

If you know Kuwait, then you will know about ood, a rare type of wood used by Kuwaitis and their rich Gulf neighbors to perfume their clothes and houses. The wood must be burned over a small piece of blazing coal to release smoke with a fragrance like mellow perfume. It will make your head spin, and will conjure up stories of the East. However, like mature French cheeses, ood must begin to turn moldy before it releases its captivating fragrance.

Like anything rare, ood comes at a hefty cost. The price for one pound can reach thousands of dollars, while for some varieties the price per gram is the same as the price of diamonds. However, as an item of Gulf heritage, it is used in moderate quantities in daily life. Ood is a sign used to welcome guests, who will depart with light hearts and perfumed clothes. At the same time, some people who wish to appear distinguished will use it in large amounts for social occasions, weddings, parties and in the offices of sheikhs, ministers and top officials as a sign of opulence and splendor — or, occasionally, just as an indication of wealth.

Exorbitant Campaigns

In the scorching hot summer of 2006, I found myself making my way to an election headquarters to listen to an announcement by one of the candidates for the Kuwaiti National Council elections. No sooner had I taken a few steps into the headquarters than I found myself surrounded by a cloud of exorbitantly expensive ood smoke. The candidate's reception committee was taking care of the guests and sought to give an indication of the staggering amount of money the candidate had spent on his campaign.

In order to get an idea of the candidate's election headquarters, one must imagine something seldom seen in most democratic countries, something which could only be described as a Kuwaiti specialty. It features all the trappings fit for a truly luxurious gathering. The meeting hall, known as the "royal tent," is 1,100 square meters (almost 12,000 square feet), with walls draped in silk and Indian satin. The ground is covered with carpets of the grandest designs, in the middle of which hundreds of chairs and tables are placed. Many enormous crystal chandeliers, made up of hundreds of lights, hang from the ceiling. It is not merely a five-star tent; it deserves seven stars, or maybe more, and might be considered on par with the famous Dubai hotel, the Burj al-Arab.

Naturally, the tent itself is not enough to meet the needs of the candidate's guests. There are dozens of waiters, whose clothes reveal they are staff at one of the famous hotels. They offer hot and cold drinks and fresh juice in crystal glasses, all arrayed on silver serving trays. In a corner of the tent stretches a huge evening buffet table.

On my way out, on a small poster stuck in the corner of the outer courtyard, I came across the phone number of the company that set up this royal tent. When I called them to ask how much everything had cost, the manager told me that the price was around US\$10,000 a night, not including the furnishings, chandeliers, air-conditioning units, plasma screens or any of the other hotel services. The headquarters would remain set up for at least 30 to 50 days. I asked him why the price was so high. He told me that his company, along with most of the others operating in Kuwait, had expanded into Iraq to cater for the American army there, where there was also great demand for the services they provide. I asked him if they also provided air-conditioning units, and he replied, "Yes," and said that a single air-conditioning unit would cost US\$700 to US\$1,600 a day, according to its specifications. A tent like this one would require at least nine large units, although they had now sold out and there were none left for sale.

I asked the campaign manager of one of the "jumbo" candidates how much the election campaign was spending on their candidate. He said he couldn't give out that information, but after I offered him a rose and a promise not to reveal his identity, he told me, "The election campaign itself has cost around US\$20 million. However, there is another price including presents, gifts and 'assistance,' if you know what I mean!" I assured him that, naturally, I did know. I then asked where the campaign was getting its finances. He told me that the candidate was a rich man with enough money to finance his own campaign. I questioned further, "But he is a businessman. He won't pay this sort of money for nothing! If your candidate does win, how will he recoup this huge sum during his membership of the parliament? After all, the position doesn't offer a salary that can cover any of his expenses. And if he doesn't win, who will compensate him for the enormous sum he's spent on his campaign?"² The director apologized, but declined to answer the question.

Exorbitant sums of money are also handed out for candidates' publicity campaigns. One of my colleagues working for an advertising company sounded extremely pleased when I called him. "Touch wood," he told me, indicating that he was making so much money he was scared of people being envious or giving him the evil eye. I asked him what he meant.

“What’s happening is crazy,” he told me. “The papers have started issuing an extra 160 pages of adverts, with only 40 pages for the news! The advertising market in Kuwait has made enough profits to last for years. There are candidates flooding the papers, television stations and mobile phones with adverts and text messages. They aren’t content with a quarter or half page advertisement; they want full pages. Some of them are paying for full-page spreads in all the regional papers on an almost daily basis.”

I called one of the chief editors and offered him my congratulations, saying I had heard that they were making huge profits. He answered without any reticence: “We’ve made enough money to cover us for four years. If it takes another year or more to finish dissolving the council, we might make enough to last us for another four years.”

Abusing Power

In regretful tones, Kuwaitis tell tales about members of parliament who used to earn moderate wages, but have now become obscenely rich. Their previous professions certainly offered them none of the luxuries and riches that fell into their laps after obtaining a parliamentary membership card. The press and social circles and clubs have been in an uproar over numerous manifestations of corruption in the Kuwaiti Parliament. Members have offered services and bribes to obtain constituents’ votes, and have exploited their connections to send their constituents and their relatives abroad at the expense of the state. They have also exploited the state’s resources and appropriated state lands to set up their own private residences, meeting places and chalets.

Some MPs can obtain loans and bank guarantees amounting to millions of dollars through their positions and their private relations with banks and investment companies. They can also write off loans for their constituents, as a relative of one MP told me: “I had debts over US\$40,000. My relative, the MP, took me by the hand and together we visited the president of the company in his office in the financial district in the east of the Kuwaiti capital. He welcomed us warmly, we drank a glass of sweet tea together, he issued an order to write off my debts and we left.”

I asked him how this was possible, as surely it would result in losses for the company. “The company has many interests that my relative and his parliamentary colleagues can either assist with, or put a stop to,” he told me.

You often see MPs in ministry corridors and official offices carrying folders containing paperwork outlining the (presumably mostly illegal) dealings they are involved in. They pressure ministers or senior government officials into passing and signing them. If the official in question refuses to sign, more often than not, incendiary reports and hints of interrogations will be found igniting the next morning's papers.

In November 2006, I had an appointment with a state official. I had waited more than a month for the appointment. When I entered the waiting room, I found more than 24 people waiting for the same official, and I knew that I would be waiting for at least two hours. We were then surprised by the entrance of a new MP, a young man belonging to a major Islamic faction and one of its more prominent faces. He was holding a folder and was accompanied by someone seeking the official's help. Immediately, all of the workers in the official's office turned pale, as if caught in some awkward position. The MP entered the official's office without an appointment and without apologizing or even passing by the secretary or knocking on the door. When I met the official later, I asked him if he had a scheduled appointment with that young man. The official confirmed there was no appointment. I then learned that the MP had come to pressure the official into passing business dealings that did not meet the conditions of a company doing business with the government.

In November 2008, the Kuwaiti Electricity and Water minister issued a press report accusing an MP of trying to help a company contracting with the Ministry of Electricity to obtain a security deposit of around US\$35 million, even though the company failed to deliver its obligations³. This was in the wake of harsh attacks from the MP to the minister, who said he, "would not trust (the minister) to look after a single goat," and challenging him to prove his accusation!

Media Censorship and Complacency

It is worth noticing that the Kuwaiti press did not try to look more closely into the story, as the Western media would have done.

It is widely known that many members of the National Council wield considerable influence over the regional press. They resort to protecting themselves from any press criticism by appointing parliamentary correspondents as their own private secretaries.⁴ They grant services to the journalists and their families. Sometimes they might even

put pressure on government institutions to allocate funds for the journalists' jobs, allowing them to claim salaries, yearly bonuses and legal perks without ever having to visit their supposed workplace! Their colleagues are unaware of the situation because these "journalists" merely show up as names on the payroll of the ministerial budget.

Last summer, a group of Kuwaiti activists, including the writer of this report, demanded the Kuwaiti government to issue a law of transparency for the financing of election campaigns. This would allow the monitoring of candidate financing sources. However, no progress has been made so far.

Maybe the vision of democracy in Kuwait can be seen most clearly through the smoke of the ood. You will hear cries and raised voices calling out on behalf of the Kuwaiti Parliament, which might have you believe that the delegates are exercising their constitutional powers in line with freedom and democracy. These loud voices, however, are also made up of consciences bought and paid for by centers of power in the country to exploit and threaten, in order to ensure particular interests or to obtain important positions in the ruling institution.

While corruption in government institutions is monitored by numerous bodies such as the Kuwaiti National Council, the Audit Council, the Kuwaiti press and NGOs, no official body, institution or even newspaper is paying any attention to the story of parliamentary corruption. It reads like a Hollywood film script full of Italian mafia gangs. The famous English writer Agatha Christie might have said of it, "The perfect crime is being committed in Kuwait!"

