

Kuwait's New Government: A Political System in Crisis?

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Kuwait's new government, which was sworn in on March 3, is facing what could be a "perfect storm," combining a troublesome mix of political and economic problems that could lead to a substantial change, and perhaps instability. These developments raise the specter of a crisis similar to that of 2012, when Kuwait experienced two separate elections and massive demonstrations.

Background

Kuwait is known for what can be termed its semi-democratic political system: a belief shared by almost all elements of its society that the centers of power – including the Emir and the royal family (although they enjoy a special status) – are subject to the constitution. This social consensus may be under threat in the near future, as the representative component of Kuwaiti politics is eroding, which could lead to pressure for more fundamental political change.

Political participation in Kuwait has a long history compared to Kuwait's Gulf neighbors. In the 1920s and 1930s, there were already mechanisms of selecting and electing public institutions. In the early 1960s, following independence, a constitution and elected parliament were put in place. The Parliament (*majlis al-umma*) has considerable relative power in the Kuwait system. It can question ministers (parliamentary interrogations, *istijwab*) and force them out, as well as withhold the government budget. The struggle for power between the parliament and the government have shaped Kuwaiti politics since the parliament's creation. Although the parliament can overrule the Emir's veto on legislation with a two-thirds majority, the Emir has the power to dissolve the parliament. In 1976 the parliament was dissolved for four years and in 1986 the Emir again dissolved it, intending for the suspension to be permanent. However, following the 1990-1991 Gulf War, the

parliament was restored in 1992, and since then dissolution has always been followed immediately by new elections.

The regional upheaval caused by the uprisings generally known as the "Arab Spring" took a unique course in Kuwait. Elections in 2009 had created a moderate parliament, from the perspective of the ruling family, after three consecutive election campaigns in three years. Nevertheless, in November 2011 a corruption scandal erupted regarding allegations that the 2009 elections had been manipulated, and the parliament was dissolved again. In the February 2012 elections, the majority of the new parliament elected were Islamists and tribal figures, which led to its dissolution by the Emir, who also decided to change the electoral system. Each voter was now allowed to vote for only one candidate instead of four in his/her district, as was previously done. This increased the power of independents and minimized the power of organized groups (there are no legal parties in Kuwait), mainly the opposition. All opposition movements decided to boycott the next elections, and massive demonstrations under the slogan of *karamat al-umma* (dignity of the nation) took place over several months. Musallam al-Barrak, the leading opposition member who, in 2012, received the largest number of votes in Kuwait's history, was arrested and later jailed after declaring that "We will never allow you (*lan nasmah lak*)," in reference to the Emir's decision to change the voting system. In addition, arrests were made following anti-Emir messages on social media.

Nevertheless, the boycotts did not have the desired effect. In contrast to the uprisings in the region during 2010-2011, all of the demonstrations in Kuwait were peaceful and gradually the popular discontent faded. Public attention from 2014 forward was focused more on Kuwait's economic problems related to the decline in oil prices; the challenge presented by the Islamic State; and other pressing issues. While the judiciary has generally been perceived as an independent arbiter and third branch of the government, which maintains the separation of powers in the Kuwaiti democracy, this notion has not been embraced by all opposition groups in recent years. The Constitutional Court's ruling in favor of the government in most cases has come at the expense of the opposition. The opposition's boycotts of the political system ended gradually, and the opposition groups returned to the public sphere, expanding their share of seats in the 2016 parliament.

Recent Developments

Last year was a challenging year for Kuwait, for several interrelated reasons: the death of the Emir, new parliamentary elections, continuing economic difficulties, and the global coronavirus pandemic.

In September 2020, Emir Sabah al-Ahmad passed away and his brother Nawaf al-Ahmad was named the new emir; he then appointed another brother, Mishal al-Ahmad, as the new crown prince. Compared to Sabah al-Ahmad – who served for forty years as Kuwait's foreign minister and later prime minister, before replacing his brother as the Emir in 2006 – the new emir and crown prince lack similar experience in Kuwait's politics. Nawaf, almost 84, was the interior minister for ten years before becoming the defense minister in 1988. Following the Gulf War he left the government and was deputy head of the National Guard. After Sabah became prime minister in 2003, he returned to the interior ministry, and when Sabah became emir in 2006 he was appointed as crown prince, but without a role in government. Mishal (81) replaced Nawaf in 2003 as the deputy head of the National Guard until becoming the crown prince in 2020, without ever holding a ministerial position. Less than three months after the late emir's death, his son, Nasser al-Sabah, also died. Nasser was popular among the public as a key figure in fighting corruption, and with his passing, the new leadership lacks popularity and charisma.

The December 2020 parliamentary elections resulted in a gain for traditionalist (Islamic and tribal), anti-elite populism, at the expense of the existing political establishment.¹ Voter turnout was high (around 65%), despite the Covid-19 pandemic. Many incumbents lost their seats due to public anger with corruption and mishandling of public funds. This election saw rise in political activity and voting among the younger generation, but this was not reflected in the appointed government. The average age of ministers rose, while 30 out of the 50 MPs elected are under the age of 45.² Despite the rise in young voters, no women were elected to the parliament, although 29 ran (the highest number since women's suffrage was instituted in 2005). This seems counter to the common belief that young people tend to be more liberal in the Gulf.

The first session of the parliament saw a drama that was a harbinger of problems ahead. Before the session, the purpose of which was to elect the speaker of the parliament, 42 MPs declared publicly that they would endorse Bader al-Humaidi, a popular former minister and moderate oppositionist, to challenge the incumbent speaker, Marzuk al-Ghanem, who was backed by the government. There are 65 members of parliament including ministers (who are appointed members), so the path was open to replace the speaker. However, the vote for the position of the

¹ Kristin Smith Diwan, "[Kuwaitis Vote for Change](#)," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, December 8, 2020.

² Bader al-Saif, "[Favoring the Familiar](#)," *Diwan: Carnegie Middle East Center*, December 17, 2020.

speaker is by secret ballot, and the government was able to pressure MPs and ensure al-Ghanem was able to retain his position, with 33 votes.³

The tension soon escalated, as the government resigned on January 13, 2021 after only two sessions, following an attempt to question the Prime Minister Sabah al-Khalid in parliament regarding his choice of ministers. The dissolution of the parliament seemed imminent as, for the first time in Kuwait's history, a substantial majority (38 of 50 MPs) declared before the parliament session began that they will vote to remove the prime minister. The motion to question the prime minister was filed a day before the first day of the new parliament.⁴

On February 18, the Emir suspended the parliament for one month under Article 106 of the constitution, which had only been used once before, during the turbulence of 2012. A few days later, Mubarak Al-Duwailah a former minister from the Kuwaiti Muslim Brotherhood (*hadas*), wrote about the need to find a solution for the problems Kuwait's "democracy" has been facing for sixty years. He suggested a national conference for all parts of Kuwaiti society to determine the "nation's will," which the government should then respect, as a solution. Al-Duwailah ended his column ominously, stating: "If not, we will find a different solution!"⁵

On March 2, almost two months after the resignation of the last government and amid growing speculation about the impending dissolution of the parliament and even a change in the voting system, the Emir announced a new government. Four ministers were replaced in order to ease the tension, including the Minister of Interior, who had stood at the center of the conflict with parliament. However, the Emir's decision to reappoint Prime Minister al-Khalid raised the possibility for another resignation and a dissolution of parliament. New elections seem probable given a new *istijwab* for the prime minister was already submitted on March 8, again even before the first session of parliament was held.

The effect of the Covid-19 virus in Kuwait has been significant, with more than 200,000 confirmed cases and over 1,000 deaths, despite a young population. Economic problems, already significant, were worsened by the effects of the pandemic. After several years of low oil prices, Kuwait is facing its eighth consecutive budget deficit in the coming year. Kuwait needs an oil price of \$90 per barrel to

³ Yasmena Al Mulla, "[Kuwait: Marzouk Al Ghanim Re-Elected as Speaker of Parliament](#)," *Gulf News*, December, 15, 2020.

⁴ Yasmena Al Mulla, "[Emir of Kuwait Accepts Resignation of Government](#)," *Gulf News*, January 18, 2020.

⁵ Mubarak Fahd al-Duwailah, "[Harvest of Years: We are still looking for a way out](#) [Arabic]," *al-Qabas*, February 22, 2021.

balance its budget, and has been struggling since the severe drop in oil prices in 2014. Fitch, the American credit rating agency, continues to define Kuwait's status as "AA", but its future outlook was changed to "negative," mainly due to political instability stemming from the stand-off situation between the government and the parliament.⁶ Kuwait's parliament is adamant in rejecting proposals to borrow from international markets to cover the fiscal shortfall, or to cut spending in the public sector.⁷ The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has called for reforms in Kuwait's economy, including diversification so as to be less tied to oil prices, but many projects, such as Nassir al-Sabah Silk City,⁸ are at a standstill, due to the impasse between the government and the parliament.⁹ As long as the political stalemate continues, the economic problems will grow, and could lead to even more public frustration with the political system.

Conclusion

Kuwait is facing yet another crossroads in its long-lived semi-democratic system. The new Emir does not seem to have many good options for dealing with the situation, and economic problems are likely to grow because of the political deadlock. A recurrence of the 2012 opposition boycotts could harm popular support for the parliament and of representative government, which has been reflected in high voter turnout in the most recent elections. In 2012, the frightening examples of the upheaval during the Arab Spring deterred the opposition from further exploiting its popularity on the street, and led it to confine its struggle for power to constitutional political means. However, given that the Constitutional Court has ruled systematically in favor of the government, and the separation and balance of powers seems more theoretical than real, the opposition might in the near future look for different, potentially more destabilizing, ways to act.

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⁶ ["Fitch Revises Kuwait's Outlook to Negative: Affirms at 'AA',"](#) FitchRatings, February 2, 2021.

⁷ Fiona Macdonald, ["One of World's Richest Nations Taps Wealth Fund as Cash Dries Up,"](#) *Bloomberg*, February 3, 2021.

⁸ A project to build a new city in the north as a free zone that will attract foreign investments. Yasmena Al Mulla, ["Sheikh Nassir was Kuwait's Key Reformer,"](#) *Gulf News*, December 21, 2020,

⁹ ["Kuwait Should Accelerate Reforms to be less Tied to Oil Price Fluctuations – IMF,"](#) *Reuters*, February 4, 2021.

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