

Egypt's Presidential Election: Kuwait Casts Its Vote

ElBaradei Supporters Deported

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“Kuwait is enabling Egypt’s repression by harassing ElBaradei supporters. Kuwaitis should be asking why their security services are harassing Egyptians seeking reform at home, instead of protecting domestic security interests.” – Sarah Leah Whitson, Middle East and North Africa Director at Human Rights Watch, 10 April 2010.

More than 250,000 Egyptians live and work in the oil-rich country of Kuwait. Yet when just three met at a local café to attend a small meeting of supporters of Dr. Mohammed ElBaradei, former IAEA head and possible Egyptian presidential contender—they were arrested.

They had hoped to establish a Kuwait branch of ElBaradei’s National Front for Change, a group committed to pressuring Egypt’s government to end Emergency Law and embrace political reforms. The wife of one of the detained recounted how plainclothes security officers escorted her handcuffed husband home to seize campaign t-shirts and pictures of ElBaradei before whisking him off to prison.

The following day, on April 9, a group of 30 Egyptians gathered outside a supermarket to discuss the prior day’s arrests, in a meeting arranged through Facebook. It didn’t last long. Kuwait’s security forces swarmed and arrested over half of the attendees on grounds they violated Kuwait’s prohibition on public assembly by non-citizens, and slander by criticizing Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak.

In less than 48 hours, Kuwait had managed to deport 21 Egyptians. At the time of this writing, up to 20 remain incarcerated. Human Rights Watch (HRW) quickly issued a [press release](#) condemning the Kuwaiti government’s actions. They appealed for a halt to the persecution of ElBaradei supporters, freedom for those still in detention and the return of the deportees to their homes and families in Kuwait.

As the Associated Press confirmed, it was the first time in years that expatriate residents had been expelled for political activity in the country. According to HRW’s Whitson, “Kuwait only selectively enforces its restrictions on freedom of assembly, which in any event violate a basic human right to freely assemble and express views. By deporting longtime residents and members of the business community, the Kuwaiti government is discriminating against Egyptian residents, depriving them of their homes and jobs in just one day.”

So why did they do it?

As I wrote [last week](#), Middle East monarchs and autocrats fear ElBaradei’s potential to

galvanize Egyptians into demanding political change and free elections might lead their citizens to do likewise.

By deporting ElBaradei's supporters, Kuwait's royal family in essence cast its vote for Mubarak well ahead of Egypt's 2011 elections. The "brotherhood" of dictators that has never received the people's sanction always sticks together.

Gamal Eid, an Egyptian activist and head of the Arabic Network for Human Rights and Information (ANHRI) remarked, "These deportations are the Kuwaiti government's favor to the current Egyptian government."

The ANHRI now reports that the United Arab Emirates has blocked the opposition and pro-ElBaradei Web site, Save Egypt Front, despite the fact it doesn't host any content related to the Emirates.

Tucked away in the AP report on the Kuwait deportations however, was this most interesting note:

"In Cairo, around 15 women flanked by dozens of khaki-clad Egyptian police protested a few blocks from the Kuwaiti embassy over the deportations, chanting 'May the (ruler) of Kuwait fall!'"

And on Tuesday, dozens of Egyptians from various opposition groups demonstrated in front of the High Court in favor of constitutional reforms and an end to police brutality. Some even carried signs reading "Down with Mubarak." Unlike last week's protests that resulted in severe beatings, this time the police largely looked on.

So, in the smallest of ways, it has begun.

ElBaradei's call for greater civic participation, amending the constitution and social justice in the face of one-party/family rule, has found a receptive audience. As fast as these genies have been let out of the bottle will the region's authoritarian regimes attempt to stuff them back in.

But for now, voices of peaceful dissent wafting through the spring air fittingly herald the season of rebirth.

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