Analysis of Women’s Political Participation in Middle East, (Case Study: Kuwait and Saudi Arabia)

Susan Noruzi and Maryam Ghorbani

Department of Political science, Mazandaran University, Mazandaran, Iran

**Abstract**

Upon reviewing all societies in the world, even claimers of equality of rights between men and women (including right to political participation) practical inequality of rights between men and women and superiority of men is understood. Arabic countries of Middle East zones are not excluded in this rule and even status of women’s political participation in these countries is much less and it is the result of accumulation of characteristics such as authoritarianism and patriarchy that provided a very inappropriate environment for pluralism and democracy. In this paper, upon analyzing the political participation of women in Kuwait that its politicians have the claim of the most democratic country’s leadership in the region [Middle East] and Saudi Arabia as the weakest country in the region, in the light of observance of women’s political rights, it is concluded that Arabic countries of region yet have a lot of problems for reaching to a real democracy and restoration of women’s rights in their countries.

**INTRODUCTION**

Women’s political participation is assumed always as one of the important topics in the socioeconomic development in process 333 (within 19th century even upon prosperity of democracy in the world [5]. Most of women were prohibited from significant participation in political processes of countries live therein. Legal barriers, norms and social customs deprived the women from rights granted to the men. Only within 20th century, in the democratic systems, right to vote and tenure of office was granted to the women [7]. Lack of women’s complete participation in political process is arising out of their inequality with men in constitutional laws, but the most important barriers for women are derived from historical and cultural grounds of each society and women’s sociability [12]. Low number of women in the political context is an international phenomenon and doesn’t relate to a specified society and system. Nonetheless, political participation in any society has specific characteristics depending on the cultural, political, social and economical factors.

1-1 Structural barriers:

a. Political barriers: Experts of sociology believe that there is a direct relationship between democratic and pluralistic systems and political participation, i.e. political participation will be increased proportional to the extent and strength of democratic system. Mutually, whatever political system is totalitarian, to the same extent political participation will be reduced.

b. Training reasons: Based on international statistics in the most world countries, women’s illiteracy rate is more than men and it is an agent which reduces the women’s awareness of their country and world’s political processes. Naturally, political and social activities of these women are finite.

c. Cultural factor: One of these factors includes patriarchal customs that are seen more or less in the most communities. Furthermore, the women themselves have special political behaviors as follows:

a. Women assume the politics as a manly profession;

b. Women’s participation in political parties is much less than men which may be the result of inattention and low awareness of political issues;

c. Success of women who appear in the context of politics is mostly indebted in political men that were beside them such as Indra Gandhi;

d. Traditionalism and conservatism of women;
e. The women due to their sensitive nature often avoid from getting involve in works mixed to violence and anxiety.

1-2 Nonstructural barriers:
Physiological characteristics include nonstructural barriers such as pregnancy period or delivery. Political participation of women may be analyzed in two Tudeh (communist) and Elites levels. Some characteristics distinguish these two levels from each other, but the both are associated with each other and have direct effect on each other. Helly, Denis [14].

1-3 Political participation in Tudeh level:
The most important form of women’s political participation in Tudeh level is their participation in periodical elections. One of ways for empowerment and participation of women in Tudeh level is participation in levels and associations. It has been proved that organizational attachment is an important factor for increasing the political participation.

1-4 Women’s political participation in elites level:
This level of political participation includes women with higher education, aware, specialist, interested and socially responsible. Presence in decision-making status for the society is the most important characteristic of this level of participation. It is not a single subject, but has a direct relationship with the vote of Tudeh and women’s bravery in candidature and elections. Women’s participation in parliaments is less allover the world and in some cases, it is reached to maximum 01% out of total representatives, whilst women form half of population of any country.

1-5 Women’s political participation in Middle East:
Plenty of researchers mention to exception being of Middle East to the other developing regions and backwardness of this region from global trends in the economic particularly political field. As the viewpoint of Waterbury, what distinguishes Middle East from other world regions is the result of accumulation of characteristics that provided an appropriate environment for legal pluralism and democracy.

Case study: Saudi Arabia:
1-6 Political structure:
Saudi Arabia is administrated as a traditional kingdom. In this country, the power belongs absolutely to the king and who the power has been assigned to them. Since 396 HA, the king has been prime minister and chief of state that the cabinet helped him for fulfillment of duties related to this position. Clause (b), principle 9 of constitutional law of Saudi Arabia stipulated the king’s election procedure as follows: the government is transferred to the sons of promoter king, Abdulaziz Ibn Alfeisal Alsaud and their grandsons. In Saudi Arabia, clergy has a considerable effect on supervision over performance of king and ruling dynasty, drafting, quality and speed of socioeconomic development process and yet reserving social consensus. On the other side, Saudi rulers shall consider the beliefs of Mohammad Abdolvahhab’s descendants Kupper, A. J, Kupper [16].

Reforms in political system of Saudi Arabia after September event:
The system ruling on Saudi Arabia is sensitive and effective on regional and international developments. Since beginning of 37th decade, USA adopted a positive role for persuasion of political reforms in the whole Arabic countries at the south of Persian Gulf particularly Saudi Arabia [19]. After September event, government of Saudi Arabia took effort, upon accelerating a part of controlled reforms trend, to adjust the religious doctrines, because within a short period thereafter berated Saudi Arabia because of financial supports of Bin Laden, Taliban Regime and Al-Qaeda network for employing the people participated in American attacks.

Political structure of Kuwaiti government:
Guillermo O’Donnell is one of theoreticians of authoritarian regime and determined features for this kind of regimes. As his viewpoint, a bureaucrat authoritarian regime is a regime that after coming to the power attempted to takeover it and took three essential performances into account for stabilization of its power: firstly limits the ways for entering into the leadership federate for other society members and deals with control and removal of political participation of people and ultimately tries to dominate over revenue resources. Such a function may be applied for political system of Kuwait. In this country, leadership is at the disposal of a dynasty (Al Sabah) and political participation is very weak [22]. The result of Al Sabah’s interventions has been converted to a nondemocratic system. Kuwaiti government was led based on the Amir’s opinion until 1702. In this year, the first constitutional law of this country was compiled and consequently a parliament consisting of 50 members was established. Certainly the women in Kuwaiti society form more than half of Kuwaiti people. This rate is applicable on students, graduates of universities and governmental staff, as well. According to the
statistics within 10 (AD), Kuwaiti women form more than 33% of workforce and based on the statistics of National Bank of Kuwait, until 2020, more than 17% of investments in the country will be referred to the women. In the constitutional law of Kuwait and its amendment, the women have been deprived from right to vote and representative candidature, but explicitly man being has been declared as one of conditions for electors and elected people in article 1 of elections act. Kuwaiti women have attempted for achieving this right several times, but faced disagreement of Amir, selfish representatives of parliament and traditionalists who often consisted of tribe heads. Among countries located at the south of Persian Gulf, Kuwait has a special position. This country claims for having a kind of democracy so that its leaders assume it as the most democratic countries of Persian Gulf Cooperation Council [16]. Following occupation of Kuwait in August 1980 and incorporation of government obeying Saudi Arabia, the first local objection by Kuwaiti women was happened following demonstrations in Kuwait 2 days after occupation [3]. Within this period, Kuwaiti Amir promised people to increase the scope of public participations, freedoms and political rights of women. These promises were reminded by his western allied. After releasing and coming of Al Sabah on the power, the people waited for realization of Amir’s promises including national parliament reopening which had been dissolved by Amir [5], as well as granting the political rights to women. Based on an order of Amir Colin, Ronald, and considering his legal powers, after 40 years experience and parliament life without presence of women in Kuwait, right to political participation was granted to the women of this country. In real, this order was unexpected for the people and even activists of women affairs. Based on the provided poll, 91% of people didn’t expect for issuance of this order by the Amir. Hassan Abdollah Johar, representative of parliament and professor of Kuwait University deemed this order as one of the most important political developments in the contemporary democracy history of Kuwait after declaration of constitutional law and beginning of parliament life in 2001.

Based on plenty of polls, Kuwaiti people didn’t agree granting full political rights to the women [4]. One of the most reliable researches about women’s political participation was applied by Bandar Ayed Alzafiri in 1965 at Kuwait University. According to his research, 63% of examinees disagreed to the customs and traditions of Kuwait as the main barrier for this participation. Results of this research indicate that disagreement in tribal regions is highly due to governance of customs and traditions. In the cities, cause of agreement was related to conservative interpretation of religion.

Conclusion:
During this research, it was concluded that women’s political participation has been ever one of important topics for development, nonetheless within 20th century, right to vote and tenure of office was granted to the women. Low number of women in the politics is a global phenomenon and is not related to a specific society and regime, but political participation in consideration of cultural, political [4], social and economical factors has specified characteristics. Barriers such as structural and nonstructural obstacles avoid participation of women in Arabic countries of Middle East due to following reasons: autocratic nature of governments, low level of literacy, culture and customs such as patriarchy causes low rate of participation in these countries [2].

In continue, status of women’s political participation in two countries of Kuwait and Saudi Arabia were analyzed as two case studies. It was observed that women’s status in Kuwaiti society is much appropriate than a closed and traditional society and Kuwaiti women after a lot of efforts in 1771 were authorized to candidate and vote. But in Saudi Arabia, this vote has been granted by king of Saudi Arabia, Malek Abdollah as a late decision, but has not been applicable yet. At end, it is notable that globalization and promotion of women’s literacy and awareness in these countries made them aware of their rights and duties [8]. Beginning of an Arabic spring in Middle East demonstrates this event. As long as real foundations of political participation means spontaneous appearance of public institutions and realization of civil society, [11]. Creation of parties’ freedom and important of all freedom of thought and expression is not incorporated in the region countries [7], stability of reforms may not be expected and it results in use of violation for reaching to its demands through people (including women and men) in these societies.

REFERENCES