

THE POPULIST LADY OF KUWAIT

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Telos: You have made history in Kuwait by becoming the first woman to win seats in three consecutive parliamentary elections. In spite of all the hurdles you had to face. One for all, the Cassation Court disqualification, from contesting in the 2016 elections. What was your successful political manifesto?

Safa Al Hashem: First of all, I am grateful to God for being the first woman to be elected as Member on the Parliament for three consecutive times. Despite all the difficulties that I have faced, the animosity and the hurdles, as everybody putting sticks in my wheels just for being a woman, I managed to survive all that with integrity, honesty, and being close to the people who gave me their votes. I think my only successful political manifesto would be integrity: you have to be honest with the people, make sure that you have understood all their requests and needs, and be a great listener. Listening with empathy, being responsive to their needs immediately. I thank the Lord, always, for having a country that is cash rich and rich in opportunities, either human investment opportunities or financial opportunities; a country that has its wealth in its people, in its oil and in its fortune. Our GDP is high, therefore the expectations of the people of Kuwait are accordingly high. The services that I focused on are health, education and infrastructure. As an example, in June 2018 I proposed to the Minister of Education the introduction of IELTS tests for students who are planning to study abroad: introducing such a test which will increase the standard of students in Kuwait. In fact, most of the students who went to other countries were sent back as they didn't pass the English test there. It might appear as a small thing, whereas these are the kind of issues that really impact the life of the people. The provision has been adopted at last.

In 2014 you shocked the country by submitting your resignation from Parliament. What were the reasons behind this decision?

Prior to that I had grilled the Prime Minister on the podium, after he submitted the business plan for Kuwait for five years, which did not meet our expectations. Personally, I was very frustrated and disappointed. At that time, I had already managed to make the Minister of Planning, the Minister of Interior and the Minister of Justice resign for not being capable to live up to the Parliament and to our people expectations as Ministers in the Cabinet. Eventually, it was an achievement to have better people sitting on those chairs, who are being able to respond effectively to the needs of MPs and what they represent for the people of Kuwait. At that point, my criticism against the Prime Minister was based on facts, numbers, figures, analyses and Kuwait status. Kuwait is a cash rich market, we have the Ultra high-net-worth (UHNW) citizens, we have a large upper middle class: *Alhamd Lilah*. Thanks to God, we never had anybody even close to the poverty line in our country but, in my view the plan that Prime Minister had presented was going to cause many people to get close to it for sure or even cross it, a possibility that strongly I refused and rejected. The number of sticks in my wheels became larger and larger. At that time I also had huge conflicts with the Speaker of the House and the other members of the Parliament. I guess because what I believe being my strength, i.e. being able to elaborate my views and fiercely pointing out the weaknesses of the others' views, created a lot of animosity and jealousy. When I saw that nothing was going to happen, in spite of all my effort, that no parliamentary questions I have asked to Ministers was being responded, I came to the conclusion that resigning was my way of saying "I came with the votes of Kuwait, the People, and if you don't respond to it, then my presence in the Parliament has no use". It was a loud cry, a shout for rejecting the *status quo* and create even more noise, constructive noise. It was the first time in Kuwait's history, for a woman MP to resign.

What is the most important political battle you are fighting right now?

After I submitted the child's rights law with others members of the Parliament, my colleagues, and it was approved by the Parliament first, and adopted by Government then, we are now at the implementation stage that requires a lot of monitoring, and this is my exact battle. I believe in generational change, I believe that if we can work towards a better life for our future generation, there will be a huge change, especially since Kuwait is unique among the GCC, the Gulf Countries. Our Parliament is very vivacious, it's extremely democratic. MPs are elected with free elections, which are very tough; so, if you are in that position you need to express rightfully the rights of the citizens that have casted their vote for you. Let alone speaking about our generations: 62% of our population are under the age of 26. Moreover, another huge battle of mine is giving a better life and care to small and to medium size enterprises, the SMEs. The legislation dedicated to them, which I proudly say it was one of my babies, was carefully drafted and I'm delighted to say that it has proven to be a huge success. It, among others, provides our youth and youngsters with their own capital to start their own businesses. My current battle deals with the right of parents on the vaccination to their children: I love the Italian experiment, and I appreciate the fact that in Italy the people or the parents have the right to choose to vaccinate their children or not. So, I'm working towards that. Now, for us to do this is critical, but it

goes without saying we are facing a lot of negative reactions - and you know how strong Big Pharma might be. I will go on fighting.

Kuwait has a major role in the Middle-East. What should be, in your view, your country's position in respect to the foreign politics of the neighbouring nations?

Kuwait has a major role in the Middle East, indeed; our Emir, the ruler of Kuwait, Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, has been named by UN "*Leader of Humanity*". He really is one of the greater humanitarians I've ever met, and, I mean, I met a lot of them. But this man, he took it as his burden to facilitate to solve all the conflicts that are happening in our region, between Saudi Arabia and UAE on one side, others in other areas, and I truly value his efforts in that regard. Kuwait has always been generous in giving others by establishing the Kuwait Fund For Arab Economic Development. It is the first Institution in the Middle East that took an active role in the international development efforts. It extends loans on concessionary term to finance development projects in the developing countries. The Fund also provides technical assistance to finance the costs of the feasibility studies of projects, as well as the training of nationals of the borrowing countries. In addition, the Fund subscribes in the capital of international and regional development institutions. The amount of financing that has gone to countries all over the world have exceeded a trillion dollars, and regards to building and the infrastructure needs for poor countries in Asia, in Africa, in South America, South East Asia, and that by itself is my source of pride and joy. Kuwait has always been known for having such brilliant inclination, with moderation, wisdom and truly working towards the benefit of others. One last comment. I'm very glad that I have this interview and being able to express and show to other parts of the world what is being a woman and a politician in this arena. I can assure you that, proudly saying, Kuwait has always been a huge advocate of woman rights. I'm a great example of how, my Emir, and the governments along the years have helped women in Kuwait to reach the levels that they aim to. We have in the Cabinet women Ministers, heads of institutions, heads of public authorities: Kuwaiti women are doing extremely well and I'm so proud of them all.

Marco Sonsini

Editorial

One woman in Kuwait is willing to stand up for what she believes, no matter the cost.

From 50 elected representatives, Safa Al Hashem is the only woman in her country's Parliament, which is the most powerful Institution of its kind in the Gulf Cooperation Council. In Kuwait, Parliament can veto state decisions and make laws. In the Emirates, by comparison, the Federal National Council (FNC), which is not a Parliament but a consultative body, does not make laws, just recommendations. By winning her seat in 2016, Al Hashem became the ninth woman to be elected to the Parliament since women obtained the right to vote and run in national elections in 2005. Already in July 2013, Safa made history by becoming the first woman in Kuwait to win in two consecutive parliamentary elections. In fact, in three of the last six elections in which they took part, Kuwaiti women failed to win any seat – in 2006, 2008 and February 2012. Al Hashem made headlines earlier this year after calling for more charges and taxes on expats living in Kuwait, saying she did so out of patriotism. "I had to sound the alarm regarding the demographic imbalance when citizens are outnumbered by foreigners by two to one," she told Kuwaiti newspaper *Al Qabas*. "Regardless of how much a country is wealthy, the overuse of its services inevitably drains its resources and undermines its society." This is the reason why media started defining her a *populist*. Let's go back to the eve of 2012 elections in Kuwait. Political tensions were on the rise, street demonstrations began to take place, and anti-government sentiment was increasing on the back of a second general election within a three-year period. Kuwait was in a state of political turmoil, when Safa Al Hashem decided to enter politics. At that point Al Hashem had already beaten the odds - she had been named GCC Businesswoman of the Year, founded her own management consultancy and held an MBA from Pennsylvania State University. As she tells us in her very vivacious interview to PRIMOPIANOSCALA, in 2014 she shocked the country by submitting her resignation from Parliament, claiming her rights had been breached by the Government for refusing to allow her to grill the Prime Minister. To most it seemed like political suicide, but to Al Hashem it was a matter of principle. She believes, and she was then proven to be right, that her resignation gave her credibility. A credibility that she has gained also for many other reasons. As an example, before resigning in 2014, she gained fame across the Arab world for the grilling session she conducted against the then Minister of Interior regarding issues of national security; to date the video of that session has gained over one million views online. Moreover, Safa makes a point to avoid political jargon, choosing instead to use Kuwaiti idioms and expressions, which resonate well with both her constituents and voters from other districts. By reading her interview you will find more and more reasons for her political success. A last anecdote that she avoids to tell us, but that shows how the life of a woman in politics is always tougher than a man's one. Recently Safa clashed with a male colleague in Parliament after he had refused to sit with her at a committee meeting. She reported to the Assembly that during a meeting of the legislature's Negative Phenomena Committee, chairman Mohammed Hayef refused to sit next to her and directed a disrespectful comment at her. Hayef explained that Islamic law dictates that he cannot "sit next to a woman who wears perfume" and claimed Hashem was lying about the disparaging comment. What did really happen? You will learn it by watching this [video](#). One thing for sure. Safa Al Hashem is a definitely a badass!

Mariella Palazzolo

Safa Al Hashem is a Kuwaiti politician who is an elected Member of Parliament, and the only woman present within the Parliament of Kuwait. She is the only female member to be elected to the Kuwait Parliament consecutively, after women regained the right to vote and stand for office in 2005. Al Hashem obtained a degree in English literature from Kuwait University and completed her MBA from the Pennsylvania State University. She also has a post graduate executive education diploma from Harvard Business School. In 2011, she was awarded a Ph.D, Doctorate (*Honoris causa*) by the American University of Technology. Before entering politics, Al Hashem worked for the Government in the Ministry of Higher Education. She later worked in various private companies being associated with PIC, PWC and the KIPCO Group. Al Hashem then started



Advantage Consulting in partnership with KIPCO and Gulf One Investment Bank, Bahrein. For the first time ever, the biography of a person being interviewed by PRIMOPIANOSCALA[®] has been, also, drafted by that person's hand. A special treatment for a special person. *'Well, you asked me about my personal life. I used to be an investment banker for so many years, I managed my companies all over the GCC countries, but since I decided to go into politics, I froze everything to be able to focus on my role as servant to my people. However, working for over thirty-three years in managing, restructuring and portfolio trading, gave me a lot of connections within the GCC countries: Saudi Arabia, Oman, UAE, Qatar, Bahrein and Kuwait. I fell in love with Oman, the Sultanate of Oman, and I love the people there. In year 2000 I have bought my own plot of land and built a very beautiful beach-front villa, where I practice my own hobbies. I love cooking, cooking for me is a passion: in order to develop my skills, I have joint great culinary schools in Italy, and one of my greatest mentors is Chef Ernesto, in Sorrento, where I go annual basis just to get tips and information on how to cook perfectly well. I still need to perfect it, I need still to learn more techniques regards to making the pasta and sauces. I love working with sea food, I'm a fun of sea food, but definitively meat is on my agenda. I have also a not so secret passion for knives, being a cook, knife is a great tool to have in the kitchen, so with my constant travel around the world I have managed to collect a*

beautiful selection of Japanese made and American made type of knives, that I take good care of it. For over twenty years I've been an avid tennis player, I love playing tennis, it's a stress reliever, it takes away all the stress I face; I love swimming, of course, scuba diving, and I tried to manage the time as much as I can to actually find the proper space to practice my hobbies.'

Very active socially, Safa has more than 625,000 followers on her Twitter account. Become one of them [@safaalhashem](https://twitter.com/safaalhashem)

Marco Sonsini