Salafis in Parliament: Democratic Attitudes and Party Politics in the Gulf

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This article explores how political participation affects the attitudes of Kuwait's and Bahrain's Salafi parliamentarians towards democracy. In comparing the two states' Salafi parliamentary blocs, this study reveals that neither political inclusion nor ideology uniformly dictates either bloc's democratic sentiments. Instead, political incentives, as shaped by their state's unique political environments, colors and contrasts both blocs' democratic attitudes and policies. Like their liberal rivals, Salafi parliamentarians are susceptible to the rewards and realities of political power.

The potential rise and dominance of Islamist movements underlies all talk of democratic reform in the Arab world. Some fear that Islamist parties will exploit democratic reform and impose their interpretation of Islamic law. Others counter that political participation defangs radical tendencies and encourages democratic norms. The debate is already well scripted.

This article contributes to the "Inclusion-Moderation" discussion by exploring how political inclusion affects the attitudes of Salafi parliamentarians towards democracy. While most research on political Islam centers on the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafism in a non-violent political context is vastly understudied. Analyzing how the Muslim Brotherhood's more orthodox rival reacts to political participation is an unused and arguably greater indicator of the influence of institutional conditions on the democratic behavior of religious movements in the Middle East.

This article assesses the democratizing attributes of political inclusion by comparing the democratic behavior of Bahrain's Salafi bloc, *Al-Asalah*, with Kuwait's Islamic Salafi Alliance (ISA).[1] To be clear, this article defines democratic behavior in its most pluralistic sense: support for fair and viable elections, the solidification of parliamentary power, and regime accountability to constitutional law. As representatives of the same literalist, orthodox current of political Islam, one might expect the blocs' attitudes towards democracy to be largely synonymous.

This comparison proves otherwise. Kuwait's ISA has been a far greater proponent of democratic norms than its Bahraini peer. This research argues that neither political inclusion nor religious ideology uniformly determines either bloc's democratic behavior. Instead, political incentives, as shaped by each bloc's unique political environment, demarcate their differing attitudes towards democratic governance.[2]

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1. Officially named *al-Tajammu' al-Islami al-Salafi*.

2. Kuwait's National Assembly consists of 50 elected officials and 16 appointed cabinet members,

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Two important distinctions between Bahrain and Kuwait caution this comparison. Kuwait's National Assembly predates Bahrain's by almost 40 years. However, as this research looks exclusively at Salafi parliamentarians' political behavior, the difference in political experience between the two blocs is less pronounced.[3] Secondly, unlike in Kuwait, sectarianism overwhelms Bahraini politics. As a minority Sunni movement, Bahrain's Salafis have little reason to back any reform that empowers the island's majority Shi'a. Nevertheless, if political inclusion ferments democratic tendencies, one would still expect political actors to gradually overcome sectarian bigotry in favor of greater plurality in governance.

It should also be noted that both blocs' decision to participate in parliament and denounce violence implies that political participation offers some avenue for moderation. However, while Al-Asalah's and ISA's decision to enter politics puts them on the more "liberal" end of the Salafi ideological spectrum, their experiences in parliament are still indicative of how participatory politics can influence Islamist movements.

Finally, it remains unclear how much Bahrain's or even Kuwait's political systems will change in response to the Arab Spring. Nonetheless, analyzing these blocs' historical behavior up to February 2011 can still provide useful insights into how orthodox religious blocs operate in politics. Using data from interviews, local newspapers, and websites, this research qualitatively assesses each Salafi bloc according to a modification of Andreas Schedler's criteria for democratic behavior: their policies towards fair and viable elections, the solidification of parliamentary power, and their regimes' defiance of constitutional law.[4]

This comparative analysis proposes two critical insights. First, political participation does not inherently promote democratic attitudes. Despite operating for almost a decade in three parliamentary terms and competing in two competitive elections, Bahrain's Al-Asalah has consistently obstructed democratic reform. Second, religious ideology does *not* necessarily define democratic attitudes; both blocs support the same literalist tendencies and the same broad objective of promoting Islamic governance, yet both espouse contradictory attitudes towards democratic governance in their respective states.

These findings carry several implications. The ISA's democratic behavior shows that Islamist movements can actively support and defend democratic norms. More importantly, this comparative research warns against generalizing Islamists' political behavior. Historical legacies and regime institutions can impact even the most austere religious parties. Accordingly, this analysis proposes that the policies of Islamist

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including the prime minister. The prime minister, historically the crown prince, presides over the National Assembly. Al-Asalah currently has three representatives in the National Assembly. In 2006, it had eight seats and in 2002 it had six. Bahrain has a bicameral parliament with 40 elected representatives in the *Majilis al-Nuwab* and 40 appointed representatives in the *Shura* Council. The two assemblies have equal electoral weight. In 2012, the ISA had four representatives in the National Assembly, they had two in 2009, two in 2008 and two in 2006 (http://www2.gsu.edu/~polmfh/database/pg2.htm).

3. The ISA was established in 1992. Al-Asalah was created in 2002. Mary Ann Tetreault, *Stories of Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 88.

4. Andreas Schedler, "Measuring Democratic Consolidation," *Studies in Comparative International Development*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2001), p. 66.

movements are vulnerable to the same rational and calculating incentives that define all political actors competing for power, whether secular or religious. Salafi parties can promote democratic norms, but only if it serves their interests; like their liberal rivals, Salafi parliamentarians are susceptible to the rewards and realities of political power.

This article proceeds in four sections. The first section reviews the literature on the relationship between political inclusion and democratic behavior. The second section, the breadth of this article, is the case study. This segment compares both blocs' attitudes and policies according to each of the three categories of democratic behavior. The third section analyzes the institutional and structural variables that might explain the blocs' contradictory attitudes towards democracy. This analysis argues that political incentives underlie both blocs' democratic affinities. Finally, the last section summarizes the research and reiterates the importance of political incentives in explaining democratic behavior. This article concludes by expanding upon the implications of this assessment on a rapidly changing Arab world.

THE INCLUSION-MODERATION DEBATE REVISITED

Jillian Schwedler's *Faith in Moderation* provides the most ambitious attempt to test the "Inclusion-Moderation" argument. Her comparison of Islamist parties in Jordan and Yemen suggests that inclusion *alone* is not a sufficient cause for "moderation," defined as the acceptance of pluralistic norms.[5] Instead, moderation requires not only the shifting of public values towards democracy, but also a change in the party's intentions. She argues that "moderation" is mainly dependent on party leaders' ability to reconcile liberalizing policies with their organization's agenda in response to both outside constraints and internal debates.[6]

On the other hand, Carrie Rosefsky Wickham emphasizes the centrality of direct political participation. Citing Egypt's *al-Wasat* party in 2004, Wickham argues that as Islamists participate in elections, they moderate their rhetoric and ambitions for strategic reasons — that is, to take advantage of the system. Contrary to Schwedler, Wickham insists that once Islamist parties participate in governance, their behavior changes from "politics of principle to politics of responsibility."[7] Islamist politicians simply learn to prioritize constituent demands over their religious agenda.

The Wickham–Schwedler debate centers on whether democratic behavior is caused by political participation or intra-party efforts to liberalize party ideology. At its core, this debate and the larger discussion on political inclusion and moderation asks whether inherent political ideology or political environment has a greater impact on democratic behavior.

Academic literature on political parties has traditionally overlooked party ideology,[8] insisting that the potential rewards of participatory governance push all ac-

5. Jillian Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation: Islamist Parties in Jordan and Yemen* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 149.

6. Schwedler, *Faith in Moderation*, p. 195.

7. Carrie Rosefsky Wickham, "The Path to Moderation: Strategy and Learning in the Formation of Egypt's Wasat Party," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 36, No. 2 (2004), pp. 205–228.

8. William J. Crotty, *Approaches to the Study of Political Organization* (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1967), p. 1.

tors to the mainstream to win as many votes as possible.[9] In viewing parties monolithically, the "Inclusion-Moderation" theory generalizes that all parties compete for the most votes, ignoring the sectarian nature and catered interests of smaller constituencies. Most importantly, it argues that party ideology is always secondary to political power.

This theory begs to be tested on Salafi parliamentarians, representatives of a literalist movement who have politicized largely in protest of other Islamists "selling out."[10] In analyzing Al-Asalah's and the ISA's policies towards the promotion of fair and viable elections, the solidification of parliamentary power, and regime accountability, this comparative analysis provides a rare measurement of political inclusion's influence on Salafi political behavior.

CASE STUDIES: SALAFI BLOCS IN THE GULF

Bahrain's Al-Asalah has systematically failed in each of this study's three criteria for democratic behavior. It has not been a proponent of fair elections. Al-Asalah actively supports Bahrain's disproportionally Sunni-centric electoral system.[11] In May 2009, Al-Asalah voted against a proposal to limit the difference in voter population per district to no more than 5%.[12] Former Al-Asalah chairman Adel Al-Mo'awdah stressed that electoral amendments depend on a "change in the performance of the so-called opposition."[13] This quote is telling of Al-Asalah's democratic attitudes. Al-Mo'awdah's claim that electoral redistribution depends on the opposition's political behavior presents political liberalization not as a normative responsibility but a potential reward for the opposition's acceptance of the political system.

Unlike its Bahraini peer, the ISA's attitudes and actions in Kuwait's parliamentary elections exemplify the bloc's democratic tendencies. The ISA has frequently denounced government interference in elections. During the 2008 elections, the ISA warned "that the government should not meddle with elections and come down heavily on candidates who criticize it."[14] The ISA also criticized corporations' infringements in elections, blaming lobbyists for the blocs' shortcomings in the 2009 elections.[15]

Most significantly, in 2005 the ISA joined a parliamentary alliance that, despite the royal family's objections, remodeled Kuwait's twenty-five electoral districts into

9. Anthony Downs, *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957).

10. Carine Lahoud, "*Koweit: Salafismes et Rapports au Pouvoir*" ["Kuwait: Salafists and Relations to Power"], in Bernard Rougier, ed., *Qu'est ce que le Salafisme?* [*What is Salafism?*] (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 2008), p. 129.

11. Despite representing close to 70% of the population, the number of predominantly Shi'a electorates is roughly equal to Sunni electorates. Katja Niethammer, *Voices in Parliament, Debates in the Majalis, and Banners on Streets: Avenues of Political Participation in Bahrain* (Florence, Italy: European University Institute, 2006), p. 6.

12. "*Al-Bahrain: da'irat intikhabiyya wahida amam al-nawab al-thulatha'"* ["One Electoral District before the House on Tuesday"], *Al-Wasat*, May 23, 2009, http://www.alwasatnews.com/2451/news/read/53894/1.html.

13. *Al-Bilad*, July 26, 2009, via a government source that did not cite the title.

14. "Poor Public Services," *Kuwait Times*, May 13. 2008.

15. Rajeb Damanhouri, "Nashi: Kuwait's Islamists Were Attacked by the Media Because of the Business," *Islam Online*, August 2, 2009, http://mdarik.islamonline.net.

five. This reform intended to curb vote buying and "produce a parliament more attuned to national needs than neighborhood demands."[16] Not all Salafi parliamentarians supported the five-district initiative. Independent Salafi parliamentarians from Kuwait's outer, tribal districts opposed the move, fearing it would dilute their political power. As will be discussed shortly, the ISA, based in Kuwait's *hadar* [urban] constituencies, backed the five-district initiative because it served their districts' interests.

Many point to the ISA and independent Salafi parliamentarians' rejection of women's participation in parliament as evidence that political Salafism subverts democratic norms. Salafi parliamentarians are by no means unanimous on this issue.[17] More importantly, however, once Kuwaiti women's electoral rights were assured in 2006, the ISA adapted to the political change. When asked about the prospects of working with women elected into the National Assembly, ISA parliamentarian Ali al-Omair commented that though "my religion does not permit women to serve in the assembly, if a lady is elected into parliament, we have to deal with her. We can't isolate ourselves in parliament."[18] Al-Omair's submission to the democratically mandated inclusion of women in politics underlines his bloc's ultimate conformity to Kuwait's constitution and democratic process. In Bahrain, Al-Asalah echoes a similar view on women in parliament. While its members' officially oppose women running for parliament, they nevertheless agree to work with them.[19]

Al-Asalah and the ISA's attitudes towards parliament further emphasize their differences in democratic behavior. Officially, both blocs view parliament as essential to good governance. Al-Asalah's representatives, like their Kuwaiti peers, often describe parliament as a tool to enforce Islamic governance.[20] Indeed, Al-Asalah has succeeded in using parliamentary pressure to enforce Islamic law — banning Lebanese pop singer Nancy Ajram's concert and prohibiting the sale of alcohol during Ramadan and at one- and two-star hotels.[21]

However, when parliament is presented as an agent for democratic governance, Al-Asalah's message becomes more muddled. In a 2004 interview, Al-Asalah's former head and current deputy Adel Al-Mo'awdah admitted that parliament is better than "a one ruler dictatorship because it gives the people the power of supervision, at least to spot any corruption in management, morals and money."[22] In 2009, he also described democracy as the best form of governance when it comes to listening to the peo-

16. Nathan Brown, "Moving Out of Kuwait's Political Impasse," *Arab Reform Bulletin,* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/publications/index.cfm?fa=view&id=23320.

17. While Walid al-Tabataba'i, an independent Salafi parliamentarian, has been vocally critical of women's participation in parliament, the ISA has been more ambivalent about women's role in government. James Calderwood, "Controversy Over Voting for Women Gets Heated," *The National*, May 7, 2009.

18. Calderwood, "Controversy Over Voting for Women Gets Heated."

19. Habib Toumi, "Al Asala Leader Rules Out Alliance with Liberals Ahead of Today's Poll," *Gulf News*, October 30, 2010, http://gulfnews.com/news/gulf/bahrain/al-asala-leader-rules-out-alliance-with-liberals-ahead-of-today-s-poll-1.703756.

20. Interview by the author with MP Adel Al-Mo'awdah, July 2009, Manama, Bahrain.

21. Interview by the author with MP Ghanem Al-Buanain, June 2009, Manama, Bahrain.

22. Turki Al-Dakhil, "Highlights: Sheikh Adel Al-Mo'awdah," *Al-Arabiya*, September 1, 2004, www.alarabiya.net.

ple: "More democracy would help Bahrain combat its growing income inequality."[23] However, Al-Mo'awdah worried that democratic governance "equates an experienced man's vote with that of an illiterate's." He thus favored Bahrain's king-appointed Shura Council as an institution of experts chosen to guide policymaking. Echoing fears shared by many in Bahrain's Sunni and liberal communities, Al-Mo'awdah suspected that immediate and drastic democratic reform would empower Shi'a hostile to Sunnis. He said that he understood the need for legislative reform, but argued that "one can't change everything at once for fear of causing greater damage." Democratization must be gradual.

Al-Asalah's legislative record towards parliamentary expansion reflects its deputy's mixed attitudes towards democratic governance. Though it seems unfathomable today, Al-Asalah actually voted with the dominant Shi'a opposition bloc *Al-Wifaq* during the last parliamentary term and mandating that the government draft laws within five months of the law's proposal by parliament.[24] Al-Asalah has also supported amendments forcing the government to solicit elected parliamentarians' views on legislation, to submit government budgets annually, to increase parliamentary sessions from seven to nine months, and to remove an article that allows the government to impose a 15-day deadline for both the appointed Shura and elected Al-Nuwab parliamentary houses to approve legislation. Most importantly, Al-Asalah backed an amendment enabling "the two houses of parliament to modify 'laws by decree' issued by the King outside of parliamentary sessions, which they currently may only accept or reject in their entirety."[25]

While these positions seem politically liberalizing, Al-Asalah's support for parliamentary expansion was ultimately delineated along sectarian lines. All of the amendments it supported to expand parliamentary power include the regime's appointed Shura Council, thus preserving the Sunnis' legislative control. Al-Asalah repeatedly opposed efforts to increase the elected Al-Nuwab Council's influence. They objected to proposals to decrease the size of the Shura Council by half and to designate the speaker of the Al-Nuwab as chair of combined sessions between the Al-Nuwab and Shura councils.[26] Al-Asalah also opposed legislation giving the Al-Nuwab speaker the final vote in a legislative split between the two councils.[27] In summary, while Al-Asalah supported increasing the parliament's collective power, it opposed legislation that strengthens the elected Al-Nuwab's council. Al-Asalah's stance cannot be seen as politically liberalizing but self-serving: it wants to promote parliament's power while maintaining its Sunni bias.

In contrast, Kuwait's ISA and independent Salafi parliamentarians' attitudes towards strengthening parliamentary power have been more supportive of democratic

23. Interview by the author with MP Adel Al-Mo'awdah, July 2009, Manama, Bahrain.

24. "*Al-ta'dilat al-dasturiyya ta'bir al-barliman bi-ittijah al-hukuma*" ["Constitutional Amendments Change the Parliament's Relations with the Government"], *Al-Watan*, May 6, 2009, http://www.alwasatnews.com/2434/news/read/50912/1.html.

25. Mansoor Al-Jamri, "Are Constitutional Amendments Possible?," *Arab Reform Bulletin*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, http://www.carnegieendowment.org/arb/?fa=show&article=22932.

26. Al-Jamri, "Are Constitutional Amendments Possible?"

27. Al-Jamri, "Are Constitutional Amendments Possible?"

governance. In an interview with Al-Jazeera in 2008, independent Salafi parliamentarian Walid Al-Tabataba'i implicitly argued that Kuwait's political stalemate is a product of the royal family's monopoly of the Prime Minister's position: "In Egypt and elsewhere, the prime minister is questioned, but then he enjoys a parliamentary majority. The government here does not enjoy a majority in parliament and therefore its back is exposed to any interpellation and questioning."[28] Al-Tabataba'i hinted that mitigating the regime's presence in parliament would ease Kuwait's political stagnation.

The ISA's attitudes towards expanding parliamentary power are less provocative. ISA member Ali al-Omair described the parliamentary process as vital for good governance.[29] In lieu of overtly criticizing Kuwait's parliamentary structure, the ISA has championed using the political system to implement Islamic reform.[30] Sources close to the ISA indicate that while the bloc views Kuwait's current constitutional framework favorably, it laments the legal obstructions to parliamentary unity that prevent the National Assembly from exerting its potential influence. This desire to reach parliamentary unity is indicative of the bloc's acceptance of democratic norms within Kuwait's political framework.

Lastly, Al-Asalah and the ISA's contrasting relations with their regimes distinguish the blocs' democratic sentiments. Opposition figures frequently paint Al-Asalah as a pawn of the royal family's interests. Al-Asalah has done little to refute this perception. In 2009, Deputy Al-Mo'awdah told the *Al-Bilad* newspaper that "even if we are affiliated to the Royal court, there is nothing wrong with that."[31] In the weeks following the February 2011 protests, the bloc proudly reiterated its support for the royal family.[32]

However, to say Al-Asalah reflexively supports the regime is too simplistic. Outside of political governance, Al-Asalah has criticized the government on economic and religious issues. In 2009, Al-Asalah strongly denounced the government's initiative to tap phone lines and record sermons.[33] It also criticized some of the regime's economic and budgetary polices,[34] lobbying for greater inflation relief, a higher minimum wage, and lower gas prices. Al-Asalah members denounced the government for hiring expatriate workers for Bahrain's national airline.[35] Significantly, Al-Asalah pledged with the rest

28. Eid Al-Ramzain, "Amir to Jarida: Gov. did Not Act Against the Salafis during Elections..." *Al-Jarida,* July 23, 2008.

29. Interview by the author with Member of the National Assembly Ali Al-Omair, June 2009, Kuwait City, Kuwait.

30. Specifically, the ISA is trying to reform Kuwait's Second Amendment. Al-Omair believes that the amendment should be clarified to mean that Islam should be "the" as oppose to "a" source of legislation. However, he accepts the need to secure the Emir and the National Assembly's approval to implement this change. Interview by the author with Member of the National Assembly Ali al-Omair, June 2009, Kuwait City, Kuwait.

31. *Al-Bilad*, July 26, 2009, via a government source that did not cite the title.

32. *Al-Watan*, March 7, 2011, via a government source that did not cite the title.

33. "*Al-Mo'awdah rada 'ala 'Itisallat:' mawqifuna 'ala 'tajassus 'ala al-nass' wadih*" ["Al-Mo'awdah Responds to 'Communications:' Our Position on 'Spying on the People' is Clear"], *Al-Waqt*, March 29, 2009, http://www.alwaqt.com/art.php?aid=157647.

34. Interview by the author with Western government official, July 2009, Aadliya, Bahrain.

35. "5 *milayin dinar shariyyan rawatib li-100 ajnabi fi "Tayaran al-Khalij*" ["Muarad: 5 Million Dinar Per Month for 100 Foreigners in 'Gulf Air'"], *Al-Waqt,* February 8, 2008, http://www.alwaqt.com/art.php?aid=197673.

of the newly-elected National Assembly in December 2010 to interrogate government ministers suspected of financial irregularities by the 2009 Audit Authority Report.[36]

Al-Asalah's criticism falls short on political issues — issues dealing with succession or the regime's executive authority. The bloc supports the royal family's political authority in exchange for government approval of Al-Asalah's religious and economic policies.[37]

Kuwait's Salafi parliamentarians, especially independents outside of the ISA, have been much more critical of the regime's executive authority. This is best seen in the wave of parliamentary interpellations backed by Salafi parliamentarians in the summer of 2009. An interpellation or grilling is a constitutional mechanism that summons cabinet ministers to face parliamentary questioning over the legality and efficacy of their policies. Following the interpellation, Kuwait's National Assembly passes a vote of confidence with 25 votes needed to dismiss the minister.

In November 2008, three independent Salafi parliamentarians initiated an unprecedented and red-line–defying request to grill Prime Minister Shaykh Nasser. Amidst their litany of complaints, they accused the Prime Minister of "failing to perform his constitutional duties and achieving the wishes of the people."[38] When prodded whether his efforts to grill the Prime Minister were worthwhile, independent Salafi al-Tabataba'i commented, "the constitution has guaranteed us the right of interpellation and we will exercise that right within the constitution's framework … There has to be accountability and questioning. This is our duty. We are exercising our role." He then lamented that "In Kuwait and in the region in general there is an annoyance, and the area of democracy is shrinking. Democracy in Kuwait is shrinking."[39] Al-Tabataba'i thus justified his interpellation not on religious grounds, but for the sake of constitutional governance.

The absence of religion in al-Tabataba'i's statement cannot be overlooked. On one level, it displays political maturity. Al-Tabataba'i did not flex his piety to justify the Prime Minister's interpellation. In keeping his criticisms rooted to constitutional law, he appropriately focused the debate on the Prime Minister's ability to govern, not his religious affiliations. On another level, al-Tabataba'i's exclusively democratic language displayed an acceptance of Kuwaiti law and its coexistence with his Salafi beliefs. Finally, his concerns about democracy's demise and the Prime Minister's failure to listen "to the wishes of the people" emphasized parliament's responsibility to represent the public, not just Salafis.

Significantly, al-Tabataba'i confined his efforts against the Prime Minister within Kuwait's constitutional framework. When asked about the ultimate purpose of the interpellation, al-Tabataba'i replied

> We will reveal that legal transgressions have occurred and citizens are suffering from

36. "*Ra'is al-wuzara': Al-tajawizat bi-"al-riqaba al-maliyya" lan tamurr dun mas'ila*" ["Prime Minister: Excesses of Financial Supervision Will Not Pass Without Accountability"], *Al-Wasat,* December 31, 2010, http://www.alwasatnews.com/3038/news/read/518021/1.html.

37. Conversation by the author with local political journalist, July 2009, Manama, Bahrain.

38. B. Izzak, "MPs Await Next Move Amid Constitutional Questions," *Kuwait Times,* November 20, 2008.

39. "Kuwaiti Salafist MP Interviewed on Deportation of Iranian Cleric," Interviewed by Jamal Al-Rayyan, November 20, 2008, (Al-Jazeera Channel), accessed via www.mideastwire.com.

> certain issues … It is our role and duty. It is for His Highness the Emir to decide if the Prime Minister is competent or not, or decide to support him. That is something that concerns His Highness. As for us, we exercise our role, but within the framework of the constitution and respect for the positions, standings and persons.[40]

Al-Tabataba'i was not looking for a revolution. His insistence on interpellating the Prime Minister was ultimately a reaffirmation of parliament's constitutional oversight.

The ISA has been more reserved in criticizing the government's transgressions than independent Salafi parliamentarians. Amidst the series of interpellations in 2009, ISA representative Mohammed al-Kandari clarified that though his bloc agreed with many of the reasons for interpellating the government, it did not feel that the newly assembled cabinet had been given a fair chance to prove its capabilities.[41] Following their electoral defeats in the summer of 2009, the ISA blamed their poor showing on the public's tiring of Islamists compulsively grilling the cabinet.[42]

In December 2010, parliamentarians filed a non-cooperation vote against the Prime Minister after security forces allegedly "beat up" and then imprisoned Kuwait University law professor Dr. Obaid Al-Wasmi while raiding a public gathering at his house.[43] Adding fuel to the fire, the government then closed Al-Jazeera's Kuwait office because of its coverage of the event. Though these executive transgressions were unprecedented, the ensuing non-cooperation measure was three votes short of the twenty-five needed to pass and eventually disband the National Assembly. The ISA was the last bloc to vote on the measure, but by then it hardly mattered as the ISA's two members and one independent supporter did not have the numbers to pass the non-cooperation motion. The ISA was divided on the measure, with only one voting in favor.[44]

The ISA's indecision should not be interpreted as an indifference towards the regime's constitutional transgressions. The ISA belonged to the coalition of parliamentarians that rejected the accession of the infirm Emir Sa'ad Al Sabah in Kuwait's 2006 succession crisis. The ISA cautioned the government against meddling in the 2008 parliamentary elections. Though it denounced parliament's relentless interpellations in 2008, the ISA also warned the government against dissolving parliament.[45] More refrained and diplomatic than its independent Salafi counterparts, the ISA has generally placed Kuwait's constitutional governance over the regime's transgressions.

The difference in ISA and Al-Asalah's attitudes towards their regimes and democratic reform is best captured by their reactions to the democratic protests that have reached the Gulf. In spring 2011, the ISA joined the opposition and called for a new cabinet and Prime Minister.[46] Meanwhile, Al-Asalah warned demonstrators in early March 2011 against protesting near the Royal Court because it could have a "cata-

40. "Kuwaiti Salafist MP Interviewed on Deportation of Iranian Cleric."

41. Dahlia Kholaif, "Bid to Rescue Kuwait from Indecision; Islamist MPs File to Grill PM," *Arab Times,* March 2, 2009.

42. Interview by the author with Member of the National Assembly Ali Al-Omair, June 2009, Kuwait City, Kuwait.

43. "Kuwait MPs Forced to Pick Sides," *Kuwait Times*, December 22, 2010.

44. "Govt, Opposition Woo Unsure Kuwaiti Lawmakers," *Kuwait Times*, December 26, 2010.

45. Izzak, "Kuwait Awaits Decision."

46. "Kuwait Opposition Demands Constitution Amendments," *Kuwait Times*, March 2, 2011.

strophic impact on the cohesion of Bahraini society" and lead to "civil sedition."[47] A week later, Al-Asalah paid for a front-page ad in the *Al-Watan* newspaper welcoming the GCC's Peninsula Shield Forces to the island.[48]

EXPLAINING THE DICHOTOMY: AL-ASALAH'S AND THE ISA'S CONTRASTING DEMOCRATIC ATTITUDES.

Al-Asalah's political behavior suggests that participating in an institutionalized party system does not intrinsically promote democratic norms. The Salafi blocs' contrasting attitudes towards democracy thus calls for a greater analysis of other institutional conditions (electoral rules, parliamentary structure) and structural variables (demographic cleavages, historical legacies) that can better explain why their goals and actions markedly diverge despite sharing the same broad ideology. Significantly, comparing the impact of structural and institutional conditions on the Salafi blocs' democratic perceptions explores whether institutional reforms can reconcile religious orthodoxy with democratic governance.

Al-Asalah's opposition to political liberalization is clearly rooted in sectarian politics. Bahrain's demography dictates that the ruling Sunnis, as a minority, would oppose any form of democratization so long as Bahrainis vote along sectarian lines. Some blame Bahrain's sectarian tensions on the Al Khalifas' invasion in 1893.[49] Others point to the Iranian Revolution as a force that galvanized sectarianism and violent opposition towards the regime, thus preventing democratization.[50] Conversely, oppositionists blame Saudi Arabia for pressuring the regime not to liberalize for fear of inciting Saudi Arabia's eastern province Shi'a.[51] Sunni Islamists, like Salafis, may oppose democratizing Bahrain on ideological grounds. They fundamentally object to being ruled by Shi'a. All these perceptions present sectarianism as an inherent obstacle to the Salafis' acceptance of democratic norms. Congruently, Al-Asalah's rejection of democratic norms is preordained by Bahrain's demography.

Though accurate, this assessment ignores the potential for institutional factors to ease sectarianism and reform Al-Asalah's democratic attitudes. Granted, demographic conditions enforce Bahrain's institutionalized bias in favor of Sunnis in electoral and parliamentary law. However, despite Bahrain's limited political liberalization, Al-Asalah's political participation had pressured the bloc to lobby for its constituents' interests and even cooperate with rival Shi'i blocs. While these attributes are not an ultimate indicator of democratic behavior, they suggest that institutional conditions are capable of influencing Islamists' political behavior.

Prior to the 2010 elections, Al-Asalah thrived in Bahrain's parliamentary system. Bahrain's slanted electoral and parliamentary structures placed this minority move-

47. "*Al-Asalah tuhadhir min fitna ahliyya*" ["Al-Asalah Warns of Civil Strife"], *Al-Ayam,* March 7, 2011, http://www.alayam.com/Articles.aspx?aid=69855.

48. *Al-Watan*, March 15, 2011, via a government source that did not cite the title.

49. Abdulhadi Khalaf, "Contentious Politics in Bahrain —— from Ethnic to National Conflict and Vice Versa," Oslo, August 13–16, 1998, http://www.smi.uib.no/pao/khalaf.html.

50. Interview by the author with MP Ghanem Al-Buanain, conversation, June 2009, Manama, Bahrain.

51. Interview by the author with senior American government official, December 2009, Paris, France.

ment at the forefront of Bahraini politics. Its head, Ghanem Al-Buanain, was the representative council's deputy speaker from 2006–2010. Backed by the regime, Al-Asalah constantly juggled its support for the government with its underlying objective of promoting Islamic governance. As a result, Al-Asalah has traditionally steered clear from criticizing the regime's executive authority, focusing instead on passing religious legislation and increasingly, populist economic reforms.

In issues not pertaining to the regime's authority, Al-Asalah and the opposition Shi'i bloc Al-Wifaq had become surprising allies. Though readily forgotten today, Al-Asalah and Al-Wifaq voted together in parliament to pass economic and religious legislation, including the previously mentioned ban on the sale of alcohol during Ramadan and at one- and two-star hotels, and attempt to cancel Lebanese singer Nancy Ajram's concert. [52] Of course, Al-Wifaq and Al-Asalah did not agree on all religious issues, like marriage laws. However, Al-Asalah's success in passing religious laws proved that Bahrain's parliament could be a tool for Islamic reform. This may have convinced Al-Asalah's members and supporters to defend the parliamentary process. Secondly, Al-Asalah's flexibility in working with Al-Wifaq on religious issues revealed that both blocs could prioritize pragmatism over sectarianism.

Al-Asalah's populist streak is another indicator that institutional factors can influence Islamist blocs' policies. One political journalist described Al-Asalah's political strategy as a "mothering" approach to politics: "[T]hey focus on helping people through economic measures. People remember bloc leader Al-Buanain for his efforts to raise the minimum wage and provide each citizen with 50 Bahraini Dinars."[53] According to their website, Al-Asalah's goals for 2010 included increasing the minimum wage and giving a 33% raise to all employees. Preserving Bahraini fishermen's property rights was listed as their first objective of the year, above their second goal of enforcing "clean tourism with no alcohol sales."[54] In interviews with two leading Al-Asalah officials, both underlined their concerns over Bahrain's growing income inequality and parliament's inability to support the disenfranchised.[55]

Al-Asalah has criticized the regime on economic grounds. In 2008, the bloc joined the rest of the elected parliament to successfully repeal the regime's attempt to cut inflation relief from the annual budget.[56] In 2009, an Al-Asalah member stormed out of a parliamentary session along with several members of the Shi'i Al-Wifaq bloc in protest of the regime's refusal to place the 2009–2010 government budget under parliamentary review, an unimaginable act of bipartisanship in today's political environment.[57] In late 2009, Al-Asalah allied with three other parliamentary blocs, including Al-Wifaq, to denounce the regime's unilateral decision to raise gas prices.[58]

52. Interview by the author with MP Ghanem Al-Buanain, conversation, June 2009, Manama, Bahrain.

53. Conversation by the author with local political journalist, July 2009, Manama, Bahrain.

54. *Al-Asalah Islamic Society Website*, http://www.alasalah-bh.org/main/.

55. Interview by the author with MP Adel Al-Mo'awdah, July 2009, Manama, Bahrain.

56. Interview by the author with Western government official, July 2009, Aadliya, Bahrain.

57. "*Rafa' 'Al-Muwazina' li-'al-Shura' yatasabbab li-insihabat niyabiyya*" ["Raising the Budget for the Shura Causes Parliamentary Withdrawals"], *Al-Wasat*, March 20, 2009, http://www.alwasat-news.com/2387/news/read/43020/1.html.

58. "*Rafa' 'Al-Muwazina' li-'al-Shura' yatasabbab li-insihabat niyabiyya,*" *Al-Wasat*, March 20, 2009.

Al-Asalah's populist inclinations stem from the urban, middle-class Muharraq districts that most of its members represent. This shows that parliamentary representation has a direct impact on Al-Asalah's policies. If Al-Asalah's electorates were transformed to represent rural, richer, or more diverse constituencies, their policies might change accordingly.

Significantly, through its "mothering" political strategy, Al-Asalah is acquiring an increasingly populist reputation. This approach could have potentially extended Al-Asalah's appeal beyond sectarian borders to Bahrain's lower-class Shi'a who share many of the blocs' socially conservative sentiments. However, continuing sectarian tensions and the opposition Shi'i blocs' reciprocal embrace of populism make the success of Al-Asalah's cross-sectarian appeal highly unlikely.

Finally, Al-Asalah's growing political capital also reveals institutional factors' potential to impact democratic attitudes. Despite only eight years of parliamentary experience, Al-Asalah is learning to adapt and take advantage of Bahrain's parliamentary system. Specifically, in 2006 Al-Asalah replaced its head, Al-Mo'awdah, with current leader Ghanem Al-Buanain. Al-Buanain was appointed for two reasons. Officially, he was promoted because he had a greater political background — he majored in history at the American University of Beirut — than Al-Mo'awdah, whose work and educational background is rooted exclusively in Islamic institutions.[59] Al-Mo'awdah conceded that after preaching for 16 years as a revered patriarch in his community, it took a while to adjust to Bahrain's cantankerous parliament.[60] Al-Asalah thus elected Al-Buanain because he was more adept at handling the nuances of politics. Unofficially, many feel that Al-Mo'awdah was replaced because he was too close to the Shi'a. In 2006, Al-Mo'awdah told the Bahraini press that he would rather side with the Shi'a than the liberals.[61] He was relegated shortly thereafter.

Interestingly, while demoting Al-Mo'awdah for his proximity to the Shi'a, Al-Asalah also expelled the polemical Salafi cleric Jassim Al-Saeedi in 2006 after he called for a ban on public religious processions during the Shi'i holy day of 'Ashura.[62] Al-Asalah's leadership shuffle and subsequent dismissal of Al-Saeedi reveals that the bloc adapts to political realities. It understood that Jassim Al-Saeedi was too much of a political liability in Bahrain's divided parliament. Congruently, Al-Asalah also realized that the regime was still too powerful and politically influential for the bloc to get too close to the Shi'a. It thus demoted Al-Mo'awdah.

Al-Asalah's blowout in the October 2010 elections might be a turning point in the bloc's relations with the regime. The bloc lost five of its eight contests to independent, more business-oriented Sunnis.[63] Al-Asalah might interpret its 2010 electoral failure and the ensuing protests and crackdown as proof that it is completely vulnerable without the regime. Ultimately, so long as sectarian tensions — whether funneled from

59. Interview by the author with MP Ghanem Al-Buanain, June 2009, Manama, Bahrain.

60. Interview by the author with MP Adel Al-Mo'awdah, July 2009, Manama, Bahrain.

61. Habib Toumi, "Political Groups 'Haven't Helped Us' Say Bahrainis," *Gulf News*, May 10, 2009.

62. Habib Toumi, "Bahrain's Islamist MP Calls for Removal of Sectarian Banners," *Gulf News,* February 19, 2006.

63. Habib Toumi, "Bahrain's 2010 Elections: The Winners and Losers," *Gulf News*, October 31, 2010.

abroad or locally grown — contort Bahrain's political environment, Al-Asalah will continue to distrust and undermine democratic norms.

The ISA's promotion of democratic norms affirms that institutional conditions can induce democratic behavior. Political actors across Kuwait's ideological spectrum support parliamentary governance because it leverages their influence against the regime. Kuwait's National Assembly is a gateway for parliamentarians to influence national policy and government spending. Put simply, if Kuwait's political Salafis did not benefit from parliament, they would be less likely to support it. Granted, Kuwait's parliament is an inefficient mechanism for governance. Its legislative structure impedes reform. In the long run, actors and constituents may tire of parliamentary governance and resign themselves to the regime's uninhibited rule. However, for the time being, Kuwait's Salafi parliamentarians still believe in the parliamentary system and thus promote democratic behavior.

Some argue that the ISA and Kuwait's democratic attitudes in general are the product of historical fortune. Unlike in Bahrain, where the royal family gained power through conquest, Kuwait's royal family was crowned under the auspices of other merchant families. It theoretically governs as a "*primus inter pares*" ["first among equals"].[64] This institutionalized a sense of equality between the royal Al Sabah family and Kuwait's prominent families. Additionally, one could argue that the merchant families' historical failures to confront the regime outside of parliament resigned them to Kuwait's parliamentary structure. These arguments posit that Kuwait's historical conditions predetermine Kuwait's Salafi parliamentarians' democratic attitudes.

This proposal fails because it assumes that Kuwaiti society and the ISA have always espoused democratic attitudes. In truth, the Kuwaiti regime had twice dissolved and disbanded parliament for numerous years with minimal public outcry. Some analysts worry that the National Assembly's ongoing stagnation is rendering the public politically apathetic. Secondly, Kuwait's Salafi community did not originally accept democratic norms, much less support political participation. The movement only politicized after Egyptian cleric 'Abd Al-Khaliq's political writings reached Kuwait in the 1970s.[65] Saudi Arabia's supreme Salafi clerics then needed to pass a *fatwa* to condone the Kuwaiti Salafis' political aspirations.[66] Despite this *fatwa*, many Kuwaiti Salafis still eschew politics.[67] Finally, the regime had to push Kuwait's Islamists into parliament by redistributing electorates to their favor in the 1981 parliamentary elections.[68] The ISA's politicization at the hand of foreign influence and regime intervention suggests that

64. Lahoud, "*Koweit: Salafismes et Rapports au Pouvoir*," p. 124.

65. Lahoud, "*Koweit: Salafismes et Rapports au Pouvoir*," p. 128.

66. Lahoud, "*Koweit: Salafismes et Rapports au Pouvoir*," p. 129.

67. There are strong elements within the movement that are skeptical of political participation. This explains why Kuwait's first generation of political Salafis actively solicited a fatwa to condone their political activism and silence their apolitical critics. The value of political participation is still debated amongst Salafis, in Kuwait and elsewhere. Lahoud, "*Koweit: Salafismes et Rapports au Pouvoir*," p. 129.

68. Conversation between the author and Middle East scholar Sean Yom, October 2009, Stanford University, CA. In 1981, Kuwait's newly-created five electorate system deliberately empowered Sunni Islamists and tribal representatives against the regime's traditional foe — urban merchant class parliamentarians — and the new potential threat — Shi'i constituencies. Tetreault, *Stories of Democracy*, p. 66.

the bloc's democratic attitudes are not complete byproducts of Kuwait's "democratic" culture.

Instead, Kuwait's institutional factors, and the political incentives they provide, sustain the ISA's democratic behavior. For example, Kuwait's parliamentary interpellation clause has reanimated debates amongst Salafis about how to hold the regime accountable. This discourse, a fundamental reflection of democratic behavior, would be irrelevant without Kuwait's legal outlets to criticize the regime. This mechanism allows Kuwait's Salafis to support democratic behavior by supervising the government's actions. Furthermore, unlike in Bahrain, Kuwait's political system provides its parliamentarians some independence from the regime in electoral and legislative spheres, thus enabling Kuwait's Salafis to denounce the regime when it transgresses constitutional norms.

Outside of parliament, the democratic validity of Kuwait's parliamentary elections pressures parliamentarians to represent their constituents' needs or face electoral defeat. This has reoriented the ISA's religious emphasis towards their constituents' economic concerns. A 2006 survey revealed that Kuwaiti voters believe that their parliament's top three priorities should be "a parliamentary proposal for the government to pay off consumer debt, health services and housing services."[69] The ISA is cognizant of their constituents' economic interests and electoral leverage. Parliamentarian Ali Al-Omair told Kuwait's *Al-Jarida* newspaper,

> Firstly, we did not enter the National Assembly with an Islamic agenda solely. We entered it with a reform agenda featuring many laws, some of which are related to the Islamization of the laws and others to the reform of the economic system in Kuwait ... it would be wrong to believe we have only come to impose amendments related to the *Shari'ah* for this is only a small part of our agenda.[70]

The former head of the ISA, Khaled Al-Sultan, called for Islamization to be "seen in many lights including serving people's needs, improving education and health services, and spreading morals and values like justice, accountability, and transparency."[71] The expansion of the ISA's political mission to include populist policies and government accountability indicates that the bloc's constituents impact its policies.

Demographics also mold the ISA's agenda. This is best seen in the ISA's allegiances in the "urban" versus "tribal" divide in Kuwaiti politics. ISA parliamentarians are almost exclusively based in Kuwait's *hadar* [urban] districts located within Kuwait City. They represent and belong to communities that are generally wealthier, business-oriented, and more cosmopolitan than the rural, recently-settled, and more populous tribal communities in the peripheral electoral districts. Crucially, *hadar* representatives have often suspected the ruling regime of catering to the tribal districts to weaken the urban, merchant class opposition.[72]

69. Michael Herb, "A Nation of Bureaucrats: Political Participation and Economic Diversification in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (2009), p. 383.

70. Al-Ramzain, "Amir to Jarida: Gov. did Not Act Against the Salafis during Elections..."

71. Meshary Al-Ruwaih, "'Connect the Dots' — One Cool Old Salafi," *Kuwait Times*, May 8, 2008.

72. Shafeeq Ghabra, "Kuwait and the Dynamics of Socio-Economic Change," *The Middle East Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Summer 1997), p. 366.

Despite these historical suspicions, there has also been a growing convergence between tribalism and Islamism in Kuwaiti politics.[73] Islamist representatives have found common cause with tribal representatives in passing religious legislation, like prohibiting mixed-sex university education.[74] The ISA must balance safeguarding the interests of its urban constituents and supporting policies that would expand the influence of like-minded tribal representatives.

In 2006, the ISA sided with other urban, more liberal blocs — despite the strong presence of Salafi followers and religious conservatism in the tribal districts[75] — to help pass Kuwait's five-district electoral reform, an initiative that preserved urban districts' electoral weight vis-à-vis the more populated tribal districts.[76] In voting for electoral reform, the ISA showed that it is more than a one-dimensional religious bloc; it has urban character, it vouches for its constituents, and it prioritizes its political needs.

CONCLUSION

The ISA–Al-Asalah bloc comparison provides two contributions to the "Inclusion-Moderation" debate. Al-Asalah's poor democratic showing stands against the argument that inclusion or even limited institutional openings are sufficient mechanisms for democratic behavior. Al-Asalah will continue to defy democratic norms so long as sectarianism dominates Bahraini politics. Secondly, this research reveals that political incentives, as determined by local structural and institutional conditions, can influence the policies of even the most hardline religious parties.

This comparative analysis has several implications. Al-Asalah and the ISA's contrasting democratic attitudes stress the importance of analyzing the political aspirations of religious blocs on a case-by-case basis. To the untrained eye, Salafi parliamentarians' long-bearded appearance, creed, and mission of promoting Islamic governance could imply a transnational set of policies. However, Bahrain and Kuwait's unique set of structural and institutional variables cast opposing attitudes towards democratic governance amongst their respective Salafi blocs.

These findings also warn that, as in trade liberalization, political liberalization designates winners and losers. Kuwait's ISA promotes democratic behavior to defend its political influence. Al-Asalah opposes democratic reform to preserve its presence in parliament. Lasting democratic reform in the Middle East is contingent upon convincing constituents with the least to gain from democratic governance that reform is in their interest.

Al-Asalah's political legacy proposes a potential solution to this quandary. Despite undermining democratic norms, Al-Asalah's parliamentary participation has affected the bloc's policies. Al-Asalah had lessened its sectarian rhetoric to facilitate working with Shi'i parliamentarians to pass religious and economic legislation. Conversely, it later demoted its leader out of fear that his proximity to the Shi'a jeopardized the bloc's relations with the regime. Within Al-Asalah, the lower class Sunnis' opposition to the

73. Kamal Eldin Osman Salih, "Kuwait Primary (Tribal) Elections 1975–2008: An Evaluative Study," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 38, No. 2 (2011), p. 147.

74. Salih, "Kuwait Primary (Tribal) Elections 1975–2008," p. 147.

75. Salih, "Kuwait Primary (Tribal) Elections 1975–2008," p. 147.

76. Brown, "Moving Out of Kuwait's Political Impasse."

regime's naturalization of Sunni expatriates[77] had spurred some bloc members to break party ranks and publicly denounce the policy.[78]

Al-Asalah's division towards naturalization typifies democratization's potential to reform Middle Eastern politics. Though biased, Bahrain's electoral system still forced some Al-Asalah members to question their proximity to the regime. Hence, even limited institutional reform can pressure the most orthodox Islamists into representing their constituents' interests. This underlines the importance and potential of democratic reform in the region. Elections may catapult Islamists into positions of greater authority, but that authority is ultimately captive to the demands of the constituent. Ideological agendas will have to give way to the everyday concerns of the citizen.

77. Many lower-class Sunnis oppose the naturalization of foreigners because it dilutes government benefits. Yaroslav Trofimov, "U.S. Navy Fleet's Mideast Home is Facing Sectarian Strife," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 22, 2009, http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124545647884133003.html.

78. Conversation between the author and a local employee at a Western embassy, June 2009, Aadliya, Bahrain.