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Kuwait: At the Crossroads of Change or Political Stagnation

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Contents

- 1 About the Author
- 2 Summary
- 2 Introduction
- 3 Social and Cultural Change: The Tribes, the Bidun, and the Shi‘a
- 7 Political and Economic Structural Constraints
- 10 The Path to Protest
- 18 The Future

About the Author

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Summary

Though Kuwaitis have been striving for change, particularly since 2011, their country's political structures remain more or less unaltered. Yet change is inevitable. At issue is a semi-democratic system that has proven ineffective at dealing with problems such as government mismanagement, corruption, a lack of economic transparency, and inequality toward tribes and undocumented immigrants. If change is not initiated by the state, peaceful demonstrations will continue to push the government toward rationalizing the political process, allowing more freedoms, and developing Kuwait's democracy by amending its 52-year-old constitution.

Introduction

While significant change has not come to Kuwait in the past three years, it has not been for a lack of trying. In 2011, in the heady time of the beginning of the Arab uprisings across the region, Kuwait entered a new and challenging era driven by youth movements and grassroots opposition forces committed to government reform. This reform is particularly concerned with a more representative electoral system, a law permitting political parties, and wider popular participation in the formation of government. While the movements and forces were stymied by rigid political and economic structures that make reform in Kuwait difficult, it is only a matter of time before the country succumbs to change.

There are several reasons for this inevitability. First, Kuwait is a special case in the Gulf in terms of governance. Despite being a semi-constitutional monarchy, its citizens enjoy a margin of freedom that those in other Gulf countries do not. Such freedom can be seen in how Kuwaiti writers and thinkers speak their minds about the most important issues in their country and in the region. It can also be seen in the vibrant opposition, which is composed of Islamists and liberals who convey the pressures of an expressive public. These circumstances are in part due to the ability of the Sabahs—Kuwait's royal family—to live up to the semi-democratic nature of the 1962 constitution, if sometimes hesitantly.

Second, social and cultural change during the last decade has strongly affected Kuwaiti society and has increased civic awareness. The rising level of education among a growing and youthful population—currently 70 percent of citizens are under the age of 29—along with globalization and social networking have contributed to the emergence of new social forces. Among these are a middle class increasingly aware of government mismanagement, rising levels of corruption, and a lack of economic transparency. Marginalized groups such as youth, tribes, and the Bidun are also calling more distinctly for their rights.

Third, the political will and pressure from the Kuwaiti public have not yet reached critical mass—but they will. In the absence of reform, another surge of demands and peaceful expression is only a matter of time, and the future will likely bring more dramatic results.

Social and Cultural Change: The Tribes, the Bidun, and the Shi‘a

During the 1950s and 1960s, an opposition based on ideas of Arab nationalism emerged among urban commercial groups. The Sabah elite, particularly after the death of the progressive emir Abdullah al-Salem al-Sabah in 1965, allied with the tribes while attempting to make the commercial elite more dependent on government-sponsored projects. Through this strategy, the tribes were brought into the political process to undermine urban middle class critical posturing. In return for the tribes’ support, the Sabah-dominated regime provided tribal chiefs with direct assistance and the tribes as a whole with employment opportunities. The Sabah elite’s reliance on tribal support is one of the reasons the government has been able to stymie the evolution of the urban middle class opposition and to delay the emergence of an effective reform agenda. However, while this formula worked during the 1960s and the 1970s, in the 1980s it began to face challenges.

As various tribal members continued to settle next to each other around Kuwait City, they began to integrate into Kuwaiti urban life and experienced tremendous growth in their educational and professional credentials. In the

1990s, many became prominent university professors, engineers, doctors, lawyers, and businesspeople. With time, however, the areas they inhabited became overpopulated and they began to suffer from inadequate services.

Because of their high birth rates, tribes today account for an estimated 60 percent of Kuwait's population. Yet despite tribal members emerging as the demographic majority, the leading urban merchant families have continued to dominate the economic arenas, with control of the private sector and influence over major decisions. The combination of this overly concentrated wealth and the Sabah-dominated political system slowly politicized the tribes.

The inability of the tribes to gain influence and status commensurate with their numbers led them to look for representatives able to articulate their demands. In particular, the desire for a voice became the inroad for Islamist movements into tribal areas, which created a new type of tribal activist and parliamentary representative independent from tribal chiefs loyal to the government. Members of parliament from the tribal areas became younger and more educated, and in time—by the late 1990s—this group would spearhead a new opposition movement in Kuwait. Kuwait's parliament thus provided the tribes with an opportunity to revamp the country's power dynamics.

The transformation of the tribes into a base of political opposition, popular protest, social activism, and youth movements is not surprising given their status as a relatively underprivileged sector of Kuwaiti society, lagging behind in services and education and—literally and figuratively—situated on the fringes of the capital. Any desirable rearrangement on the tribes' part would require a more citizen-based egalitarian political and economic structure. For this reason, this group has a vested interest in political and civil reform, which will end with the Sabahs relinquishing certain amounts of influence over the state and its apparatus. At a minimum, members of tribes seek equality as citizens and an end to their relative deprivation and alienation.

Within the urban-tribal dichotomy, an enlightened intelligentsia and politicized component at the urban center has a history of supporting reform.

Liberal groups such as the Democratic Forum (al-Manbar al-Dimuqrati) and the National Alliance (al-Tahaluf al-Watani) along with Islamic groups reflect the desire for equality, democratization, and participation in government formation. Such forces have had active reform platforms among youth and grassroots movements in tribal and urban areas alike.

While many tribal groups were naturalized in the 1960s, not all were—and the issue of the Bidun, defined as “people without legal documents,” began to evolve into a serious problem during the following decades. The Bidun belong mostly to tribes that migrated to Kuwait from other areas such as Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Syria, following relatives who had been naturalized. Unlike their relatives, however, they arrived too late. Many of them claimed to be from the Kuwaiti desert, but they

did not have identification papers or had not renewed their original passports or national identity cards. As a result, their citizenship applications were rejected.

Over the decades, this group increased to 200,000 people. Today the Bidun number approximately 120,000, about ten percent of Kuwait’s population, following the flight of a large number of Bidun of Iraqi tribal background after the 1990 Iraqi invasion who feared reprisals once Kuwait was liberated.

The Bidun were at one time considered to be “Kuwaitis in waiting” and were included in annual statistics as Kuwaitis. They had access to the basic privileges of a public education, free hospitalization, and other services. Problems for the Bidun arose in 1988, when the government began to deny them certain privileges that

“At a minimum, members of tribes seek equality as citizens and an end to their relative deprivation and alienation.”

had been previously granted. Then, in 1991, after Kuwait's liberation from Iraq's occupation, they were treated as illegal aliens and pressured to leave the country.

This change in treatment was linked to the fact that after Kuwait's liberation, the government wanted every resident to hold legal papers but did not establish a way to bring about naturalization or residency rights. It decided that anyone with a Bidun status is illegal and must show documents from his or her country of origin. As illegal residents Bidun are prohibited from obtaining civil identity cards, birth and marriage certificates, driving licenses, or employment, and their plight has become a source of protest and human rights activism.

Since 2011 the Bidun have joined street demonstrations with the Kuwaiti opposition, and Kuwaiti activists and reform groups have also bonded with the Bidun movement. The Bidun who have been protesting are young and are considered the third generation of Bidun in Kuwait.

The Shi'a, another minority in Kuwait, represent 20 to 25 percent of the population. They are a largely urban group that immigrated in stages from the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, and Iran. The revolutionary Islamic message of Iran had an impact on some segments of the Shi'i community in Kuwait that in turn led to the formation of Shi'i-based political groups.

While the Shi'a would like a larger role and more respect for their rights, they have in recent years felt closer to the established political order and therefore less willing than in the past to join the call of the opposition. As such, the Shi'a did not join with the opposition following the country's 2012 elections, but their position could shift depending on how they view their political and human rights in an evolving Kuwait.

For instance, the Shi'a joined the opposition Islamic Sunni groups and liberal parties in opposing the ratification of the security agreement with the GCC in February 2014 due to their fear of losing rights to the GCC security approaches.

“With Sunni jihadis’ and Hezbollah’s involvement in the ongoing Syrian rebellion, Sunni-Shi‘i tensions have recently intensified.”

The opposition forces considered the agreement contradictory to the Kuwaiti constitution’s articles on freedom of opinion and human rights. All other GCC countries The Shi‘a fear some segments of the Sunni majority in Kuwait, particularly certain extreme Islamist groups whose members consider them to be apostates. Such Sunni fanaticism contributes

to Shi‘i fanaticism and vice versa. Negative perceptions between the two are sometimes reflected in business relationships and personal interactions. With Sunni jihadis’ and Hezbollah’s involvement in the ongoing Syrian rebellion, Sunni-Shi‘i tensions have recently intensified. Regardless, the Shi‘a have come a long way in Kuwait and, compared to their coreligionists in other Gulf countries, they have attained a certain measure of equality with the Sunni majority despite continued discrimination in some areas.

Political and Economic Structural Constraints

The tribes and the Bidun—and to a much lesser extent the Shi‘a—have become more vocal and demanding of their rights as Kuwait’s political and economic structure has become more and more dominated by an urban socioeconomic elite. This has increasingly restricted the chances for upward mobility, political participation, and equality for a larger mass of the population. While the tribes and the Bidun have been at the forefront of protests and opposition since 2011, their calls for change have been met with rigid institutions that have constrained their potential influence.

The Core Issue: Partial Democracy

Kuwait's emir, in accordance with the constitution ratified in 1962, is always a Sabah, in particular a descendant of Mubarak al-Sabah, who came to power in Kuwait after a coup at the end of the nineteenth century. Until 2003, the crown prince always held the post of prime minister. As a result of public pressure and a gravely ill crown prince, the prime ministership was made into a separate position. However, the emir selects the prime minister from within the Sabah family.

The 50-member National Assembly consists of elected members from the opposition and from groups loyal to the government, as well as independents. The executive branch, represented by the emir and the ruling family, has supremacy, including the right to form the government. Of particular importance is that 15 cabinet members vote in parliament, giving the government a tremendous voting advantage and making the total number of parliament members about 65. (The number can be 64 or fewer if one or more elected members are chosen to serve in the cabinet.) Conflict between a weaker parliament and a stronger government is inherent in such a structure.

The Kuwaiti opposition's dilemma is this imbalance in the political system, the parliament's absence in the formation of the government, and the lack of elections based on competition between political parties. Kuwaiti political groups operate in an unofficial manner without laws to govern their role or rights. In addition, every MP in the opposition can take whatever stance he or she wants, making it difficult to create coherent and strongly backed policies.

Kuwait's partial democracy breeds crises. The primary problem is that with the exception of implementing voting rights for women in 2006, Kuwait has not developed its democratic traditions since 1962, nor has it amended the constitution to develop its democracy. This stagnation has produced disagreements that can only be resolved through political development. Society has evolved and changed, but the governing political structures have not.

The parliament has grown accustomed to using what little resources it has to challenge and weaken the Sabah-controlled government's choke hold on power. MPs regularly grill ministers at hearings, making it uncomfortable for the latter to carry out the government's every wish. During the last few years leading members of the

Sabah family in government have been exposed to such treatment, including no-confidence votes. This situation has led to a string of government crises and frequent dissolutions of parliament, resulting in new elections.

“...Kuwait has not developed its democratic traditions since 1962, nor has it amended the constitution to develop its democracy.”

Underlying political competition among leading members of the Sabah family only serves to exacerbate these governance problems. Members of the family seek influence by buying up media outlets such as newspapers and television channels. With the issue of succession ever present, the competition is most visible among the middle and younger generations of Sabahs. Some are popular among the population and have allies within the opposition, which will be of critical importance if political reforms are to be implemented. Such an evolution in Sabah-opposition relationships could strengthen the reform agenda over time.

Government-dominated Economic Structures

A central problem for the Kuwaiti labor market is that most of the country's university graduates have government jobs. Indeed, the government employs an astonishing 90 percent of the workforce. International consultants have encouraged growth in the private sector, but this has been carried out only to a very limited degree. Most Kuwaitis continue to be attracted to the government's relaxed working hours along with its generous salaries and vacation policies.

A series of strikes in 2011 revealed another economic issue. Teachers, customs workers, jurists, and other professionals organized protests to demand salary increases in accordance with inflation. Their actions resulted in major losses for merchants, and the government had no choice but to agree to many of the strikers' demands. Lacking a more developed tradition of unions or a system of human resources and salary scales, the Kuwaiti government and its huge bureaucracy is not equipped to negotiate with organized labor.

It is important to remember that Kuwait is a single commodity, that is, oil-producing, country that has failed to devise a strategy for economic diversification. Kuwait today spends 60 percent of its income and 80 percent of its annual budget on government salaries. With today's high price of oil, Kuwait is doing well and can balance its budget. A steep drop in prices, however, could make it difficult for Kuwait to meet its salary and other commitments. With the development of new sources of oil and energy elsewhere, Kuwait's diversification problem will only intensify.

The private capital of the commercial class is one of the most important factors for Kuwait's future development. Yet the biggest complaint from potential investors has been the Kuwaiti bureaucracy and restrictions on the private sector, much of which is overly dependent on the government for contracts and projects. Many of the contracts, of course, are determined by political connections, motivating some entrepreneurs to look to other countries with fewer hurdles. As a result, Kuwaitis are among the top investors in Dubai. They have done well in the Gulf, Egypt, Lebanon, and elsewhere in such sectors as food, clothing, and hospitality. In Kuwait, their activities have stagnated.

The Path to Protest

With a citizenry generally dependent on such a rigid economic system based on government employment and clientalism, reform efforts—both economic and political—are stymied. Yet what was considered appropriate and acceptable in Kuwait in the 1960s is no longer so, as the changes in the structure of Kuwaiti society, particularly social and educational shifts, are not

reflected in the politics or the hierarchy running the country. The authorities are nowhere close to devising a solution to the country's need for economic diversification and privatization, nor to the rigid administration, which is plagued by increasing corruption. They instead prefer to deal with actors who they consider loyal at the expense of those who might be better skilled and efficient. Such a practice only serves to spur citizens more and more to action.

The Seeds of a Storm

In 2011 a number of independent youth organizations, supported by members of the parliamentary opposition and involving Islamist as well as secular groups, coalesced around a platform focused on changing the government. Their slogans targeted combating corruption and removing the prime minister, Sheik Nasser Mohammed al-Ahmed al-Sabah, who had held power since 2006.

That fall, a Pandora's Box opened when banks leaked information revealing the exorbitant accounts of some 15 parliamentarians. Some of the holdings included deposits in the millions of dollars, but with no indication of the funds' origins. Fellow parliamentarians and members of the public accused the MPs of having accepted bribes in return for voting with the government.[1]

Movement leaders, inspired by local events and the "Arab Spring," organized weekly gatherings in the public space next to the National Assembly building. The sit-ins began in the spring of 2011 with just a few hundred participants, but grew in the fall with renewed energy after the bribery scandal. On November 16, 2011, many youth supported by members of parliament from the opposition, such as Musallam al-Barak, stormed the parliament building with the goal of pressing for the prime minister's resignation. Tens of thousands gathered in the streets of Kuwait City to demand the same.

The prime minister submitted his resignation on November 28, 2011. It was the first resignation that resulted from public and popular pressure in any GCC country. Dissolution of the parliament followed on December 6, 2011, along with the scheduling of new legislative elections for February 2, 2012.

“The results represented the first time that the opposition dominated the legislature, offering some hope of the possibility of putting the new prime minister...under pressure so as to influence the government. ”

After the storming of the parliament building, the government arrested a number of youth activists. This led to daily gatherings organized by young women in front of the Ministry of Justice to demand the immediate release of all the detainees. Those participating in the gatherings had become acquainted with such tactics by following the unfolding events across the region. Professors and writers dropped by the demonstrations

and engaged the protesters in discussions on democracy, human rights, and reform.

The February 2012 legislative elections saw 35 of the 50 seats in the National Assembly go to opposition candidates, reflecting the climate of discontent in Kuwaiti society. The results represented the first time that the opposition dominated the legislature, offering some hope of the possibility of putting the new prime minister, Jaber al-Mubarak al-Sabah, appointed by the emir in accordance with the constitution, under pressure so as to influence the government.

The new parliamentarians, led by Musallam al-Barak and inspired by the street youth movement, floated the idea of parliamentary government for Kuwait and demanded half the cabinet seats. While this did not transpire, this National Assembly was far more assertive than any before it in Kuwait, introducing a law guaranteeing the independence of the courts. However, eight days before the vote on this law was to take place, in June 2012, the Constitutional Court dissolved the parliament, citing a procedural flaw in the earlier emir's call for new elections. This raised many questions regarding the neutrality of the judiciary.

Changing the Voting System

After the dissolution of parliament, the government asked the courts to review the constitutionality of the “five districts, four votes” system and whether it could continue to be used in future elections. It thus became clear that the government was nervous about a potential repeat of the February 2012 election and an opposition majority.

Kuwait’s voting system at the time was the product of a 2005 youth movement push for electoral reform, during which the government and the parliament agreed to divide the country into five districts and give each voter four votes. Several elections were held based on this arrangement until the government realized that it would likely produce forces beyond its control and risked a parliament that might legalize political parties and gain power at the executive’s expense.

Under the five districts, four votes system, ten candidates were elected in each district from among 70 to 100 or more competitors. Every voter in the district cast four votes total, essentially making his or her own “list.” Each voter would typically end up having at least one individual of their choosing elected in the district. The Constitutional Court judged the system to be constitutional.

Regardless, in October 2012, the emir invoked one of his constitutional rights by issuing a “decree of urgency,” which allowed him to change the electoral system unilaterally. Under the new rules, each voter would cast only one vote for one of the 70 to 100 competitors in a district. Each of the five districts would continue to elect ten representatives, putting the total number of parliamentarians at 50. The emir called for new elections based on this new law.

The opposition charged that the intention of the emiri decree was to delay democratic evolution in the country. Having only one vote to select one of ten winners in a district with 70 or 100 competitors, in the absence of party lists, stood to fragment votes and promote electoral corruption, such as vote buying. The opposition argued that by minimizing the voting power of each person, the new system would consistently produce pro-government legislatures. A candidate in a district of 120,000 voters could win a seat with some 2,000 or

3,000 votes—or less. Such a system would be incapable of adequately reflecting societal currents in the parliament. Only Jordan and a handful of other countries, all of them authoritarian, have such a one-vote system. The imposition of this system elicited calls for a boycott of upcoming elections, as well as street protests.

A New Cycle of Protest

From October 2012 into early 2013, Kuwait witnessed unprecedented demonstrations, licensed and unlicensed, involving tens of thousands of participants airing their opposition to the new voting system and seeking reform that would further democratize the country.[2] There were clashes with police, something new to Kuwait. Political and security prosecutions followed, as well as prison sentences for activists and spokespeople of youth and popular movements and former members of parliament.

This new era of protest started with the famous speech by Musallam al-Barak in October 2012 in which he criticized the emir in a public rally. This was the first such challenge from a Kuwaiti or even Gulf politician against a sitting emir, and went against Kuwaiti law, which dictates that the emir should not be criticized directly or even indirectly. Al-Barak broke an old tradition so openly that it encouraged hundreds of young men and women to follow suit.

Al-Barak went from being a local politician in his tribal area in the 1990s to becoming a national figure seen as empowering marginalized tribes and social groups. He has won almost every parliamentary election with ease since 1992. If a free election was held today in Kuwait for the position of a popularly elected prime minister, al-Barak's popularity and grassroots reach would assure him a lead. Al-Barak is not an Islamist, but is rather a combination of a trade unionist, a charismatic nationalist leader, and a politician whose aim is to change peacefully the elite politics of Kuwait into a more democratic, inclusive, and open structure. Al-Barak reflects deep changes in Kuwaiti society; for the first time a leading figure has emerged from the tribal majority and not from the commercial elites. Being as populist as he is, some leading members of the Kuwaiti commercial elite and many Sabah are deeply fearful of his rise.

However al-Barak is a safety valve for the Kuwaiti political system, as he is among few in the hardcore opposition power structure that has the credibility to cut a compromise deal with the Sabahs. His strength also lies in that he stands politically halfway between the authorities and the youth movement.

Al-Barak was punished for his actions in court, along with hundreds of others, including prominent members of the dissolved 2012 parliament. The charges were many: storming the parliament building (62 participants implicated); criticizing the emir or defaming the majesty of the emir (more than 35 implicated out of dozens investigated, with the possibility of five years in jail); calling for an unlicensed demonstration (dozens implicated); repeating a speech delivered by al-Barak as an open letter to the emir; and criticizing the judiciary. Dozens of youths have cases pending, and many are enduring overlapping accusations. In July 2013, the emir acquitted all those sentenced on charges related to criticizing him, but other charges proceeded in the courts. Many of those arrested cannot travel by order of the court, and some cannot even obtain a standard government document.

In fairness, it must be said that the authorities have at times showed signs of restraint, such as by acquitting all those accused of storming the parliament building. Also, there were beatings and injuries reported during clashes in 2012 and 2013, but no deaths.

Political and Youth Groups

Due to these activities, the Kuwaiti youth movement has acquired experience in nonviolent action and protest.[3] The movement arose organically and has a variety of components, such as Hadam (the Civil Democratic Movement) and Nahj (an Islamic coalition that includes the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafis). The Muslim Brotherhood, which in Kuwait formed the constitutional movement (al-Haraka al-Dusturiyya), while not the driving engine of the opposition, represents an important force with important influence. Its members and supporters constitute about one-third of the popular movement. The Salafi Movement is also allied with the opposition, while a second Salafi group, al-Tajamu al-Islami al-Salafi, believes that Salafis should never

disobey a Muslim ruler. However, Tajamu suffered when several of its leaders joined the protest movement in 2012. Other mainstream liberal groups and independent youths have been extremely active in the protest movement as well.

This generation is also gaining experience in politics. So far, Hadam is among the more political and mature of the groups. It has written its own platform and has positioned itself to become Kuwait's first youth party.

In the short term, the goal of the youth groups is simply to hold the government accountable for its actions. But its discussions and debates make clear that the ultimate aim is to push Kuwait toward a popularly elected prime minister and a cabinet based on competitive parliamentary party lists. Perhaps most importantly, the youth movement has put pressure on the traditional opposition to seek a parliamentary government as well.

Continuity of Government Policy

Despite the demonstrations of 2012 and 2013 and the flurry of political activism among youths and the traditional opposition, the regime's decisions have remained in effect. A very weak parliament was elected in early December 2012 after a boycott of 62 percent of voters. The new parliament immediately became the target of ridicule in addition to monitoring by an increasingly critical population.

The one-vote electoral system was appealed to the Constitutional Court, which ruled it admissible in June 2013. The court noted that many countries use such a system, though it did not mention that it can only work fairly in conjunction with political parties, such as in proportional representation and winner-take-all systems. However, the court then dissolved the parliament elected in December, also on procedural grounds, and gave itself the power to oversee future decrees announced by the emir. Such oversight is a small step forward in matters of constitutionalism and checks and balances.

Parliamentary elections held again on July 27, 2013 were boycotted by fewer voters—38 percent. The speaker of the new parliament,

Marzouq al-Ghanim, is a charismatic young man from the commercial elite. But in the absence of the participation of major political and reform forces, this parliament is set for another round of failure.

Kuwait is in dire need of reforming its voting system to regain oppositional participation. Without such change, most of the opposition is left outside the parliament. Therefore, the public expression of the protest movement is expected to return in response to a new scandal or an unpopular government decision.

This expression is evident in the following developments. A major group, referred to in parliament as “popular” (*al-sha‘bi*), led by the leading opposition parliamentary figure and former chair of the parliament, Abdul-Aziz al-Sadoun, and al-Barak, announced in 2014 the formation of what looks like a political party in the making, called Hashd. The group now has many supporters, though it lacks organization. However, its formation is reenergizing the reform movement.

This reenergizing has taken the form of an even larger group, a coalition called Tahaluf al-Mu‘arada that was formed in the spring of 2014 and is composed of most of the opposition groups, including youth groups, Hadam, Hashd, and the Muslim Brothers. Its daring platform consists of pushing for constitutional amendments and changes that seek to transform Kuwait into a parliamentary system, target the powers of the emir, and develop the independence of the courts.

Hadam, the youth group, has had the most influence vis-à-vis this platform. While the Salafis dropped out of the coalition due to their desire for Shariah law, which is not included in the platform, the Muslim Brothers agreed on all the proposed constitutional changes and shelved their demand of Shariah implementation for the sake of the reform agenda. Some liberal groups felt that the platform was too far-reaching and left the coalition. These groups’ links to the commercial elite and their fear of Islamic influence could be another factor behind their withdrawal. The left, in particular “the progressive movement,” has stayed on.

These alliances and fissures demonstrate that the opposition and reform project in Kuwait is an evolving project. Yet despite the splits, none of the ideals in the Tahaluf al-Mu'arada's platform has ever been put at the forefront of the political scene by such a large coalition with such an extensive grassroots reach.

The Future

Kuwait is going through what can be called a constitutional revolution. Events there continue to grow in importance due to the rousing debate and increasing political awareness across all sectors of society. This level of politicization will make the current authorities' ability to maintain control more difficult than in the past. Thus, the only way to address the desires of the people and ensure stability in the coming era will require rationalizing the political process, allowing more freedoms, and developing the country's democracy by amending the constitution.

Kuwaitis are increasingly openly discussing the idea of a parliamentary government based on party competition. The 2010 scandal involving bribing MPs to vote with the government resulted in part from the fact that the Sabah prime minister lacked majority backing in the legislature. In general, however, the parliament has limited impact on policy and no power to reflect the will of its majority in government programs. This makes the government and the legislature unable to work together or reflect Kuwaitis' voting choices.

Kuwaitis are aware that achieving a true partnership in the governance of their country cannot happen overnight or without a form of compromise with the ruling elite or parts of it. There is thus an ever-increasing awareness that finding middle ground, rather than playing a zero sum game, can help Kuwait avoid external intervention and will not create a situation in which some elite elements feel cornered and therefore become destructive to the country and to themselves.

It is therefore a mistake to assume that parliamentary government will necessarily undermine the monarchy. Kuwaiti society, including youth movements, shares a consensus on the role of the Sabah family. What groups disagree on is the

breadth of the Sabahs' power. Finding a balance between democracy—with the nation as the source of power—and the status and role of the royal family as decreed by the constitution can be accomplished through parliamentary government, a popularly elected prime minister, and a constitutional monarchy. None of this is achievable, however, without meaningful reform of the current, 1962 constitution as well as an agreement with the emir on such reforms.

Moving toward political parity would enhance the protection of individual and minority rights, provided such movement is accompanied by the clear development of an independent judiciary and the right of individuals to approach the courts in the event of abuse on the part of the parliamentary majority or executive authority.

If the government fails to initiate meaningful reform, the country's opposition is likely to press on with its activism through peaceful gatherings and demonstrations. Having discovered the chance to transform government by peaceful means, youth groups and the traditional opposition will continue to push the political class in parliament and the public sphere toward change. ■

This study is based on field interviews conducted between 2010 and 2014 with Kuwaiti activists, youth organizers, political groups, Shi'a, tribes, Bidun, women's groups, urban communities, and political elite. Special thanks goes to Ms. Dalal al-Dayel for arranging seven open-ended interviews with approximately 50 individuals representing various groups in Kuwait.

Assertions and opinions in this publication are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Middle East Institute, which expressly does not take positions on Middle East policy.

Endnotes

[1] Foreign Minister Mohammed Sabah al-Salem al-Sabah, a son of a former emir and a former ambassador to the United States, resigned in protest over the funds being transferred through his ministry without his knowledge.

[2] Some estimates put the number of demonstrators in two separate protests at 70,000—40,000 in the actual demonstrations and another 30,000 in their cars, unable to reach the site due to police roadblocks. By any account these were the largest demonstrations in the history of Kuwait. See, for example, this video: http://panadol75.blogspot.com/2013/02/blog-post_10.html.

[3] The youth movement had even been evolving before the Arab Spring, using Twitter and social networking to its advantage.