



KUWAIT: Kuwaiti men arrive to cast their votes for the parliamentary elections at a polling station in Kuwait City yesterday. —Photos by Yasser Al-Zayyat



A Kuwaiti woman writes on her ballot paper before casting her vote for the parliamentary elections at a polling station yesterday.



A close up shot shows the hand of a Kuwaiti man casting his vote for the parliamentary elections at a polling station.

HIGH TURNOUT AS KUWAITIS VOTE AMID PRESSING ECONOMIC, SECURITY CHALLENGES

OPPOSITION'S RETURN ENERGIZED THE ELECTIONS

KUWAIT: Kuwaitis went to the polls yesterday for the first election contested by the opposition in nearly four years amid fresh disputes over cuts in subsidies due to falling oil revenues. Turnout was high at many of the 100 polling stations with some centers reporting 70 percent of eligible voters had cast their ballots with two hours to go, according to state-run Kuwait Television. While Kuwait's two previous elections yielded poor turnout due to an opposition boycott, voters said they were encouraged by more candidates running this time around. "Their return is needed to strike a political balance in the country. They are more capable of monitoring the government actions," retired voter Ibrahim Al-Tulaihi said at a polling station south of Kuwait City.

"A wise opposition is needed because we don't want more political disputes," Jarrah Mohammad, a government employee, said after casting his ballot. Unusually for the oil-rich Gulf Arab states, Kuwait has an elected parliament with powers to hold ministers to account, even though senior members of the ruling Al-Sabah family hold all top cabinet posts.

The election comes against a backdrop of discontent among Kuwaiti citizens over mounting cutbacks in the cradle-to-grave welfare system they have long enjoyed as a slump in world oil prices hits government revenues.

Islamist candidate Hamad Al-Matar, a former MP, said he expected the opposition to win a majority in the 50-seat parliament and prevent the government from raising charges. "There will be no charges on citizens because we have no problem with finances. We have a problem with government management and corruption," Matar said. The opposition is fielding 30 candidates among a total of 293 hopefuls who include 14 women.

Women, who have had the right to vote in Kuwait since 2005, were already queuing outside polling stations when voting began at 8 am. "We want the next parliament to stop the government from hiking prices," said pensioner Maasouma Abdullah.

"We want the government to begin taxing the rich and pay great attention to the low-income sections," added Maha Khorshid, an education ministry employee. Opposition candidates campaigned heavily for economic and social reform and an end to what they charge is rampant corruption.

Bleak economic backdrop

The election also comes with Kuwait facing its most acute budget crisis in years. Oil income, which accounts for 95 percent of government revenues, has nosedived by 60 percent over the past two years. And the emirate has fewer alternatives than its Gulf neighbors, partly because of its elected legislature, analysts say.

"It has built an economic model completely funded by oil and natural gas revenue to support its workforce, but with its empowered parliament it has less flexibility than any other state in the region to abandon that model," US-based intelligence firm Stratfor said in a recent report. Kuwaiti citizens make up around 30 percent of the emirate's population of 4.4 million. A total of 483,000 are eligible to vote.

No motivation

But despite some positivity surrounding the elections especially after the opposition's end of boycott, there have been factors that undermined Kuwaitis' confidence that their votes will make much difference. "There is nothing that drives me to cast my vote," says Nasser al-Dawood, a 26-year old marketer. "We boycotted the previous elections for a number of reasons. Those reasons are still valid ... our participation will only give legitimacy to this cat-and-mouse game between cabinet and parliament."

Only a few of the 293 candidates running are seasoned politicians. Opposition members boycotted the last polls in December 2012 and many now have either retired from politics or belong to groups that are seen as fractured and ineffectual.

Slightly smaller than the US state of New Jersey and with only 1.4 million citizens, Kuwait has the world's sixth largest proven oil reserves and enjoyed more than 15 years of budget surpluses until the price of oil collapsed in 2014. Since then, the government has pushed through a program of economic reform that included reductions in subsidies on electricity, water and gasoline. It has also moved to trim massive public-sector labor costs.

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah pointed to "regional circumstances" and "security challenges" in his decision to dissolve parliament. Kuwait's northern neighbor, Iraq, is fighting to drive

Islamic State militants from the northern city of Mosul.

In June 2015, normally peaceful Kuwait was stunned when an Islamic State-claimed suicide bombing at a Shiite mosque in Kuwait City killed 27 people and wounded scores. In October of this year, an Egyptian who allegedly was an Islamic State supporter rammed a garbage truck into a vehicle carrying US soldiers, wounding only himself.

Those concerns have raised questions about Kuwait's future. Still, economic issues including a critical shortage of housing for citizens and the prospect of further belt-tightening are foremost in voters' minds.

New blood

Turnout had appeared to be low in the first few hours after polls opened, but picked up eventually as officials expected before polls closed. Many of the voters who cast their ballot after polls opened said they hoped the election would inject new blood into parliament.

"I hope we will have a better parliament than the previous one," said a 22-year-old Islamic Waqf Affairs ministry employee after she voted for the first time at a girls' school in the upper middle class al-Rawda district in southern Kuwait City.

"We want young men who can help turn Kuwait into a financial and commercial hub, and who can help give people their rights without the help of influential peo-

ple," said Amal Abul, 45, a department head at the education ministry.

Austerity measures

Campaigning has focused mainly on austerity measures adopted in the past year after officials forecast a deficit of 9.5 billion dinars (\$31 billion) for the 2016/17 fiscal year. The OPEC state relies on oil for about 90 percent of its revenues.

Although the deficit is likely to be smaller than forecast as it was based on an oil price of \$25 a barrel, many Kuwaitis fear the government will try to raise prices further and cut many of the perks they have enjoyed for decades, including free health care, education, subsidized basic products, free housing or land plots and interest-free loans to many citizens.

The cabinet has approved economic reforms, including increasing gasoline prices by as much as 80 percent. "The raising of fuel prices and electricity prices has severely hurt citizens," 23-year-old Abdallah, said after he cast his ballot at a public school in the upper middle class al-Rawda district in Kuwait City.

Amal al-Jarallah, a 50-year-old Education Department employee, said she wanted to see MPs try to improve health and education standards and help working mothers. Asked if she wanted to see women in parliament, she said: "If they are qualified, yes. But that is not an issue." — Agencies

شركة البترول الوطنية الكويتية
Kuwait National Petroleum Corporation (KNPC)

AUCTION NO: WH-001/2016
SALE OF SCRAP/SURPLUS MATERIALS
AT LOCAL MARKETING - SHUWAIKH

Kuwait National Petroleum Company announce the issuing of auction No.: WH-001/2016, and invite bids in sealed envelopes for the sale of Scrap/Surplus Materials at Local Marketing – Shuwaikh as per attached Brief Scope of Works.

Documents can be obtained from the Tendering Committee at Head Office, 1st Floor, Room # 1A-046 during the official working hours i.e. 7:00 AM to 3:00 PM against the official fee of KD. 10/- (non-returnable), starting from Sunday 27/11/2016

Note: Please arrange to provide us with an official letter from the Company authorizing their representative to collect the documents.

The dates of view and inspect the offered items will be on Wednesday, 07/12/2016 at 09:00 AM at Local Marketing -SHUWAIKH.

The last date of accepting the bids is 12:00 PM on Tuesday, 20/12/2016. A Bank Guarantee equivalent to 10% of the total offered value valid for 60 days will be attached with the bids and to be inserted in the ITC special box and offers shall be valid for 60 days from the bids opening date.

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