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Women's rights bill sinks in Kuwait

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KUWAIT CITY - In a major setback to Kuwaiti women in politics, Islamist and conservative tribal lawmakers created a constitutional crisis that will delay consideration of a draft election law long enough to keep women out of this year's race for municipal council seats.

Women's rights activists were left hoping they can win voting rights ahead of the next municipal election, due in 2009.

The municipal council is a partially elected body with no major political significance. But succeeding in voting or running for it is seen as a step closer toward the larger aim of obtaining full political rights for women in Parliament, which has been an all-male domain for more than 40 years.

The maneuvering in Parliament was yet another success by conservatives in derailing attempts by Kuwait's ruler to push through laws granting women voting rights.

Women can vote in all Middle Eastern nations where elections are held, except in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Saudi Arabia barred women from voting in municipal elections - the kingdom's first ever - held in the first three months of this year. Elsewhere in the Persian Gulf, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman all have held their first elections in recent years and allowed women to cast ballots.

Kuwaiti women have reached high government posts and make up about half of Kuwait's work force, but opponents of the measure believe it would lead to mixing between men and women and fear that wives would neglect their domestic duties when they get involved in politics.

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