

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

Public Statement

AI Index: MDE 17/004/2005 (Public)
News Service No: 133
20 May 2005

Kuwait: Amnesty International welcomes the extension of political rights to women

Amnesty International welcomes the approval by the Kuwaiti parliament, on 16 May 2005, of a bill extending political rights to women. Once the bill receives assent by the Amir of Kuwait, it will become law and extend to Kuwaiti women the right to vote and stand in-elections.

This act is in no small measure attributable to the many years of campaigning and legal challenges to the discriminatory electoral law of 1962, undertaken by women's rights activists in Kuwait. Amnesty International commends the persistence of these human rights defenders (HRDs) and those who acted in solidarity with them on local and international level.

The extension of political rights to women in Kuwait will help bring domestic legislation in line with Kuwait's international obligations. In 1994, Kuwait acceded to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and in 1996 it acceded to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

In January 2004, during the consideration of Kuwait's report by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the government of Kuwait reiterated its intention to present to Parliament, during the current legislative session, legislation that would grant women their full political rights.

In its Concluding Comments on Kuwait's implementation of the UN Women's Convention, the CEDAW expressed its concern at Kuwait's failure to ensure that women had, on equal terms with men, the right to vote in all elections and public referenda and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies. It noted that the lack of political rights of women also has a negative impact on women's enjoyment of other rights protected under the Convention. The Committee called on Kuwait "to take all necessary steps, as a matter of utmost urgency, to introduce and actively support the adoption of legislation to amend the discriminatory provisions of the Electoral Law in line with the constitutional guarantee of equality and in order to ensure compliance with the Convention".

Echoing the findings of the CEDAW, Amnesty International urges the Kuwait authorities to take all necessary measures to harmonize all aspects of its domestic legislation with the principles and provisions of the Convention.

In the CEDAW General Recommendation No. 23 on women in political and public life, the CEDAW identifies some measures to states to take, including ensuring "that women understand their right to vote, the importance of this right and how to exercise it" and "that barriers to equality are overcome, including those resulting from illiteracy, language, poverty and impediments to women's freedom of

movement". Amnesty International urges that the government of Kuwait should – in consultation with civil society - examine measures which could be taken to encourage the equal participation of both men and women in public life, notably by challenging the culture of perception concerning the place of Kuwaiti women in society.

Along with Kuwaiti human rights defenders, Amnesty International will monitor implementation of the new measure to assess its consistency with CEDAW and other international human rights standards.

BACKGROUND

Article 1 of Kuwait's 1962 Electoral Law (Law number 35 of 1962) prohibits women's participation in the political process. The CEDAW issued its Concluding Comments on 30 January 2004 (UN document reference CEDAW/C/2004/I/CRP.3/Add.4/Rev. 1; please see paragraphs 1, 15, 16 and 20). The first opportunity that Kuwaiti women will have to use their right to vote will be in July 2007, when the next national elections are scheduled.

Levels of women's political participation in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are severely limited. More details on discrimination against women in the Gulf Cooperation Council can be found in Amnesty International report: "Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries: Women deserve dignity and respect", AI Index: MDE 04/004/2005, 11 May 2005; and news release, GCC Countries: Time to end discrimination against women, AI Index: ACT 77/018/2005.