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Kuwait:

Politics in a
Participatory Emirate

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Contents

Introduction	1
The Roots of Reform	2
The Origins of Kuwaiti Politics: <i>Shura</i> , Authority, and Opposition	2
The Struggle over Constitutionalism: 1961–1990	4
The Reaffirmation of Constitutionalism: 1991 and Beyond	4
The Context of Competition	6
Social Structures: Between Heterogeneity and Exclusion	6
A Monolithic Economy	9
Civil Society: Standing but Stunted	10
Political Groupings: Protoparty Patterns	11
The Process and Priorities of Reform	13
The Horizons and Limits of Reform	13
The Reform Debate	14
Looking Ahead: Prospects for Fundamental Reform	17
The Role of External Actors	18

Introduction

Kuwait has a long history of consultative government, constitutionalism, and participatory politics unique among the monarchies of the Gulf region. The ruling Al Sabah family's place in the political system was established by agreement—not force—among the leading families of the trading city of Kuwait in the mid-eighteenth century; administration by consultation continued until the late nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, while the country was a British protectorate, authoritarian tendencies within the ruling family were countered by a strong constitutional movement that started in the 1920s, bore fruit in parliamentary elections in 1938, and resulted in a fairly democratic constitution when the country became independent in 1961. Since then, Kuwait has had 11 parliamentary elections, and the National Assembly has continued to play a very powerful role in the state.

Nevertheless, there has been a long power struggle between the ruling Sabah family and the Parliament, leading to the suspension of both the constitution and Parliament in 1976 and again in 1986. The system became more stable after the liberation of Kuwait from the Iraqi invasion of 1990 for two reasons: first, the Sabah family had performed poorly during the war and needed to rebuild its legitimacy with the Kuwaiti public; second, the United States insisted on a return to parliamentary constitutionalism after the war. Since then, Parliament has played a central role again and the country has seen various reforms.

The year 2006 was particularly eventful. In January, the National Assembly resolved a succession crisis within the Sabah family by intervening constitutionally in favor of Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad over the ailing Sheikh Saad al-Abdullah. In the spring, after a number of lawyers successfully challenged a ban on public gatherings in the constitutional court, youth and other social groups led public protests for a change in the electoral system. The movement was joined by members of Parliament and led to a standoff with the government. The emir dissolved Parliament and called for new elections, which an opposition coalition decisively won. The new government accepted the opposition's redistricting proposals, which amounted to a major reform of the electoral system. Since then, the government has also responded to pressure from the National Assembly on a number of issues, including anticorruption, press and television freedoms, and reform in the educational, sports, and business sectors.

The process of reform in Kuwait is neither systematic nor linear. There are many players with competing agendas; and the political pulling and pushing that characterizes the relationship between the government and the National Assembly is often more about showboating and capturing newspaper headlines than comprehensive, well-thought out reform. The contentious Parliament is often seen by the government as an obstacle to top-down reforms that the emir or government might be interested in pushing through. Yet there is no doubt that the Kuwaiti political system is a fluid and responsive one, that the emir and the executive branch do not have a free rein on power, and that the National Assembly, civil society, the business community, and public opinion have important roles in the Kuwaiti decision-making process.

The Roots of Reform

The Origins of Kuwaiti Politics: *Shura*, Authority, and Opposition

The origins of the Kuwaiti political system go back to the late eighteenth century, when the merchant families of the small fishing and pearl-diving town of Kuwait appointed a respected member of one of the families, Abdullah al-Sabah, as emir—in effect, governor. The appointment was essentially a practical division of tasks between governance (*imara*) and commerce (*tijara*) among different families, rather than the ascension of one family to a position of dominance over others. Indeed, until the twentieth century, it was usually the Sabah family that was the weaker party, dependent as it was on precious revenues from the merchant families, rather than the other way around.

This period contains the germs of many elements that are essential in understanding the basic political ideas and attitudes in Kuwait. First, the ruler was not seen as superior, but simply as performing a particular function as part of the necessary division of labor within a growing economy and society. Second, the ruler was tasked with looking after the interests of the city as a whole, not with promoting the interests of his family, and there was no question that other groups or families were in any way his—or his family's—subjects. Third, the political sphere was not seen as superior to the economic or civilian spheres, but rather parallel to and supportive of them. Fourth, rule was not imposed by force, but by consent and agreement. Fifth, rule was established within the firm context of consultation (*Shura*), and the emir did not have absolute power—this was no Hobbesian contract to quell dissension by establishing an all-powerful monarch, but a more businesslike arrangement to appoint a chairman to help look after the interests of a growing concern. Sixth,

the arrangement was bolstered by representation with taxation, because it was the tax revenues generated by the merchant families' activities that sustained the emir and his fledgling administration.

This spirit of cooperative *Shura* was broken at the turn of the twentieth century by Sheikh Mubarak al-Sabah, who leaned on newfound British support to impose a more authoritarian style of politics on Kuwait. His attempts led to several waves of protest and dissent, culminating in the demand for a written constitution. A first constitutional document, agreed upon by leading opposition notables and the Sabah family, asserted the right of the community to resolve succession crises within the Sabah family and called for the election of a *Shura* council charged with the "administration of the affairs of the country on the basis of justice and fairness" under the guidance and leadership of the emir. A 12-member *Shura* council was appointed, not elected; it was not given any real authority and soon dissolved, bringing to a quick end this first attempt at a constitution.

In 1938 the British urged the Sabah family to shore up their rule by accepting a number of political reforms. Elections for a National Assembly were held that June, with voting restricted to the leading notables of the main families. The assembly, headed by the reformist Sheikh Abdullah al-Salem of the Sabah family, drafted another constitutional document, one promptly accepted by the ruling emir. The document asserted that the people were the source of all authority, that they were represented by their elected deputies, that the National Assembly alone had the right to produce legislation, and that all treaties and concessions must go through the National Assembly. But the assembly soon began to flex its muscles and question the petroleum concessions granted by the Sabah family to the British, prompting the emir to quickly dissolve it with enthusiastic British backing. New elections held in early 1939 produced another assembly, but attempts by the new legislature and the emir to agree on a constitution failed, and the assembly was soon dissolved again.

The third and decisive attempt at a constitution came in the late 1950s, again with a nudge from the British. Reacting to the growing appeal of Nasserism after the Suez War of 1956 and the union of Egypt and Syria in 1958, the British tried to preempt trouble by promising independence to Kuwait. They also again urged the emir to allow wider participation in government to shore up the state's weak Arab nationalist credentials with at least some democratic credentials. The British were also eager to create a Jordanian-Iraqi-Kuwaiti Arab Union led by the pro-British Hashemites to counter Nasser's Egyptian-Syrian United Arab Republic (UAR). Although the Iraqi monarchy soon fell to an Arab nationalist coup and Nasser's UAR itself collapsed in 1961, the momentum for independence and change in Kuwait had already taken root.

The Struggle over Constitutionalism: 1961-1990

Kuwait received its independence in June 1961. This was followed in December by elections for a constituent assembly (*majlis ta'sisi*) tasked with drafting a constitution for the country. The constitution was drafted in cooperation with the emir and promulgated in November 1962. The emir at that time was Sheikh Abdullah, who had headed the constitutionally minded assembly of 1938. His presence was crucial in legitimizing and institutionalizing the new power-sharing arrangements between the ruling family and the public.

The 1962 constitution is a detailed and strong document that effectively curbs the power of the emir and the ruling family in a way that falls short of a true constitutional democracy but is unparalleled among other monarchies in the region. It declares Kuwait an independent sovereign state in which the head of state is a hereditary member of the Sabah line. Sovereignty resides in the Kuwaiti people and they choose their representatives to a National Assembly in regular and free elections. The heir to the throne, who is nominated by the emir, must be approved by the Parliament, and the emir must swear an oath before Parliament. The emir appoints a government that helps him exercise executive authority; this government does not require the approval or confidence of Parliament, but any and all ministers, including the prime minister, can be questioned by Parliament and removed from office by a parliamentary vote. Legislative authority is shared by the emir and Parliament in two ways: ministers (no more than 15) in the emir-appointed cabinet become ex-officio voting members of Parliament alongside the 50 elected deputies, and all legislation requires the approval of both Parliament and the emir.

But the successors of Abdullah, Sabah al-Salem al-Sabah (1967-1977) and Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah (1977–January 2006), were not as favorably inclined to constitutionalism and parliamentary democracy as Abdullah. The increasing oil revenue of the state enabled the Sabah family to rid itself of its original dependence on the big trading families for financial support and thus change one of the main dynamics of the system. They suspended the constitution and dissolved Parliament twice, in 1976 and 1986, each time for four years. In the first case, domestic pressure led to fresh elections and a resumption of parliamentary life; in the second, the Iraqi invasion intervened.

The Reaffirmation of Constitutionalism: 1991 and Beyond

The Iraqi occupation and its aftermath represented an important watershed in Kuwaiti political development. The return of Sabah rule to Kuwait after its poor performance during the war and after the attempts to roll back constitutionalism in the 1970s and 1980s required a renewed commitment to that principle from both the Sabah family and the Ku-

waiti public. In addition the U.S. government had no choice but to press the Sabah family to commit itself to a restoration of the constitution and Parliament so Washington could justify its military investment in Kuwait to Congress and its own public.

When Iraqi forces took over Kuwait, most of the Sabah family fled the country, a severe blow to their credibility. At the same time, the population that suffered under the occupation developed a sense of unity, nationalism, and entitlement. The outlines of the new political contract that would emerge after the war were hammered out in a meeting organized in Saudi Arabia in which members of the Sabah family and other leading Kuwaitis met under Saudi and American auspices. The conferees in Saudi Arabia agreed to renew their support for the rule of the Sabah family in return for a permanent and unequivocal return to regular constitutional and political life. Although authoritarian and anticonstitutional tendencies persist within the Sabah family, they have remained in check. Postwar elections were held in 1992 and again in 1996, 1999, 2003, and 2006, often with a very strong showing for the opposition, without leading to a suspension of constitutional or parliamentary life.

The long-reigning Sheikh Jaber died in mid-January 2006, inaugurating a year of extraordinary political dynamism in Kuwait. The assumption of power by the heir-designate, Sheikh Saad al-Abdullah, who was virtually incapacitated by illness, was contested both within the family and by Parliament. It soon became clear that the new emir was not even well enough to take the required oath of investiture before Parliament. As the deadline for taking the oath passed, Parliament moved to depose the emir-designate and invest instead Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad of the Sabah family's Jaber line. As the parliamentary motion was taking place, a letter of abdication from Sheikh Saad arrived, thus avoiding a direct parliamentary deposition. Sabah took the oath of office as emir and appointed his brother, Nawwaf al-Ahmad, as the new crown prince and his nephew, Nasser al-Muhammad al-Ahmad, as prime minister.

The extraordinary events of January were followed in the spring by equally significant developments. A group of lawyers, contesting a political case, challenged the constitutionality of the law banning public gatherings that had been on the books for over two decades. The challenge went to the constitutional court, and in a bold move, the court struck down the law. This emboldened a number of opposition and youth groups, mobilized around the demand to amend the election law, to organize an escalating series of public gatherings and demonstrations. Their main demand was that the number of electoral constituencies be reduced from 25 to 5.

The 25 constituencies had been put in place by the government in the run-up to the first postliberation elections in 1992. Opposition leaders

alleged that the constituencies were gerrymandered in such a way as to favor allies of the government and were small enough so as to enable the easy buying of votes to decide the outcome. They argued that five large districts would reduce the influence of gerrymandering and money and bring about fairer representation. The youth-driven public protests quickly garnered the support of a majority within the National Assembly. The government, hoping to stem the tide, proposed a 10-district compromise, which the National Assembly rejected. Facing growing opposition within Parliament and among the protestors, the emir acted on his constitutional prerogative to dissolve Parliament and call new elections, albeit on the basis of the old 25-district law—hoping to reshuffle the parliamentary deck in his favor.

Government supporters did poorly in the elections, with a loose opposition alliance—supporting the five-district reform—taking more than two-thirds of the 50 seats in Parliament. After the elections, the government promptly dropped its old ten-district proposal and agreed to five districts. With victory in the electoral districting battle, public and parliamentary attention shifted to other issues, particularly those of corruption and waste, oil and land resources, and the sports and youth sectors.

The succession crisis of January, the protests of the spring, and the elections of the summer all demonstrated the extent to which the public and Parliament wield significant influence in the Kuwaiti political system.

The Context of Competition

Despite the realities of constitutionalism, regular elections, and an important degree of popular participation and parliamentary influence, the Kuwaiti system remains restrictive in a number of ways. The ruling family, although weaker than others in the region, remains the dominant player in the system; the political system up until only two years ago excluded women and still excludes a large number of other Kuwaiti inhabitants; the economy is state dominated, which creates a dependent labor force and prevents the emergence of a truly independent business class; and civil society is active but still stunted.

Social Structures: Between Heterogeneity and Exclusion

In a resident population of over 2.5 million, not quite one million are Kuwaitis. The remainder are largely Arab and South Asian workers, along with a number of Westerners. It is only the Kuwaitis, of course, who are officially included in political life, and even among Kuwaitis, the extension of suffrage has been very slow. The first “elections” in 1920 involved a few dozen notables gathered at a home of one of their own. Suffrage was gradually extended in successive stages to include, by the 1990s, the

majority of male Kuwaitis 21 or older. Still excluded were a large number of male citizens who had only recently been naturalized and another 100,000 stateless inhabitants of Kuwait, known as the *bidoon* (in Arabic, “without”). The question of suffrage and citizenship remains highly contested in Kuwait.

The exclusion of women from political life was the most glaring until the last elections. Women’s suffrage had been a demand of reformers since the 1960s, but conservative forces in the Sabah family and in Islamist organizations represented in Parliament opposed it. The law granting women the right to vote was finally passed in 2005, and women were enabled to vote and run for Parliament for the first time in the 2006 elections. While several women ran, none won seats, due to a lack of political experience and continuing resistance by voters. However, female candidates might fare better next time Kuwaitis go the polls, because of changes in the electoral law and because political organizations, above all Islamist groups, have now realized the weight of the women’s vote and seek to include them in the political process as supporters and candidates.

Although almost the entire Kuwaiti population is urbanized, there is lingering identity segmentation between self-described “urban” (*hadari*) Kuwaitis, who consider themselves the original or early settlers in Kuwait City, and the “tribal” (*qabali*) Kuwaitis, who made the transition to urban life and, in some cases citizenship, more recently. In the current Kuwaiti population, about 65 percent are considered “tribal” or “Bedouin” and 35 percent “urban.” The tribal populations, although living in urban conditions indistinguishable from those of others, still have a social structure and identity that flows from their tribal group. Their social and cultural values tend to be more conservative, and their politics were originally more sympathetic to the Sabah family.

The main leftist, liberal, and Arab nationalist movements in Kuwait originated largely in the *hadari* communities and continue to find most traction there. It is the Islamist groups that have been able to make inroads into the so-called tribal communities since the 1980s. Before several elections, the tribal groups have organized their own “primaries” to choose candidates for office, and under the old 25-district electoral system districts were gerrymandered to ensure the ample representation of tribal groups allied with the government. In recent times, inroads by the Islamists into tribal communities together with the broad opposition alliance that brought together Islamists and nonIslamist forces since the 1991 liberation has somewhat reduced the rift between these two elements of society.

Although official figures are kept under wraps, estimates of the sectarian distribution put the Shiite community in Kuwait at between 15

and 25 percent. Some are from among the *hadaris* and trace their roots to Arab and Iranian merchant families; others are of Arab tribal origins. Initially led by various Shiite merchant notables, the Shiite leadership has been increasingly supplanted by Islamists inspired by movements in Iraq and Iran. In the wake of the Islamic revolution in Iran, Shiite Islamists organized protests demanding wider participation and more recognition of their presence and role. The government reacted forcefully to the challenge and quelled the movement, but Shiite Islamists were allowed to enter mainstream politics and won seats in all subsequent Parliaments. After an initial policy of repression, the state shifted to a policy of co-optation and containment by legalizing some of the associations and allowing them to participate in elections, while gerrymandering districts to ensure that Shiite representation remained quite small. For their part, by allying with the broad constitutional opposition since the mid-1980s, Shiite Islamists have been able to limit the Sunni–Shii divide and avoid confrontation.

Youth is also a potent and rising force in Kuwait. Making up over half of the population, empowered by education, and raised on satellite television and the Internet, Kuwaiti youth is an informed and dynamic force. It was demonstrations organized by young people in May 2006 that broke the longstanding taboo relating to public demonstration and opened the gates to wider protests that eventually brought down the government, led to early elections, an opposition victory, and the change in the electoral law. It was youths organized in a number of formal and informal groupings, working together in 2006 who launched the popular campaign to amend the election law. The agenda adopted by youth in the spring of 2006 was eventually adopted by a large cross-section of the business and political elite and became the heart of the successful opposition campaigns leading up to the June 2006 elections.

Youth in Kuwait have traditionally mobilized around university student bodies. The main student body, the National Students Union, has been dominated by conservative Islamist students since the mid-1980s. However, secular, liberal, and nationalist currents among the student body have also found voice in other organizations, some of which have been set up by students after graduation. In any case, student organizations from most sectors of the political spectrum joined together in the reform movement of spring 2006, and much of this cooperation has continued in the postelection period. Nevertheless, youth leadership is divided over some social and cultural issues. Islamists wish to introduce more conservative rules and habits into Kuwaiti society and culture, amend article 2 of the constitution to render Sharia *the only* source of legislation, and introduce more segregation and separation of women in society. NonIslamist youth, while grateful for the support of their

Islamist cohorts in the electoral reform and anti-corruption struggles, are wary of them on other issues.

At the higher reaches of the social pyramid there is also heterogeneity. The ruling family is just that—a ‘ruling’ family, i.e., tasked with the troublesome job of governing—not a royal family. While respected, members of the Sabah family—including the emir, the prime minister, and ministers—are not treated as exalted royalty, as they are in some of the other Arab monarchies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), but rather with professional respect. In social settings, other elites interact with them on an equal footing. In Parliament and the press, while the emir himself is generally shielded from direct criticism, other members of the ruling family—in and out of office—come in for much direct and free-wheeling challenge and even attacks. The presence of a fair number of prominent, wealthy, and powerful merchant families with historic roles in Kuwait (such as the Sager, Kharafi, Ghanem, and Budai families) also adds to the sense of openness and power-sharing at the higher reaches of the Kuwaiti social pyramid.

A Monolithic Economy

In contrast to this sociopolitical heterogeneity, the economy of Kuwait tends very strongly toward the monolithic and top heavy. Over 90 percent of the labor force is employed by the state, and the bulk of the economy is dependent on the single, state-controlled resource of oil. This heavily state-centric structure has been a longstanding point of agreement between the ruling family and the traditional nationalist opposition, which shared the statist economic thinking of most Arab nationalists in the region in the 1950s and 1960s. The merchant families might have put forward an alternative point of view, but undertaking divestment and privatization and risking unemployment was never a politically popular viewpoint; privatization, in particular, was too closely linked with a fear of Western, especially American, influence. In addition, the Kuwaiti merchant and private sector became a successful but dependent partner of the state, and thus were coopted into the politico-economic structure. Oil remains the sole, significant driving force of the Kuwaiti economy, and foreign direct investment does not exceed a few million dollars.

The monolithic and statist aspect of the Kuwaiti economy is the main factor that gives the state a large measure of ultimate control and influence over society. While Kuwaitis agitate, oppose, and complain, their economic interests tie them firmly to the state and dissuade them from more openly shaking or challenging the system. Students and youth agitate for change, but when they graduate they invariably turn to the public sector for jobs. Even the so-called liberal reformers, who complain about the limited role the private sector plays in the economic development of

Kuwait, suggest—without a hint of irony—increased government subsidies for private companies as a way to bring about such change.

It is important to note that the oil income accrues to the Kuwaiti state, not—as is the case in many other GCC states—to the ruling family. The ruling family has a set allowance, currently fixed by parliament at KD50 million (U.S. \$173 million). This goes to the emir to cover the expenses of his office as well as the income of other members of the Sabah family. Otherwise, the vast oil revenues of Kuwait accrue to the Kuwaiti treasury. Thus, dependence on the oil sector and state employment in Kuwait do not mean dependence on the Sabah family but on the state in general. Nevertheless, the monolithic aspect of the economy and employment in Kuwait is one of the strongest forces that promotes apathy in the society and protects the status quo. There is little in Kuwait that cannot be resolved by cooptation or throwing money at the problem or the person.

Civil Society: Standing but Stunted

The absence of a strong ruling regime has prevented the state from crushing or absorbing civil society—a rare situation in Arab countries. The original establishment of Sabah rule and the constant dialectic between state and society in the development of the state's institutions in the past century consolidated a state-society relationship that is fairly open and balanced. Much of this balance was established not on the strength of modern associational patterns, but on that of tribal and family groupings and traditional patterns of consultation and decision making. Between 1920 and 1960, modern forms of association, such as professional syndicates, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and youth and cultural groups also joined this balance.

The 1962 constitution enshrined the right to form associations and unions in article 43, and many such organizations bloomed in the 1960s and early 1970s. Despite these constitutional guarantees, successive emirs and governments tried to maintain restrictions on associational life. Until recently, the establishment of any association required the express permission of the emir himself; even today the government's permission is necessary. Political associations—i.e., political parties—are not mentioned in the constitution and are still not allowed in Kuwait, although political groupings are strong and active. They are discussed below. There are approximately 300 registered NGOs functioning in Kuwait at present, according to the ministry of social affairs, with interests ranging from education to welfare, health, environment, and social awareness.

Much of the NGO sector has strong links with the state, as many are dependent on government cooperation or funds, or are dominated by elites who for other reasons have strong links to the state-centric elite, or both. Only a small portion of the NGO sector has been a source of

sociopolitical dynamism, hosting debates and participating in public movements. The majority of other NGOs have remained focused on narrower sectoral or service functions, preserving a nonantagonistic relationship with the state and other elites. The student unions are very active. Labor organizing among public sector workers, who constitute 90 percent of the labor force, is not allowed.

Somewhat specific to Kuwait is the influence of *diwaniyat*, informal salon gatherings that are part of traditional practices. These mushroomed in the 1990s and early post-2000 period as main centers of gathering, debate, and opinion formation. Shielded by the privacy and integrity of the home, these *diwaniyat* provided additional civil space and became organized into various types and topics; for example, there were *diwaniyat* that brought together businessmen and focused on economic matters, others that brought together youth and focused on education and sports, and so on. They remain an important pattern of associational life.

In the realm of the news media, Kuwait has a significant print media tradition outside of government control. The country's five main newspapers are privately owned and fairly opinionated and influential. To be sure, their editorial policy often reflects the orientation or interests of their well-connected owners, or both, but they still provide a wide arena for airing of issues and criticism of government policy. Parliament recently gained concessions from the government that loosen restrictions on the establishment of new newspapers, but there are fears that members of the ruling family will rush to move into the newspaper business more widely to crowd out their traditional rivals.

Television and radio has long been a government monopoly, although Kuwaitis have easy access to numerous other channels from neighboring countries and satellite TV, but even in this sector there has been movement. The government licensed the first private television station, al-Rai, in 2006, and Parliament and the government have had heated debate in recent months about the rules and regulations for licensing other new private television stations. It is yet to be seen whether the private audiovisual media will emerge as a sociopolitical force in Kuwait like the private press was previously and in the way that private and satellite television has emerged as a force elsewhere in the region.

Political Groupings: Protoparty Patterns

The establishment of political parties is a central question for Kuwait, since it is hard to contemplate the further development of the Kuwaiti political system unless modern political parties are allowed, even encouraged, to form. However, the Sabah family and conservative elites remain predictably reluctant to allow the organization of parties. Even among the opposition, there is hesitation to broach the issue, because legalizing

political parties would require amending the constitution, and many fear that tampering with the constitution might lead down a slippery slope and roll back the gains made after 1962 and 1991.

Nevertheless, associational life in politics goes back many decades in Kuwait and has considerable vigor and dynamism. Many ostensibly nonpolitical associations that were established in the pre-independence period were actually closely associated with the constitutional opposition and with Arab nationalist movements. Arab nationalists played a prominent role in the 1960s. They did well in the elections of 1963, but the next elections of 1967 were rigged expressly to weaken their power in Parliament, and the Arab defeat in the 1967 war led to the splintering of the movement into various nationalist, leftist, and liberal subgroups.

Islamists entered political life in earnest in the early 1980s, winning numerous seats in Parliament and taking control of the National Union of Kuwaiti Students, thanks in part to the government's efforts to encourage Islamist organizations to counter the traditional nationalist opposition. Shiite Islamists became active and influential only after the 1979 revolution in Iran, but succeeded in getting deputies into Parliament in 1981 and 1985, and have been a presence in Parliament ever since.

The present Parliament, elected in June 2006, demonstrates the lively political life of Kuwait, but also the endless splintering and divisions that make decisions difficult. Of the 50 elected members, seventeen are Islamists—six Muslim Brothers organized as the Islamic Constitutional Movement, three Salafis, and eight independents. Eight other deputies belong to the National Action group (*al amal al watani*), which brings together liberals, former socialists, and nationalists. Another eight are grouped in the Popular Action bloc (*al amal al sha'bi*), a loose alliance of more hardline nationalist deputies who oppose economic liberalism—the Popular Action bloc also includes the Shiite Islamists. The remaining seventeen deputies are government allies who ran as independents. The Islamists, the National Action bloc, and the Popular Action bloc contested the elections together in a loose opposition alliance of 33 deputies referred to in Parliament as the Bloc of Blocs (*kutlat al kutal*). They have not always voted together on all issues, but they remain the dominant parliamentary force.

The political landscape in Kuwait thus remains pluralistic and competitive. The Islamists are a strong but not overwhelming force, and they have not been able to get their way on a number of issues, such as changing article 2 of the constitution or blocking the women's vote. They have had some success, such as the recent imposition of a 1 percent *zakat* (Islamic tithe) on corporate profits and older regulations restricting the mixing of the sexes in universities.

The nonIslamist forces have a harder time mobilizing public enthu-

siasm and support in the wake of the decline of socialist and nationalist ideologies and their inability to give democratic and liberal discourse wide popular appeal. Significantly, Islamist and non-Islamist forces have been able to find common ground on some fundamental reform issues—such as electoral law reform and fighting corruption—work out common plans of action, and move together during and after elections to effect change.

The Process and Priorities of Reform

The Horizons and Limits of Reform

Gradual and negotiated reform has been part of the practice and legacy of Kuwaiti politics for the past century. Politics has often been a fairly fluid process based on power balances, negotiation, and accommodation. Reform—in the sense of issue-specific, domestic change—has been a focus of political activism and pressure in postliberation Kuwaiti politics in ways quite different from other Arab countries, where the discourse is much more radical and general. This is so for a number of reasons.

First, there is a fairly wide consensus within Kuwait in support of the basic outlines of the political system: respecting the rule of the Sabah family, the constitution, basic freedoms, and the political process. Second, there has been a fair margin of public space throughout the past decades to develop and refine reform ideas. Third, the state has not radicalized the opposition through repression and persecution but rather moderated it through accommodation and participation. Fourth, authoritarian regimes in Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia have continually served as a sobering example for Kuwait. Fifth, the Iraqi invasion and the support of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) for the invasion shattered the credibility of panArabist ideology and reinforced Kuwaiti nationalism. In a sense, Kuwait's focus on domestic reform is not only the result of its political traditions and history, but also the result of its inoculation against the temptations or illusions of the ideologies that have seized other political communities in the region.

Since the constitution is the backbone of the system, there is a sense among many reformers that one can push for reform within the system, but one must not tamper with the constitution itself. For example, there is considerable debate as to whether members of the ruling family should refrain from occupying ministerial posts and the prime ministership—a change that does not require a constitutional amendment—but very little debate about whether cabinets should require a vote of confidence by Parliament, because such change would require a constitutional amendment.

The recent record of reform in Kuwait has been significant. In the

past two years alone, women were given the right to vote and run for office; the ban on public gatherings was effectively lifted; the election law was changed, decreasing the number of districts from 25 to five; the press law was changed to allow the licensing of new newspapers and magazines; and the government's monopoly on audiovisual media was loosened.

In addition, the heated elections of 2006 and the resulting Parliament have raised the level of parliamentary influence. Shortly after the election, all opposition deputies agreed to a six-month, written reform plan. It specified a month-by-month schedule of activities, including engagement with the government, and proposed new legislation on taxation, public concessions, business competition, oil wealth management, health and health insurance, Islamic banking, social security, handicapped rights and services, electoral law, sports, and other matters, including changes in parliamentary bylaws.

Indeed, the elections of 2006 have introduced a new dynamism in Kuwaiti political life. Parliament feels more empowered, and opposition deputies have been able to achieve a workable level of collective action. However, it is not clear whether this threshold will last. The Sabah family was particularly weak during 2006 and is likely to reassert its power; it has many financial and political tools at its disposal to coopt and defuse opponents. The opposition alliance itself is shaky, and a number of deputies have already voted with the government on a number of key appointments and decisions, and this lack of unity and discipline could grow. The public itself was very involved during 2006, but this level of engagement has already died down considerably, thus weakening Parliament in relation to government and the Sabah family. The true test of the course of Kuwaiti politics lies in the next parliamentary elections in 2010.

The Reform Debate

Kuwaitis agree on the need for further reform in their country but not on what changes the country needs. There are considerable divisions between the government and the opposition as well as among opposition groups. The main sources of tension between the government and the opposition are corruption and economic management and, to a lesser extent, the participation in the cabinet of members of the Sabah family. The opposition is deeply divided on cultural issues and to some extent on political strategy.

Fighting corruption has been the rallying cry of the opposition, and Parliament has been quite aggressive in questioning key ministers—of energy, health, sports, and education, among others—on public spending and contracting. Although Kuwait has a major advantage over other GCC countries in that oil revenues accrue to the state treasury rather

than to the ruling family, the opposition contends that the ruling family and their allies use their political influence for private gain and unfairly channel resources and assets to themselves. In the controversy over corruption, both sides use the information provided by the government audit bureau (*diwan al muhasaba*), which keeps fairly accurate and transparent accounts of public revenues and expenditures.

Controversy over the government's economic plans is great, to the point where the government charges that it threatens economic progress. Project Kuwait, a government plan to encourage foreign companies to invest in the country's northern oil fields bordering Iraq, has been blocked for years by dissension. The government argues that rapid development of the fields requires a level of investment and technological know-how beyond the capacity of Kuwait's publicly owned oil company; it also points out that Western investment on the precarious border with Iraq will guarantee Western interest in protecting Kuwait. A majority of parliamentarians insist that Kuwait can and must develop the fields alone. As a result, the oil remains unexploited.

More controversy has surrounded the government's granting of Build-Operate-Transfer (BOT) contracts for lucrative projects, such as hotels and malls, and its granting of permits for the use of public lands in valuable areas. This has been a main source of enrichment for members and allies of the ruling family and government officials in the past. The post-2006 Parliament has forced the government to abrogate or renegotiate many of these contracts. Still, there is no agreed plan for the use of public land.

There are also many tensions among the various opposition groups. To begin with, the opposition remains quite divided about the participation of the Sabah family in the cabinet. The decision of the emir not to appoint the crown prince as prime minister after the 2006 elections was seen by most as a step forward, because it left Parliament free to criticize the prime minister and even question him without directly implicating the emir and his heir. However, the idea of moving to a true parliamentary system, where no ruling family members would be part of the cabinet and thus the cabinet would be fully responsible to the Parliament, remains controversial among opposition groups. Some see it as a step toward greater democracy, but others believe that the presence of al-Sabah members in the cabinet increases the system's dynamism and checks and balances, and gives the executive some independence from the legislature. Some of the smaller opposition groups fear a true parliamentary system, calculating that their rivals would end up getting the lion's share of power.

The opposition is still not satisfied with the electoral law and wants further changes to reduce the influence of money and patronage and create a more transparent and fair process. However, they are divided about

the legalization of political parties. While nobody disagrees that it would be desirable in theory, many prefer to keep the issue on the back burner, because it would require a constitutional amendment and possibly open a Pandora's box of constitutional revisions.

The major differences, which put different opposition groups and even different factions in the government at odds with each other, are those concerning the role of Islam in the political system and society. Islamists, led by the Islamic Constitutional Movement, would like to amend article 2 of the constitution to make Sharia *the sole* source of legislation. Pragmatically, they have shelved the issue, realizing that they were alienating other opposition members and in any case could not get the change approved as long as the emir opposed it. Indeed, they are playing down the Islamist agenda, focusing on electoral and governance reform in general. As far as the Islamization of laws, they have restricted themselves to highlighting and supporting the work of the emir-appointed committee officially tasked with bringing legislation in line with Sharia, although the committee's progress is deliberate and slow.

Nevertheless, tensions remain between Islamist and nonIslamist opposition groups. The latter fear that Islamists would insist on amending article 2 if they gained more seats in Parliament, leading to a revision of all legislation. Kuwait is a conservative and Islamic society; however, it is more liberal than many of its GCC neighbors or its other large neighbors, such as Iran or the emerging Iraq. The nonIslamists fear that even the narrow margin of secular freedoms that Kuwait enjoys might be under threat in the near future and that Kuwait could move toward a more rigidly Islamist future even as it might become more democratic.

While there is a lot of discussion about reform in Parliament, in practice there is also a lot of horse trading and pork-barrel politics. Parliamentary seats are a source of patronage for politicians and a platform from which they can position themselves for ministerial posts, lucrative deals, or prestigious assignments. This opens Parliament to accusations that it is impeding reform rather than promoting it.

The argument is most often set forth by members of the ruling family and their associates. In their view, the power of the Kuwaiti Parliament is the main reason why the country has not been able to modernize its economy and match the phenomenal growth of Dubai or even Abu Dhabi and Qatar. Kuwait, once the leader in the region, has now fallen behind countries it used to regard as backward. The ruling family see Parliament as a drag on quick decision making and growth-friendly policies, a body that blocks government initiatives and craves patronage. While the opposition argues that more democratization is necessary for more rapid and sustainable growth, many within the emir's circle argue quite the opposite.

Looking Ahead: Prospects for Fundamental Reform

To some extent, the political life of Kuwait resembles that of many countries with a reasonably democratic and open political system. There are plenty of tensions in the system—between government and opposition, among groups within the opposition, and even within the government. There is disagreement on policy issues, horse trading, and grandstanding—in other words, there is a lot of normal politics.

Below the surface, however, there runs in Kuwait a much deeper tension about the unresolved nature of the political system. On the one hand, there is a drive, or at least an expectation among some, that Kuwait eventually become a constitutional monarchy, with the Sabah family slowly reducing its direct role in day-to-day government. The separation of the offices of crown prince and prime minister can be seen as a step in that direction, as can the dropping of key Sabah ministers from the cabinet through a reshuffle when they were challenged by Parliament.

While it would be highly premature to say Kuwait is moving toward a constitutional monarchy, the potential exists.

On the other hand, many Kuwaitis do not rule out the possibility that the ruling family could suspend the constitution and Parliament, as it has done twice before in recent times—and as it was rumored to be considering after the last elections. Many within the ruling family feel that the concessions of 1962 went too far and that the present weakness of the Sabah family and strength of the opposition are worrisome developments that must be remedied at the earliest opportunity. This view is shared by the ruling families of other Gulf monarchies, who fear that the example of the more open political system of Kuwait will encourage similar demands in their own countries. So far, it seems likely that the balance of power between ruling family and opposition will continue more or less as is. However, unforeseen shocks, such as a sudden escalation of conflict in the Gulf area—if the Iraq sectarian war spreads to other countries or if hostilities erupt between the United States and Iran—could upset this delicate balance.

The next real test of the system will be the legislative elections in 2010. They will be held under the new law of five 10-seat districts, in which voters can cast only four votes each. This will be a challenge for large groups like the Islamic Constitutional Movement, which would face the difficult choice of either running slates of only four candidates in each district thus limiting their maximum number of seats to 20, or running more than four candidates per district and running the risk of splitting their votes and losing seats. The law was designed to try to limit vote buying and client-centered politics; it is likely to bring about a fairly heterogeneous Parliament with a slightly better chance for a few women

to make it and with no clear majority for any one group. As for whether the elections of 2010 will elicit as much participation and polarization as the 2006 elections, much will depend on the politics of the time. No doubt the emir will have drawn many lessons from the chaotic experience of 2006, and the government will try to be much better prepared for the next elections.

Meanwhile, Kuwait appears to be moving forward—even if fitfully at times—along the path of reform. The opposition has taken a clear initiative in identifying key areas of governance that need reform and is keeping its level of engagement and action high; the emir and the government have accepted the legitimacy of many of these reform ideas and proposals and also have realized that accepting policy reform is politic, both strategically and tactically, a way to develop the state and its institutions and to keep the emir and the family ahead of demands for reform. In that sense, Kuwait is in a fairly healthy dynamic in which the fundamentals of the political system are not threatened—hence major players do not feel forced to fight back—while the system is responsive enough to allow the airing of public needs and demands, their articulation into proposals and programs, and their occasional adoption by government or Parliament. Kuwait may witness significant policy reform in various areas, including electoral law, political association, media, civil society, social services, education, and sports as well as the management of public funds, public property, and public resources.

The Role of External Actors

The elements and dynamics of participatory and constitutional politics are deeply rooted in Kuwaiti history and the Kuwaiti experience. Reform has not been imported from abroad, nor is it an ill-fitting vestige of colonial influence. To be sure, Kuwait does not exist in a vacuum, and constitutional ideas that swept the Middle East in the 1930s and 1940s found their way into the constitution of 1962; similarly, the U.S. liberation of Kuwait in 1991 influenced post-liberation politics. All these influences, however, have played into a pre-existing reality of a country where there have always been several centers of power.

The main challenge for external actors who want to see reform continue in Kuwait is not to find ways to influence Kuwaiti leaders and institutions toward instituting specific changes, but to protect Kuwait from being overwhelmed by new regional wars. Kuwait was saved from the Iraqi invasion by U.S. forces in 1991, and has so far survived the collapse of the Iraqi state and the serious deterioration of the security and sectarian situation there. But the dangers emanating from Iraq are still of grave concern to Kuwait, as is the possibility of a confrontation between the

United States and Iran. Kuwait is a small country among large neighbors in an explosive corner of the world; it has weathered the regional storm so far, but cannot afford further tensions and escalations. It has a strong interest in helping external players—both regional and international—find negotiated and peaceful resolutions to their differences.

From Arab countries, Kuwait only needs stability, but the Arab countries have much to learn from Kuwait, a country that has been able to match traditional power structures with a growing margin of democracy. For most of the past decades, Arab republics looked down on Kuwait as a conservative country dominated by a ruling family, while Arab monarchies feared that the Kuwaiti example would encourage demands for similar empowerment at home. While the Arab republics have regressed into military or one-party dictatorships or collapsed into failed states, and even recently promising Arab monarchies like Jordan have pulled back from real democratic accommodation and empowerment, Kuwait increasingly stands out as an important, even if imperfect, example.

From the West and other international players, Kuwait, as noted, needs the safeguard of regional security and stability. Kuwait is on a fairly positive trajectory and it is regional instability, not domestic reversal, that threatens it most. Otherwise, it is important that the community of democratic nations understand and appreciate the realities of Kuwaiti politics. There is an important opportunity in the coming years to proceed with further reforms in governance and policy in Kuwait. This should be encouraged, for it will have a great impact on the economy and society. Otherwise, in terms of political reform, it seems important to help Kuwait figure out how to build on its public engagement and political dynamism to develop more efficient and productive political associations or parties that can do a better job of aggregating interests and developing policy and legislation.

Finally, it might also be important for the world's constitutional monarchies to share the history of their evolution and internal debates that led them to where they are today. Constitutional monarchy might be the long-term destination of Kuwait as well as of many of the Arab world's current monarchies, but the most active Western player in the Middle East, the United States, has no such sensibility and offers a radically different perspective.

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