Diwaniyya, Democracy, and Kuwait’s Developmental Path

Bayly Winder

The lecture held on Tuesday, May 28, 2015 entitled “Diwaniyya, Democracy, and Kuwait’s Developmental Path,” discussed the diwaniyya as a central well-established institution in Kuwaiti society. The presenter, Bayly Winder, is a Fulbright Scholar conducting research at the Center for Gulf Studies at AUK. His focus is on the diwaniyya as a venue for informal, everyday gatherings as well as a space where major business deals and political debates take place.

Winder started his talk by giving a definition of the diwaniyya and stressing that it is something unique to Kuwait and is different from the “majlis” found elsewhere in the GCC. He argued that in Kuwait, it is more empowered and central to the founding of the state. The diwaniyya also has basic social functions like weddings, funerals, and Ramadan gatherings. It is an institution that cuts across different segments of society in that it encourages diversity and fosters understanding, enables people to mingle freely between different classes and sectarian lines, and it is a reason why Kuwaiti society is better integrated compared to the rest of GCC.

He explained that, historically, the diwaniyya has changed significantly in terms of the actual physical space. He gave the example of Diwan al-Asousi as one of the oldest diwaniyyas in Sharq, which dates back to 1742. It is narrow and old-fashioned with a museum-like feel. Today, however, we find the expanded version of the diwaniyya that is a large new construction or a standalone structure found in different neighborhoods. These are designed to handle large crowds and major functions.

According to Winder’s research, different diwaniyyas have different purposes and a variety of different uses. Some diwaniyyas are for families while others are for prominent individuals of the business or political community. There are diwaniyyas that hold formal lectures such as Diwan Al-Qadsia. Some diwaniyyas cater to specific hobbies or interests. There are several reasons to attend including maintaining strong family ties, networking and taking advantage of the wasta system, and reaffirming friendships.

Winder also explained that Kuwait was built on consensus and the ruling family being elected by the people through the venue of the diwaniyya. In the past, the diwaniyya allowed merchant families to have a role in decision-making. In 1921, men gathered in a diwaniyya and put forth an appropriate list of candidates to become the next Amir. Winder also gave the example of the popular Monday Diwaniyyas of the 1989-1990.

To conclude, Winder emphasized the important role that the diwaniyya plays as a space where freedom of speech is practiced and a place that promotes a healthy sense of debate. However, he argued that the diwaniyya has downsides. It contributes to a culture of nepotism, inefficiency,
and bloated bureaucracy. The *diwaniyya* is also a gendered concept that reflects an unhealthy degree of segregation that affects the society in general.