

The Shia of Kuwait And Minority Politics

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Abstract: The Shia' in Kuwait is the second largest religious sect. It represents an excellent case-study of minority-majority relations in Gulf Countries. The present study is an exploration of how the Shia's of Kuwait adapted to its minority status, and the various strategies it employed in maximising its resources, and in promoting its group interests. What is unique to Kuwait is the democratic experiment that was the result of a struggle that lasted three quarters of a century, and the Shia's role in this struggle. The main import of the present study is to show that the economic and cultural factors are as important as religious factors in establishing group identity.

Keywords: Sectarianism, Activism, Minority, Mobilization, Tribalism, Opposition.

THE SHIA OF KUWAIT AND MINORITY POLITICS¹

I. Some Sociological Considerations:

This paper aims to establish the following: First, the concept of *minority*, when applied to the Shia of Kuwait is to be understood in strictly sociological terms. Second, the Shia of Kuwait utilize specific strategies to maximize their resources. Some of their strategies are; (a) aloofness, (b) political loyalty, and (c) rebellion and protest. Third, the Shia of Kuwait have acted in this way not in accordance with the theological principles, but in accordance with the pragmatic nature of the game of politics. Fourth, the paper concludes with an explanation as to how the Shia sectarian strategies, which were coupled with, those of Sunni tribalism contributed to the emerging of unbridled neo-primordialism in Kuwaiti Society.

As it is well known, that the label "minority" is not a comfortable concept in the Middle East. The term minority may give the impression that minority disrupts group consensus. A *minority* group may imply that it poses a threat to national integration, e.g. a threat to regime stability or to the political order, and to dominant group values. (McLauren, 1979: 9-10).²

¹ This is an expanded version of a paper presented to the Middle East Net work Seminar on: Religious Minorities in the Arab Middle East, Cultural Practices and Political Strategies. Organized by the Carsten Niebuhr Institute, Copenhagen, Denmark, December 2-3, 1996

² McLauren (1979:4) in contrast defines a minority group as "a body of persons... (which) constitutes less than one-half the population of an (national) entity."

In addition to the negative denotations of the label *minority*, other sources of confusion may complicate the picture. On such source of confusion is the dilemma of establishing a criterion as to what exactly constitutes a *minority*. Neither numerical superiority alone, nor physical and/or racial features are sufficient enough to account for the social categorization of a group to be labeled as such (Ibrahim, 1992:23-30)³

Giddens (1990: 245) summarized a long lasting debate about what may constitute a *minority*. He postulated the following 'features' for a minority group:

1. Its members are disadvantaged, as a result of discrimination against them by others, and as a result of negative stereotyping (negative classification).
2. Its member's possess group solidarity, or a strong sense of identity, as a result of prejudice and discrimination.
3. Its members are to some degree physically and socially isolated from the larger community.

When closely examined, the Shia of Kuwait exhibit little similarity to the minority group as described above. It may be true that the Shia of Kuwait were a disadvantaged group in the past, and to a lesser extent still are, but obviously they are not isolated, neither physically nor socially, from the community as whole. They, are themselves inclined to fragmentation and factionalism, both internally as a religious group and politically, which violates the second requirement of Giddens postulates.

³ Ibrahim (1992:25-6) adds further requirements, that a minority group membership is ascriptive i.e. non-voluntary, and that endogamy is the most prevalent form of marriage. For a summary of research in this field: See and Wilson, 1988:224-229

It seems to be more feasible to consider a wider than is normally practiced scope to the issue of minority in the socio-economic context. Thus, the minority-majority differentiation is a social control mechanism: Social categories are created by economic classification and augmented by the cultural division of labor. Control of discreet social groups is exercised, either by repression or by incorporation (i.e. institutionalization) in the political system, depending on specific set of collective events of a community. In this regard, Gibbs (1989) simple definition of the concept of control is very useful.

The generic definition of control advanced by Gibbs is that; attempted control is an overt behavior by a human or a social group "in the belief that (1) the behavior increases or decreases the probability of some subsequent condition and (2) the increase or decrease is desirable "Gibbs, 1989: 22-35). If we set aside for the moment the objection to whether control is conscious, i.e., goal directed, this definition may overcome the anomalies of minority group size and degree of isolation, by rendering them immaterial.

A word of caution here is justified at this juncture. Although the control mechanism operates reasonably well at the societal level, it does not accommodate all the cases where actions taken by group members may result in a lower reward for their groups, such as the belief in the occultation of the hidden Imam, flagellation, *taqiyyah* and martyrdom, the peculiar practices of Shi'ism which set it apart from the Sunni population. As the research of Tajfel and Billig (1981) on the social psychology of inter-group relations indicated, the proclivity

of invidious inter-group comparison and competition cannot be reduced to materialist factors, "or to rational choice strategies."⁴

A more appropriate explanation for this aspect of minority relations is to consider the cognitive and the emotional capacities in which the control is exercised. This can be illustrated, in part, by the tremendous hold that the *Mullas* have on the Shia's psyche (in Kuwait and elsewhere). The formative event of Shi'ism is the tragedy of *Karbala*, more than thirteen centuries ago, which has been constantly played and replayed in order to strengthen the emotional commitment of its members. As Gordon pointed out that ethnicity--and for that matter minority group, unlike economic class background--cannot "be shed by mobility: It becomes incorporated into the self" (See and Wilson, 1988:225). The emotional and cognitive capacities of Shia -- as a minority group--alone do not explain group durability and resilience. What accounts for these features is that the Shia in Kuwait has been institutionalized, in the social (and) power structure in the course of the twentieth century, and hence acquire a relative share in the social power as will be shown later on.⁵ I have proposed, elsewhere, that Shia, in the context of Kuwaiti society, represent a corporation, as they are incorporated in the mainstream of the social and the economic life⁶

⁴ Banton (1983) has shown that ethnic community evokes both affinal and cultural attachments, because it is rooted in kinship ties, real or imagined, which appeals to the bonds of family, blood origin, descent; but its resilience and power is subject to social and economic constraints (Quoted in See and Wilson, 1988 225-6).

⁵ This point is continuously with justification raised by many Sunni intellectuals and politicians, that prior to fundamentalist politicization, discrimination at the social and cultural level was not widely practiced in Kuwait. I will address this point presently. As for the sectarian and tribal corporation in Kuwait (and the Arab World) see Al Naqeeb (1990), Ayubi (1995).

⁶ The differences between Shi'i Arabs including those from *bar faris* who are called sometimes Huwelleh, and Shi'is from Iranian origin are so marked in certain periods and at certain aims that they do not marry with Ajam.

The incorporation of the Shia in the political structure of Kuwait, did not follow a smooth linear process to say the least.. It fluctuated widely. As demonstrated by the work of Charles Tilly, the relationship between the political center and peripheral (i.e. minority groups) is conflict ridden. As the peripheral, or a minority group attempts to penetrate the center, sometimes successfully but mostly it ends in its repression by the majority. With each rebuff the level of grievances of the minority groups increases (Tuma, 1984:530, and Tilly, 1978). When however, the minority groups penetrates the center successfully, 'its power becomes institutionalized, and the likelihood of further collective action declines, perhaps precipitously." (Tuma, 1984:531).

The minority group's position is determined in accordance with the particular historical events that mark their development, depending on a set of fluctuations in relative power distribution, and level of grievance over time. I will trace the fluctuation and the incorporation of the Shia group in the community of Kuwait over the last seventy-five years (1920-1996). In this attempt, I will demonstrate how these fluctuations support Tilly's hypothesis. In particular, I will attempt to establish the fact that these fluctuations began long before the Iranian revolution of 1979. Consequently, I will show that these dynamic processes of minority politics are generated by internal dynamics of the Kuwaiti society, and not simply as a reflection of regional external factors.

II. Socio-Economic Origin

The Shi'i migration to Kuwait from the neighboring countries began around the middle of the ninetieth century. They came from four different origins. The first group is the Shi'i Arab, which are the *Baharnah* (migrated from Bahrain) the *Hasawiyyah* (migrated from Hasa-the eastern province of Saudi

Arabia). The second group is composed of those from Iraqi origins. The third group is the *Huelleh*: the Arabs who came from the Iranian side across the Arabian Gulf, and those who came from *Ahwaz* (the eastern side of *Shatt Al-Arab*); geographically known as *Bar Faris*. The fourth group are the descendants from Iranian origin. The latter group is traditionally known by historians as the minority within a minority⁷ The dominant religious sect among these groups is the *Imami-Twelvers*.

Shia migration to Kuwait coincided with Shi'i revival: the vast historical movements to confront the massive penetration of European Imperialism of the Gulf region. Shi'i revival, which Enayat (1986:160-194) described as "modernism", represents a break, both epistemologically and politically in the traditional *shi'ism*.

Modern *Shi'ism*, in Kuwait and the Gulf region, came into existence in the last decade of the nineteenth century, and not before. According to Enayat (1986:162-4), the middle of the nineteenth century was the major turning point. During this period, the office of *Marjai taqlid* ('the source of imitation'- the highest religious authority whose rulings should be observed by all Shia) was established in Iran. The *Marjai taqlid* provided an organized and centralized structure of leadership as opposed to fragmented localism of the past.

The Shi'i cultural revival in Iran, *Najaf* and *Karbala* (in Iraq) which took place around the middle of nineteenth century (Alawi, 1989: 83-92), has not received the same attention vis-a-vis *Sunni* revival as portrayed by *Al-Afghani* and *Abdu*. Both Alawi and Enayat claim that Shi'i revival was to a large measure a

⁷ Most of prominent merchant Shia families settled in Kuwait around this time frame, such as the Maarafi, Behbehani families belonged to this group. (Private conversations, with members of these families).

response to the spread of secularization and westernization introduced by the European dominance, which alarmed the Shi'i religious hierarchy that these innovations might lessen the difference between *Sunnis* and *Shi'is*.

Since then, fear of secularization will remain the impetus of Shi'i political mobilization as well as the main source of resistance. Additionally, We should take note of the fact that Shi'i revival coincided with *Sunni* reformist movement, as personified by two of its main figures; *Al-Afghani* and *Mohammad Abdu*, a point of great historical significance.

Lack of systematic political thinking has been one of the major distinguishing feature of the Shia orthodoxy. The reason, hence, can be attributed primarily to 'ideological' *fiqhi* position of the Shi'i twelvers, since "the legitimate source of all authority and political decision" rests with the absent Imam. Therefore, all exercise of political power in the absence of the Imam is considered as usurpation of his authority, and thus as theoretically illegitimate (Momen, 1989:56).

It took a long time before *Khomeini* resolved this issue (paradox) with his concept of *Willayet Al-Faqih*. In the interim the Shi'i political stand oscillated between three positions:

1. Political Aloofness, that is when *ulama* (the knowledgeable) must concern themselves exclusively with Shari'a (a position similar to Arab peninsula version of Sunni orthodoxy).
2. Support for the government, because it is believed that the government responsibility is to maintain social order. Therefore, it is the duty of *ulama* to support the government in carrying out its duties.

3. Opposing the government since it represents illegitimate temporal authority in the absence of the hidden Imam. It happens that this position is invariably adopted whenever the *ulama* (*mullas*, or *malali* in Arabic) feel that their authority and interests are being threatened.

Momen (1989:57) maintain that these three positions do not represent different schools of political thought, rather they are options exercised by Shia according to circumstances⁸. We will show in the next section that the Shia in Kuwait utilized the three options—aloofness, loyalty and opposition—between 1938-1981. The two years, 1938 and 1981 representing the second and third turning points. (The first being the last decade of the nineteenth century mentioned earlier.)

What led to these turning points is that, by the end of the First World War, the British government encouraged Shi'i migration to Kuwait (Tamimi, 1989). That migration coincided with the relative growth of the Kuwaiti economy. The immigrant numbers were large enough to be alarming to the other Kuwaiti Arab nationalists, and gave way to considerable tension and large-scale nationalist agitation. The tension and political friction between Shia and nationalists reached confrontation level in the year 1938, during the first constitutional experiment in Kuwait.

At this historical conjecture and for the first time in the Kuwaiti history, the question of political sectarianism came to the fore. The point I would like to

⁸ According to Bailey's (1985:5-7, 1988-189) thereon when normative rules predominate the political game over pragmatic rules is an indicator of stability. While pragmatic rules that fill the gaps left by norms such as the Shia oscillation by quietism and revolt, become predominant when there is radical change, i.e. instability. This applies well to Kuwaiti Shia's transition from quietism in pre 1938 period to participation in a rentier economy. Zubaida (1972) on the other hand emphasize's the fact that political activism in Islam assumed religious-sectarian overtones.

make in this connection is that political sectarianism was up to that point in time not practiced at the popular level, it became since an adopted but undeclared public policy by the state⁹.

If true, then it confirms our central thesis that majority-minority relationships can be better viewed in terms of control and power politics, the two sides of the same coin.

III. Strategies of Minority Politics

It has been mentioned earlier that Shi'i migration to Kuwait at the post first world war period--especially from Iran raised considerable alarm among the Arab nationalists in Kuwait. Perhaps partly for this reason the first consultative council formed in Kuwait in the year 1921 was composed exclusively of Sunnis. It did not include representatives of the Shia in Kuwait at that time, neither Arab Shia (Baharna and Hasawi), nor from Iranian origin. The same policy toward the Shia persisted in 1938 when the first constitutional council was elected (Mudairis, 1996:31)

According to Mudairis (1996), the discrimination against Shia—especially those of Iranian origin—has been consistently applied in Kuwait since then, that constituted the main reason for the Shia to refuse taking part in Jahra battle (1921), when Kuwait was attacked by Ibn Saud forces. A group of Shia went to the British agent in Kuwait, at that time, demanding that they must be excluded from the participation in this battle in view of their claim that they are not Kuwaiti Citizens but Iranians living in Kuwait (Abdulla Hatem-as quoted in Mudairis, 1996:25)

⁹ Similar view has been raised by Alawi (1989:151-194) regarding the Iraqi situation. See also Al-Nafisi (1973).

In retaliation, the civil administration councils, which were established in Kuwait between the years 1934 and 1938 consistently, excluded Iranian Shia from their membership. On the other hand, Arab nationalists continued to protest against foreign migration, targeting Iranian emigrants to Kuwait, in particular. During the first parliamentary election in Kuwait in March 1938 the Shia were only allowed to vote and not to run for office. The Shia, in response, composed a letter of protest to the constitutional council demanding (Mudairis, 1996: 32):

1. Shia membership in the council,
2. Establishment of a Shia court,
3. Opening of Shia schools,
4. Equality in employment

The council rejected all these demands. A group of Shi'is—from Iranian origin—in direct challenge to the council requested that they be issued British nationality by the British agent. The constitutional council then seized this opportunity and issued a decree that those Kuwaitis who have a dual (foreign) nationality to be expelled from Kuwait.

While this tense exchange was going on, the ruler of Kuwait at that time, Shaikh Ahmed Al-Jaber was waiting for the right opportunity to dissolve the council and rid himself of the cumbersome and acrimonious nationalist agitators. In September of the same year (1938), he made his move, with the support of the Shi'a of Iranian origin, who were his fervent supporters¹⁰.

¹⁰ For an assessment of the constitutional experiment in Kuwait, Bahrain and Dubai, see Al-Naqeeb (1990: 75-78). In contrast to the situation in Kuwait the Shia in Bahrain were leading the opposition to the regime, see: Fuad Khouri (1980).

In the aftermath of the Second World War, and with advent of the rentier economy (in which oil wealth replaced trade and perling as the source of national income), the Shia benefited immensely from the oil boom of the fifties. The ruling family of Al-Sabah immensely rewarded the prominent Shi'i merchant families who moved closer to the mainstream of Kuwaiti loyalist politics.

The sixties and early seventies witnessed high rates of mobility, both geographically and socially. Geographically, urban areas of Kuwait went through dramatic expansion, which resulted in the demographic dispersion of the urban population. The Shia who were concentrated mainly in Sharq quarter of old Kuwait City and other coastal areas, spread all along the seaside to the south and east of Kuwait.

Socially, however, there was a great deal of collective mobility, in which social groups moved en block upward on the social ladder. This was due to expansion of employment in the government sector, public transfers, and direct compensation from public treasury (Al-Naqeeb, 1990). Social mobility was more marked among the Shia in Kuwait, especially among those of low income jobs such as porters, tararih, peddlers, craftsmen and traditional artisans, and lower middle occupations. (Al-Naqeeb, 1996 a : 49-84).

In 1961, immediately after political independence of the State of Kuwait, a second constitutional attempt began. During this time, the Shi'i minority advanced its institutional structure as they have been allowed to open their Husaniya (Shi'i religious center), their own mosques and their own Jafariyya court (Shiat court). And when the Kuwaiti constitution was declared in 1962, it stressed the equality for all the citizen of Kuwait (Crystal, 1996:259-286).

During the first parliamentary session, the Shi'i deputies (members of parliament) who were recruited from the prominent merchant families continued to give full support to the government. During the second parliamentary session—when the results of the elections for the second parliament were falsified by the government—the Shi'i deputies, together with the tribal Sunni deputies formed the loyal majority in support of the government. By means of this, the government was able to pass a number of unconstitutional laws—many are still in force and remain unamended: such as the nationality law, the press law, and the election law.

Consequently, by the late sixties, corporate arrangements emerged: sectarian, tribal, family and occupational corporations. But unlike European corporatism the authority of leaders of each corporation is not independent of the ruling family, rather it is an extension of the authority of the ruling family, and by the same token the state (Al-Naqeeb 1996 a). Most of the financial rewards and benefits were deliberately channeled through this corporate institutional setup. These rewards and benefits included: nominating deputies to run for election, nominating cabinet ministers, appointing municipal council members (a lucrative post in Kuwait) and key positions in the public and joint sectors¹¹.

Given the loyalist politics of the Shi'a minority and in the absence of political parties (which is still totally banned in Kuwait), the Shi'i community was organized around the social and cultural associations, such as:

¹¹ Shia and tribal conglomerations beginning in 1962 were normally given one or two ministerial posts. For more details concerning composition of public sectors, cabinet posts and parliament, see (Al-Naqeeb, 1996 a).

(al-jamiyyah al-thaqaafiyyah (J.T.I. for short)¹² The J.T.I. under the leadership of traditional merchant leaders refrained from participating in Kuwaiti politics, which was dominated by Nasserite and leftist groups at the time. But this situation did not last for long, as we approach the third turning point after 1975.

IV. Neofundamentalism: The Iranian Factor:

The formation of the J.T.I. prefigured the advent of Khomeinism by a decade or so. It is in some important way part of a Shi'i politicization beginning in the sixties with formation of the Da'wa party in Iraq and the appearance of the Al-Sadr movement in Lebanon¹³.

Before the formation of the J.T.I. the four major groupings of the Kuwaiti Shia belonged to four different doctrinal schools – Mathhabia:

1. The Shaikhi's, composed mainly of the Hasawiyah -- from Hasa.
2. The Ikhbari's, composed mainly of the Bahraini's.
3. The Usuli's, who are mainly Iraqis and some Iranians.
4. The Khu'is, who are mainly from Iran origin, and both Arabs and Furs. Some of the leading merchant families who belong to this group are: Musawis, Qabazard, Bahman, Behbehani and Ma'arafi... etc. (Mudairis, 1996 : 30)¹⁴

¹² In the late fifties and early sixties during Abdullah Al-Salim rule (later the first sovereign ruler) sport and cultural clubs were permitted which became centers of political activity. The J.T.I. became the center for Shi'i activism, which later, after the Iranian revolution, developed into the center of Shi'i conservatism. See Ghabra (1991) and Crystal (1996) for a general discussion of voluntary associations.

¹³ Dr. Isam Al-Khafaji brought this important connection to my attention.(Private conversation).

¹⁴ For details of doctrinal differences between these groups see Mudairis (1996).

The J.T.I. failed to unify the marji'yeh or the dominant fuqhi sect, and was split with the shirazi group over doctrinal matters. By 1969 (according to Mudairis, 1996:36) an upwardly mobile young leadership replaced the old traditional merchants. Although the strongest achievement of the Shi'i merchants was in 1975 elections when they managed to send ten deputies to the parliament (one fifth of membership), it was the last time when the traditional loyalist Shi'i merchants succeed in parliamentary elections. From 1976 onward (the year when the fourth parliament was unconstitutionally dissolved to the present, nearly all Shi'i deputies were members of the neo-fundamentalist movement, in one shade of the doctrinal hue or another (See Table No.1 below).

Table No. 1 here

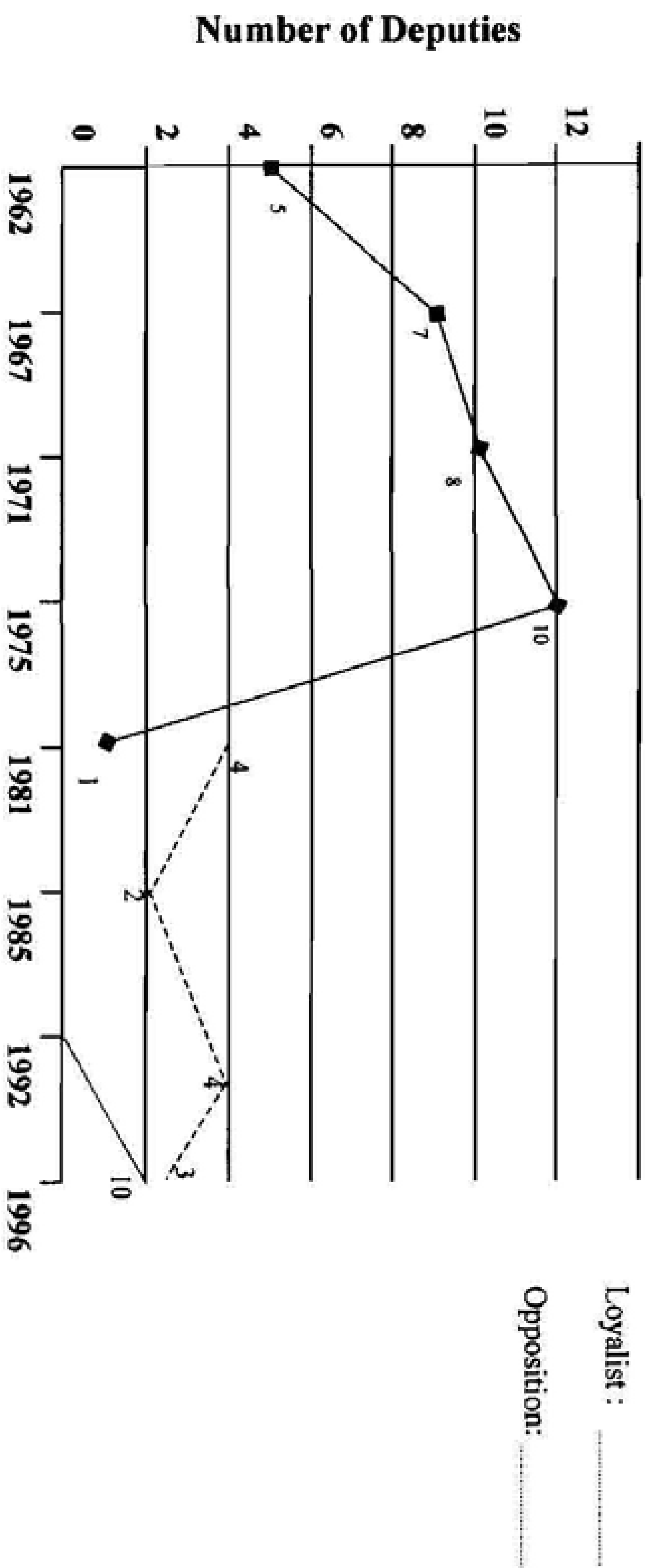
**Table No. 1 Number of Shi'a Deputies in Kuwaiti Parliaments,
By Name and Political Affiliation**

First Parliament (1962)			Second Parliament (1967)		
No. of Deputy	Name of Deputy	Political Affiliation	No. of Deputy	Name of Deputy	Political Affiliation
1.	I. Khuraibut	Loyalist	1.	I. Al-Mutawi	Loyalist
2.	H. Hayat	"	2.	J. Al-Ustath	"
3.	S. Al-Musawi	"	3.	I. Bahman	"
4.	A. Mawash	"	4.	M. Al-Hassawi	"
5.	Z. Al-Kadhumi	"	5.	M. Al-Mazidi	"
			6.	A. Al-Kadhumi	"
			7.	A. Dashti	"
Third Parliament (1971)			Fourth Parliament (1975)		
No. of Deputy	Name of Deputy	Political Affiliation	No. of Deputy	Name of Deputy	Political Affiliation
1.	I. Al-Mutawa	Loyalist	1.	H. Hayat	Loyalist
2.	T. Al-Ustath	"	2.	I. Khuzraibut	"
3.	H. Hayat	"	3.	I. Bahman	"
4.	M. Al-Mazidi	"	4.	I. Dashti	"
5.	A. Al-Kadhumi	"	5.	Kh. Khalaf Al-Tailji	"
6.	A. Dashti	"	6.	M. Badger	"
7.	I. Bahman	"	7.	J. Al-Qattan	"
8.	M. Al-Hasawi	"	8.	H. Juma	"
			9.	A. Al-Wazzan	"
			10.	H. Marafi	"
Fifth Parliament (1981)			Sixth Parliament (1985)		
No. of Deputy	Name of Deputy	Political Affiliation	No. of Deputy	Name of Deputy	Political Affiliation
1.	A. Abdul Samad	Opposition	1.	Y. Hayati	Opposition
2.	M. Habib	"	2.	A. Khudari	Loyalist
3.	A. Jamal	"	3.	N. Sarkhoh	Opposition
4.	I. Al-Mazidi	Loyalist			
5.	N. Sarkhoh	Opposition			
Seventh Parliament (1992)			Eight Parliament (1996)		
No. of Deputy	Name of Deputy	Political Affiliation	No. of Deputy	Name of Deputy	Political Affiliation
1.	A. Abdul Samad	Opposition	1.	A. Abdul Samad	Opposition
2.	Y. Hayati	"	2.	H. Al-Qallaf	"
3.	A. Al-Baghli	"	3.	H. Jawhar	"
4.	A. Jamal	"	4.	A. Al-Khudhari	Loyalist
			5.	S. Khorshid	"

The turning point was when Sha'ban mosque movement which started in 1979 onward. The Shi'i community in Kuwait was split into two groups; (a) the politically conservative merchant oligarchy with its traditional loyalist political line, and (b) young middle class "revolutionaries" who were calling for bringing conservative Gulf regimes down, and replacing them with Islamic republican regimes--analogous to the Iranian model. In the course of 1979, the Shaban mosque movement brought together the former secular Arab nationalists, who turned after the 1967 defeat into leftist revolutionaries, and the Shi'i middle class militants in one movement (see Table No. (1) and for graphic presentation figure No.(1).

Figure No. 1 here

Figure No. (1)
 Changing Ideological Affiliation of Shia Deputies in the Kuwait Parliament, 1961-1966
 Graphic Presentation of Information contained in table no. (1)



The Shi'i neo-fundamentalist militants were carried away by their own rhetoric, which brought them on a collision course with the ruling regime. The assassination attempt at the life of the ruling Amir (prince) of Kuwait in 1985 was followed by heavy-handed persecution of the Shia in Kuwait. Internal security service and the officer corps of the army were purged of Shi'is regardless of political affiliation (Assiri, 1994; and Mudairis, 1996:39).

It is not surprising then that the Shi'i representatives in the 1985 parliament were among the most radical, and the most critical of government policies. The 1985 parliament lasted no more than one year and half, when it was un-constitutionally dismissed in July 1986, and not to return until two year after the liberation of Kuwait, from Iraqi occupation in October 1992. The period between 1986 until the Iraqi invasion galvanized the opposition to the government with the formation of the constitutional movement called the Monday gatherings (Diwaniyat al-Ithnain) which the Shia of Kuwait wholeheartedly supported.

During the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, the national integration of Shia and Sunni was at its highest point. The Kuwait Shia community played a significant role in the resistance movement against the occupation. But soon after the liberation of Kuwait the tension between Sunni and Shia activism resumed, and was not discouraged by the government. Obviously, the government was not interested in promoting voluntary work, self reliance, and popular initiatives which characterized the social life under the occupation and resulted in the reduction of tension between culturally and religiously differentiated groups.

After liberation, new political blocs and alliances emerged. These blocs are neither strictly religious nor are they secular. They are representatives of a

new breed of “Islamic intellectuals” (Roy, 1994: 85-106). The National Islamic Co-allision (NIC for short, Al-Itilaf Al-Islami Al-Watani) is composed of representatives of this trend. The Sunni counter part is composed of the popular Islamic Bloc (Salafi) and constitutional Islamic movement (Muslim Brotherhood). The three groups represent the neo-fundamentalist movement in Kuwaiti parliament since October 1992. Collectively, they constitute 28% of 1996 parliament (Al-Naqeeb, 1996 c).

Members of the NIC are loosely organized at present, and almost all of them emerged from the J.T.I. groupings (Al-Jam'ia Al-Thaqafiyeh Al-Ijtimaiyeh). They differ slightly from their Sunni counterparts, by moving towards the political center espousing a peculiar brand of reformist orientation.

V. Concluding Remark: Neo-Primordialism:

We have seen how the Kuwaiti Shia political strategies oscillated between Quietism and protest in the course of the twentieth century. Such strategies were instigated not only by theological principles or religious thinking, but also for pragmatic reasons, power relations, maximization of rewards and benefits and identity maintenance. If Shia cultural revival in the late nineteenth century came as a response to European Imperialist penetration of the Middle East, then European Imperialism was in many respects a precursor to the forces of globalization, taking definite shape in the aftermath of the Second World War.

By Globalization is meant that the “compression of time and space” has become so prevalent to the degree that societies are differentiated not only by territorial nation-states, but also being segmented in many different ways, such as

national, ethnic, religious and tribal identities. So that no one form of differentiation is so dominant as to enable us to adopt it as a general principle of analysis". The rising tide of the new nationalisms confirms this development (Shaw, 1994:89).

In the context of the Gulf countries where the institutions of civil society (i.e. political parties, social movements, and voluntary associations) are generally weak, the new forms of social movements that possess the characteristic of social bonding, that we normally attribute to traditional, religious, and nationalistic expressions, become prominent (Gellner, 1981:20). There are, to be sure, major differences between traditional primordialism and this type of post-modern primordialism—that encompass such expressions—characteristic of the age of consumer society. This is why it is qualified as neo-primordialism. (Smelser, 1996:277).

Geertz (1973: 259-269) contrasted primordial sentiments/attachments with civil political communities and states. This approach is consistent with the functionalist classification of societies: traditional societies in which primordialism prevails; and modern (western) societies in which allegiance to "civil state" is dominant. In this sense, primordialism is a rock-bottom "sentiment" which bonds numbers of a community together, when no other forms of attachments, such as those found in western society, are available to them¹⁵.

¹⁵ Geertz terminology poses serious difficulties for those who theorize civil society to be in direct opposition with the public sphere dominated by the state. Geertz seems to consider the state as being equivalent to civil society and hence civil state as opposed to pri/mordial communities. This theoretical problem will not go away unless the concept of civil society is restricted to the original Gramscian formulation.

This formulation is rather simplistic. Neo-primordialism of contemporary society grows out of internal as well as external pressures. In the case of the Kuwaiti Shia sectarianism and religious identity needed to counter the Sunni tribal corporate sentiments and attachments, which is being continually cemented through parliamentary tribal by-elections (the so-called tribal primaries) and the growing influence of the tribal corporation¹⁶.

Shi'i sectarianism and Sunni tribalism are competing in Kuwait for resources, benefits, power and control. The neo-fundamentalist movements in Kuwait and elsewhere in the Gulf fulfill certain functions in the internal community life, as well as being a response to the growing psychological uncertainties produced by political and economic forces of globalization.

Shi'i sectarianism and Sunni tribalism are dynamic expressions of identity politics or the politics of differences¹⁷. If unchecked, we should expect social conflict along cultural lines to intensify. There are, indeed, mitigating circumstances that may prevent such conflicts from developing in civil violence again, or from spilling over across state boundaries, as the Iraqi invasion of Iran exemplified.

¹⁶ The Kuwaiti parliament recently (March 1998) passed a law criminalizing the holding of these by-elections, in which each tribe select its representatives.

¹⁷ To place the question of identity politics, one should not focus on ideological and cultural changes, but should also take into account transformation of social structure and social integration (Calhoun, 1995,53-55,205-224). As for Harrison White (1992: 312-316) one can accept the notion of control as related to the common-sense layer of identity without having to accept the other layer—that is the identity of sectarianism and tribalism. Furthermore, there is now enough research evidence, according to Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle (1997:27-31), 244-248 to support the hypothesis that multiple deprivation is the chief contributing factor to religious revival.

Afghanistan or Algeria may be remote places from the Gulf, but the images they produce can only show the final outcome when the unbridled forces of neo primordialism come into full play¹⁸. But so far, our research has shown, that what we termed as the strategies of minority politics of aloofness, loyalty to ruling regimes and opposition, have worked to incorporate the Shia in the Kuwaiti- and Gulf power structure, largely as anticipated by Tajfel and Tilly, and our concepts of Arab-Islamic corporatism, and political tribalism.

¹⁸ For an overview of the resurgence of ethnic-tribal and sectarian conflicts after the end of the cold war and in response to/or in association with Globalization, see Sadowski (1998), Gurr (1993), and Mlinar (1992).

END NOTES

¹ This is an expanded version of a paper presented to the Middle East Network Seminar on: Religious Minorities in the Arab Middle East, Cultural Practices and Political Strategies. Organized by the Carsten Niebuhr Institute, Copenhagen, Denmark, December 2-3, 1996.

² McLaren (1979:4) in contrast defines a minority group as "a body of persons.... {which} constitutes less than one-half the population of an {national} entity."

³ Ibrahim (1992: 25-6) adds further requirements, that a minority group membership is ascriptive i.e. non-voluntary, and that endogamy is the most prevalent form of marriage. For a summary of research in this field: See and Wilson, 1988: 224-229.

⁴ Banton (1983) has shown that ethnic community evokes both affinal and cultural attachments, because it is rooted in kinship ties, real or imagined, which appeals to the bonds of family, blood origin, descent; but its resilience and power is subject to social and economic constraints (Quoted in See and Wilson, 1988 225-6).

⁵ This point is continuously with justification raised by many Sunni intellectuals and politicians, that prior to fundamentalist politicization, discrimination at the social and cultural level was not widely practiced in Kuwait. I will address this point presently. As for the sectarian and tribal corporation in Kuwait (and the Arab World) see Al Nageeb (1990), Ayubi (1995).

⁶ The differences between Shi'i Arabs including those from *bar faris* who are called sometimes Huwelleh, and Shi'is from Iranian origin are so marked in certain periods and at certain aims that they do not marry with Ajam.

⁷ Most of prominent merchant Shia families settled in Kuwait around this time frame, such as the Maarafi, Behbehani families belonged to this group. (Private conversations, with members of these families).

⁸ According to Bailey's (1985:5-7, 1988-189) theorem when normative rules predominate the political game over pragmatic rules is an indicator of stability. While pragmatic rules that fill the gaps left by norms such as the Shia oscillation by quietism and revolt, become predominant when where is radical change, i.e., instability. This applies well to Kuwaiti Shia's transition from quietism in pre 1938 period to participation in a rentier economy. Zubaida (1972) on the other hand emphasize's the fact that political and economic activism in Islam assumed religious-sectarian overtones.

⁹ Similar view has been raised by Alawi (1989:151-194) regarding the Iraqi situation. See also Al-Nifisi (1973).

¹⁰ For an assessment of the constitutional experiment in Kuwait, Bahrain and Dubai, see Al-Nageeb (1990: 75-78). In contrast to the situation in Kuwait the Shia in Bahrain were leading the opposition to the regime, see: Fuad Khouri (1980).

¹¹ Shia and tribal conglomerations beginning in 1962 were normally given one or two ministerial posts. For more details concerning composition of public sectors, cabinet posts and parliament, see (Al-Nageeb, 1996 a).

¹² In the late fifties and early sixties during Abdullah Al-Salim rule (later the first sovereign ruler) sport and cultural clubs were permitted which became centers of political activity. The J.T.I. became the center for Shi'i activism, which later, after the Iranian revolution, developed into the center of Shi'i conservatism. See Ghabra (1991) and Crystal (1996) for a general discussion of voluntary associations

¹³ Dr. Isam Al-Khafaji brought this important connection to my attention. (Private conversation).

¹⁴ For details of doctrinal differences between these groups see Mudairis (1996).

¹⁵ Geertz terminology poses serious difficulties for those who theorize civil society to be in direct opposition with the public sphere dominated by the state. Geertz seems to consider the state as being equivalent to civil society and hence civil state as opposed to primordial communities. This theoretical problem will not go away unless the concept of civil society is restricted to the original Gramscian formulation.

¹⁶ The Kuwaiti parliament recently (March, 1998) passed a law criminalizing the holding of these by-elections, in which each tribe select its representatives.

¹⁷ To place the question of identity politics, one should not focus on ideological and cultural changes, but should also take into account transformation of social structure and social integration (Calhoun, 1995, 53-55, 205-224). As for Harrison White (1992: 312-316) once can accept the notion of control as related to the common-sense layer of identity without having to accept the other layer – that is the identity of sectarianism and tribalism. Furthermore, there is now enough research evidence, according to Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle (1997:27-31), 244-248) to support the hypothesis that multiple deprivation is the chief contributing factor to religious revival.

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