



## Kuwaitis Vote in Parliamentary Elections

Kuwaiti Men Cast Ballots for a Parliament Many Hope Will Give Women the Vote

*The Associated Press*

**KUWAIT CITY July 5** — Kuwaiti men cast ballots Saturday for a Parliament many hope will give women the vote and work to wean this oil-rich Gulf state off its generous welfare system. Four decades after the country's first legislative election, tribal and religious allegiances still largely determine who wins a seat. But campaign rallies were rife with complaints. Candidates accused the outgoing Parliament of failing to deal with major economic issues such as privatization of the economy, which depends on oil revenues and government spending. Kuwaitis say the 50-seat Parliament was more interested in winning favors for constituents than dealing with the country's problems. "All Kuwaitis agree the last Parliament was a failure," said 23-year-old law student Mohammed al-Kandari, one of hundreds waiting to vote at a polling station littered with empty water bottles and juice cartons. Al-Kandari said he voted for a new face. Campaign workers sprayed water on voters to give them relief from the 120 degree Fahrenheit heat, while food stands offered chicken sandwiches compliments of hopeful candidates. Kuwait's legislature has significant influence although the 1962 constitution gives the emir the final say and the ability to dissolve Parliament. Rulers have disbanded the house three times, most recently in 1999. The Parliament must approve all legislation and has blocked the emir's attempt to give women the right to vote. The outgoing Parliament is dominated by Islamists and blocs supporting the Cabinet. Kuwait has no political parties. Candidates run as representatives of three fundamentalist and two liberal movements, or as independents. "I'm not optimistic about change," said columnist Mohammed Musaed al-Saleh, adding that as long as the precincts are small, people will keep voting for relatives and tribal members. Al-Saleh, who writes for the independent Al-Qabas daily, attended a mock election for women, organized in support of women's suffrage. Only men over 21 can vote and run in Kuwait. Members of the military and the police are also barred from casting ballots. Women's rights activists are hopeful of participating in the next public election, set for 2007. Sheik Sabah Al Ahmed Al Sabah, the deputy prime minister, said recently he believes the incoming legislature will grant political rights to women. "Women are not qualified for politics," Islamic fundamentalist Mohammed al-Gharib said on leaving a polling station. "They need at least 10 years before they can vote and run." Such logic infuriates Fatima Hussein, 65, who in her younger days hosted a television program. "Why do we have to scream for our rights?" she said. Kuwaitis are increasingly aware that their single-sourced economy will not last forever, and they may need to accept paying more money for public services when Cabinet sells them to the private sector. Some 12,000 Kuwaitis, mostly university graduates, are waiting for lucrative but unproductive state jobs, rather than seeking work in the private sector, which is dominated by foreign workers. "The private sector has to have a bigger role in the economy. The Cabinet can do it all no longer," said Jamal Hussein, a 26-year-old soldier. Many lawmakers describe the Cabinet's privatization plan which they have so far blocked as "a scheme to sell the country" to a few wealthy individuals.

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Kuwaiti citizen Fatma Muteri casts her vote in a mock election at the Kuwait Journalists Association in Shuwaikh, Kuwait City on Saturday, July 5, 2003. Women are not allowed to vote in the parliamentary elections Saturday but scores of women came out for mock elections which will not count. Organizers made the setup as real as possible, with booths, candidate posters, brochures and buttons. (AP Photo/Gustavo Ferrari)

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