

Frankenstein's Lament in Kuwait

By Mary Ann Tétreault

"[T]his country of ours is kidnapped, hijacked by groups that call themselves Islamic but in truth use Islam as a cover and a garb for political goals." So says Shaikh Saud Nasir al-Sabah, Kuwait's former oil minister, information minister, and ambassador to the United States. Yes, indeed, but where did these groups come from? And who else in Kuwait has used Islam as a cover and a garb for political goals while in the process creating the monsters that so distress Shaikh Saud today?

The Shaikh does not have to look farther than across the dinner table—especially during Ramadan, a month when extended families frequently gather at sundown to break the daylight fast together. His family, from which Kuwait's rulers are drawn, began to "Islamize" Kuwait in the late 1970s. At that time, the most serious threats to the continuity of monarchical regimes in the Gulf came less from Nasir-inspired "Arab Nationalists," whose popular appeal had diminished from its pre-1967 peak, than from home-grown democrats. These dissidents were chafing at the regime's 1976 suspension of the national parliament and of the civil liberties guaranteed by Kuwait's 1962 constitution.

In a 1978 speech, Kuwait's ruler, Shaikh Jabir al-Ahmad, expressed his desire to "renew" the Kuwaiti state: "These days in Kuwait there is a clear movement for renewal... And what about religion? The constitution declares Islam to be a source of legislation—so what is new here? The renewal is in the Islamization of the state, in the way that the state will apply religious rules in all spheres... Renewal means changing the present order into a new order."

Back then the regime embraced Islamization, and now they are paying the political price. Kuwait's rulers were attracted by Islamists preaching the virtues of a hierarchical ethical order that included loyalty to Kuwait's ruling autocracy. At the same time, Islamists criticized principles of equal rights

and participatory politics—principles that undermined the authority both of clerics and of princes. Islamists also embraced Islamization because it gave them higher status and access to political power. In practical terms, as the new political allies of the regime, Islamists could colonize state agencies, such as the Ministry of Education, where they could influence the adoption of texts and support the growth of Islamic studies. Over the years, these positions allowed them to recruit young Kuwaitis to their organizations and movements. Among the most fruitful recruiting strategies were appeals to young men by advocating limits on the access of female university students to careers that would enable them to challenge men as professional equals.

The power of Islamists in Kuwaiti politics was augmented in 1981 by the wholesale naturalization and enfranchisement of Bedouin tribal groups allied to the regime. That same year the government redrew electoral district lines as part of its strategy to bolster support for the ruling family in the face of the imminent return to constitutional rule and new elections. Tribally dominated election districts proliferated at the expense of the urban constituencies, which also were redrawn in this large-scale effort to limit the size and cohesion of opposition parliamentary coalitions. Islamists, most of whom were neither wealthy nor members of socially prominent families, used elections to neighborhood cooperative boards as vehicles for mobilizing constituencies and gaining practical experience as political operators. Islamists won elections for parliamentary seats in 1981 and, together with tribal leaders who shared many of their values and political goals, speeded up the Islamization of Kuwaiti society just as the rulers had intended.

Kuwait's Islamists were less tractable than the tribal leaders, as the 1985 election demonstrated. Islamists have political agendas of their own, including the desire of Sunni Islamists to make religious law (Shari'a) the sole basis of legislation.

However, occasionally those agendas include goals that nudge Islamists into the arms of the democrats. To the regime, this is a monstrous alliance. When the Islamists joined the democrats in criticizing the regime's economic policies in 1986, the parliament was shut down again. A few of these Islamists stayed with the democratic opposition throughout the contentious pro-democracy period that started in the summer of 1989 and ended with Saddam's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990.

In the post-liberation parliaments, Islamists again occasionally allied themselves with the democrats in opposition to the government. More often, however, they supported the regime—verbally, at least. But their growing authority made a few of them flaunt their power and flout accepted conventions of legislative behavior. The ruling family, however, still considered them to be the opposition of choice—despite the frequency with which they blocked legislative action on issues the regime wished to see resolved. Islamists were so contentious in the second post-liberation parliament that it was suspended in May 1999. This time around the Emir followed constitutional procedures and permitted new elections to take place in July the same year. The election results returned many of the regime's Islamist antagonists to the legislature, along with members of a new liberal coalition whose popularity was doubtless equally disquieting.

Kuwaiti Islamists have a strong power base. Islamists own their own bank, the Kuwait Finance House, and control many charities, all of which are unsupervised by the government. Money collected by clerics for charitable purposes has been diverted not only to candidates running for parliament but also to international Islamist networks, including some

supporting the activities of Osama bin Laden. A prominent Kuwaiti cleric who was exiled for his inflammatory diatribes, Sulieman 'Abu Ghaith, turned up in Afghanistan as a bin Laden spokesman. Although post-September 11 pressure from the United States gave the government an opportunity to crack down on Islamist activities, including charities, so far little has been done.

Like other fundamentalist entrepreneurs, members of Islamist groups such as Kuwait's branch of the Muslim Brotherhood are active fund-raisers. They speak before large gatherings, issue religious pronouncements (fatwas), and hawk their inspirational tapes. They call themselves "the future of the Middle East," and some, like Suleiman 'Abu Ghaith, urge their countrymen to fight "Jews, Americans, and all their allies." Although Kuwaitis continue to be the most pro-U.S. people in the Gulf region, Islamist power-seekers are playing on what is still a simmering anti-Americanism rooted in U.S. policy toward Israel/Palestine and popular revulsion against TV pictures of "collateral damage" from the Afghan war.

The radical Islamist message falls on fertile ground. Years of Islamist domination of education in Kuwait has produced a generation of graduates—many of whom, having majored in Islamic studies, are unable to get jobs in the modern economy. This is the primary constituency for Islamist mobilization of supporters and voters. These young men are in the forefront of the opposition to women's rights, and the most extreme among them have engaged in vigilante attacks on women whom they accuse of failing to conform to their version of Islamic standards for dress and decorum. A favored tactic is to charge writers with blasphemy, which is illegal in Kuwait. Two women authors who were convicted of blasphemy in

January 2000 were not jailed, but their movements were constrained by street attacks from persons who, after verifying their identities, screamed at and spit on them. Later that year a gang of youths known as "The Desert Flogging Group," followers of Suleiman 'Abu Ghaith, assaulted a young woman and broke her arm. The failure of the courts to convict any of the seven charged for assault reflects the power of those who can frame and then excuse criminal behavior as a religiously motivated act.

As elsewhere in the region, the government's reluctance to crack down on the marginally legal and outright illegal activities of Islamists underpins the authority of religious extremists. Orchestrating hate campaigns, bringing nuisance lawsuits, assaulting people in the streets, and diverting charitable contributions to political campaigns and international terrorist groups are common practices of Islamists in Kuwait. They frame their campaigns in religious terms that appeal to youthful idealists and devout traditionalists. As Shaikh Saud points out, what the radicals have done is to hijack Islam to serve as a cloak for their activities. However, they have not managed to do this all by themselves. The government needs to recognize its contribution to the creation of these monsters, and take responsibility for ending the impunity under which they operate.

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