

## **Kuwait**

Kuwait is a constitutional, hereditary emirate ruled by the Al Sabah family. The 1962 constitution grants the emir executive authority and authorizes the amir to appoint a crown prince and a prime minister, who selects a cabinet for amiri approval. The government and an elected National Assembly share legislative authority. According to the constitution, the amir may dissolve the elected National Assembly by decree but must call elections within two months. The amir exercised this authority in May 2006 and parliamentary elections were held the following month. Local observers and the press generally considered the June 2006 elections free and fair, although there were reports of vote-buying by the government and certain candidates. The National Assembly passed a law in 2005 granting women the right to vote and run for office. Women participated in the subsequent parliamentary elections; however, none was elected. Of the two appointed female cabinet ministers, one resigned in August 2007 under pressure from the National Assembly. By year's end, the other female cabinet minister was under fire from the National Assembly as well. Most members of the military and police do not have the right to vote. While political parties are not technically illegal, the government effectively barred them in practice. There are, nevertheless, several "informal" political groupings that act as quasi-parties. Kuwaiti law provides for an independent judiciary and the right to a fair trial; however, the emir appoints all judges, and the Ministry of Justice must approve the renewal of most judicial appointments leading to a lack of judicial independence. Civilian authorities maintained effective control of the security forces. The government restricted freedoms of speech, press, assembly, association, religion and movement for certain groups, and corruption continued to be a problem. Expatriate laborers continued to face significant violations of their human rights due to the country's labor laws and practices. Trafficking in persons and forced labor continued to be a significant human rights issue in the country. The status of stateless Arab residents ("Bidoons;" Arabic for "without," meaning "without citizenship") remained unresolved.

The U.S. strategy for promoting human rights and democracy in the country was multifaceted and involved engaging in a vigorous dialogue on human rights issues, notably Trafficking in Persons. Some of the tactics used in promoting this dialogue included study tours to the United States, U.S. government outreach and digital video conferences between Kuwaiti and American students, journalists, subject experts and government officials. The United States worked to instill the values of democracy and participatory civil society, especially among youth and women, through support of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), participation in the International Visitor Leadership Programs (IVLP) and educational and training programs. A major focus of the U.S. government's activities during the year was raising awareness about human trafficking in society among government officials.

### **SUPPORTING DEMOCRACY AND POLITICAL AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION**

During the year the United States took a number of diplomatic and programmatic steps to promote democracy. The United States sent Kuwaiti participants to the U.S. on numerous IVLPs and Middle East Partnership Initiative (MEPI) grants were awarded to various local groups to promote political and civic participation. Approximately 200 high school students received English language microscholarship grants helping to instill the values of democracy and civic participation through in-class elections and community service projects. Sixteen Kuwaiti ninth- and tenth-

graders spent a year in the U.S. through the Youth Exchange and Study Program where they were able to learn first-hand about American democratic values.

Some of the IVLPs targeted youth and taught them how to effect social, political and economic change, while other programs taught participants about promoting rule of law and judicial reform, U.S. elections and U.S. foreign policy. A MEPI grant aimed at youth taught leadership/organizational skills geared towards mobilization of peers on environmental issues. Another MEPI grant was awarded to assist in promoting women's political participation and leadership. The U.S. Government also engaged in ongoing and frequent discussions with Kuwaiti parliamentarians and government officials to encourage further progress in the development of democracy in the country.

High level visits by the Secretary of State and the First Lady during the year also helped to promote awareness about women's civic and political participation. During both of their visits, the Secretary and the First Lady met with prominent Kuwaiti women activists and discussed challenges and opportunities for women with their new political rights.

#### SUPPORTING FREEDOM OF THE PRESS/SPEECH

Although Kuwait has one of the most open environments for the press in the region, the U.S. government continued to encourage additional media freedoms and facilitate Kuwaiti reporters' exposure to U.S. counterparts. Two Kuwaiti journalists travelled to the U.S. as part of the Edward R. Murrow Program for Journalists. The journalists examined first-hand journalistic practices in the United States through visits with government institutions, NGOs and journalism schools. The Kuwait Journalists Association (KJA) received a MEPI grant to help them draw up an amendment to the Kuwaiti Press law. An U.S. expert provided guidance on international norms, based on UN and European conventions, and recommended a plan for GOK action. The KJA then drafted an amendment to the Press Law, and laid the groundwork for future experts to advise Kuwait on how to gain public and government support for the passage of the new legislation. Another MEPI grant taught journalists and editors, as well as eight Kuwaiti NGOs, how to produce Public Service Announcements for television.

#### COMBATTING TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS

Expatriate laborers, who form the majority of the country's labor force, face significant problems, particularly household workers, since they are not covered by labor laws. U.S. officials made public addresses concerning the need for the country to address the problems domestic workers face. The U.S. continued to implement a program to raise awareness among foreign workers of their rights and duties. U.S. officials worked closely with labor-sending countries to increase awareness among GOK officials about the plight of the expatriate labor community in Kuwait.

The U.S. Government also engaged in ongoing and frequent discussions with high-ranking and working-level government officials to raise awareness of the problems faced by foreign workers in the country and combating trafficking in persons. Due to USG pressure, the GOK opened a temporary shelter for domestic workers and drafted anti-trafficking legislation.

## OTHER ACTIVITIES

NGOs in the country operate in a difficult environment, since they are prohibited by law from engaging in overt political activity. To strengthen the country's NGO community, the United States continued to fund a number of programs through small grants. Kuwaitis also participated in IVLPs concerning intellectual property rights and promoting interfaith. Kuwait has one visiting Fulbright Scholar in the U.S. whose specialization is in Women and Islam. The U.S. Government continued to engage Kuwaiti interlocutors on promoting religious freedom and tolerance.

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