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Female candidates reject Kuwait's Salafi's stance Kuwait's Salafis call voting for women a sin



19 women have registered to run in Kuwait's upcoming parliamentary elections (File)

KUWAIT (Ahmed Abdullah)

Kuwait's Islamist Salafi movement called Monday for a boycott of women candidates in the upcoming parliamentary elections on the grounds that public offices are reserved only for men, sparking outrage from female candidates and activists.

Voting for women is considered a sin, said Fuhaid al-Hailam, of the Islamic Salafi Alliance politburo, according to the Salafi's interpretation of a saying by the Prophet Muhammad to the effect that a nation will not prosper if a woman leads it.

Election sin

"What is prohibited as an aim is also prohibited as a means," he told Al Arabiya. "Voting for women is the means of their access to parliamentary membership, thus it is prohibited."

Although Kuwaiti law permits women to hold seat in parliament, Hailam called on female candidates to withdraw from the elections to protect themselves and the voters from a practice he labeled as contrary to Islam.

Nineteen of the 282 registered candidates are women, down from the 28 who registered last year and 31 in 2006, according to the Kuwait Times. The Majlis al-Umma, Kuwait's National Assembly, was dissolved in March in the aftermath of tension between the executive and legislative authorities.

He denied the fatwa, or religious ruling, is politically motivated to undermine women's chances to win seats in the parliament.

"This has always been the movement's stance and we have always objected to giving women the right to

run in elections. We are reiterating our opinion now because it is the right time to declare how legitimate voting is," he said, adding that the movement recommended that the law not be applied.

Strident objections

Critics slammed the conservative Salafi movement's statements and urged the government to distance itself from such a position.

Parliamentary candidate Fatima al-Abdeli, a woman's rights activist who ran in the two previous elections, dismissed the call to withdraw and said the statements betrayed a state of intellectual bankruptcy.

"They have nothing to say," she told Al Arabiya. "Kuwaiti laws that gave women the right to run for parliament are not against Islamic laws."

Abdeli called upon the Kuwaiti government to declare the movement's statements void and said that female candidates intend to organize a press conference to respond to the fatwa.

"This fatwa will harm women candidates and the Kuwaiti people might be deceived by it. We are not going to stand still while this happens. Women should not be told what to do," said Abdeli.

Observers give women better odds of winning seats in this year's elections despite failing to win any in the 2006 or 2008 elections, citing more extensive political experience women gained during this time and greater acceptance of women's role in public life.

Former Planning Minister Massouma al-Mubarak, the first female cabinet member, was appointed in 2005 and is running in the 2009 elections, a move that observers said shows that women are gaining momentum. Women were granted the right to vote in 2005.

The election war flared when several candidates were arrested and charged with slandering the government. Some parties like the Ummah party, which is not officially recognized, said it would boycott the elections.