 1. Organizational Structure of NUKS.

Figure adapted from information provided by Dr. Ali AlKandari (professor at Kuwait University) in discussion with the authors, April 2017.