

Kuwait's Democracy Is Challenged by Pressure for Reform

by [Shafeeq Ghabra \(/experts/shafeeq-ghabra\)](/experts/shafeeq-ghabra)

Feb 2, 2012

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Shafeeq Ghabra \(/experts/shafeeq-ghabra\)](/experts/shafeeq-ghabra)

Dr. Shafeeq Ghabra is a professor of Political Science at Kuwait University.



Brief Analysis

The elections taking place today are but one episode in the incremental transformation and democratization of Kuwait.

On February 2, for the fourth time in six years, Kuwaitis -- men and women both -- will vote to choose members of the country's National Assembly. The latest vote is a consequence of a continuing deadlock between the cabinet, appointed by the Emir of Kuwait Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah, and the elected parliament.

Despite its democratic tradition, Kuwait has not been immune to the political activism sweeping the Arab world. The country is entering a new and challenging era driven by a youth movement committed to government reform. In 2011, various independent youth organizations, supported by members of the opposition in parliament and encompassing Islamic and secular groups alike, coalesced around a platform focused on combating corruption in government and changing the appointed prime minister, Nasser Muhammad al-Ahmad al-Sabah, who has held power since 2006.

Movement leaders, inspired by local dynamics and the Arab Spring, organized weekly gatherings in the public space next to the National Assembly building. Having begun in spring 2011 with just a few hundred participants, the sit-ins expanded by November to include some 60,000 Kuwaitis, after a scandal implicated more than a dozen of parliament's fifty members for possibly taking bribes to back the government's positions. The storming of the parliament building by youth on November 16, 2011, divided the population and led to the prime minister's resignation on November 28, the dissolution of parliament on December 6, and the scheduling of the February 2, 2012, legislative elections.

After the November 16 storming of the parliament, the government arrested a number of youth activists, leading to daily gatherings in front of the Ministry of Justice -- orchestrated by young female activists -- demanding the immediate release of all detainees. The activists learned such tactics, new to Kuwaitis, by watching the unfolding events of the Arab Spring across the region. University professors and writers dropped by the gatherings and engaged the protestors in discussions on democracy, human rights, and reform.

The current movement consists of such youth-dominated groups as the Fifth Wall, Kafi, and Nahj, along with youth

affiliates of the Muslim Brotherhood and the mainstream liberal faction. In the big picture, the goal of these activists is simply to hold government accountable for its actions, but their discussions and debates make clear that their ultimate aim is to push Kuwait toward having a popularly elected prime minister and a cabinet based on competitive, parliamentary party lists. For the moment, political parties continue to be prohibited, and the prime minister and the defense, foreign, and interior ministers must be members of the Sabah family.

The seeds of discontent in Kuwait can be traced to -- among other sources -- structural problems dating to about 1991. During the last two decades, the Gulf emirate has experienced a steady deterioration in its governance, priorities, and vision. Along the way, the nation has lost its momentum to develop new, forward-looking projects (especially when compared to the creative initiatives undertaken in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar). Particular areas in which major accomplishments have been absent include energy, education, health care, and economics. And despite women's right to vote in Kuwait since 2006, as well as wider freedoms and human rights compared to other Gulf nations, Kuwaiti youth see wealth being spent without much to show for the effort.

Kuwait's ruler, the emir, is always a member of the Sabah family and, until 2003, the role of prime minister was taken by the crown prince. Based on popular demand, the prime minister's position was fully separated from that of the crown prince in 2003, but the emir still selects the prime minister from within the Sabah family.

Parliament, as common in other nations, consists of opposition members as well as various groups loyal to the government. Conflict between the parliament and the government is nothing new in Kuwait. The executive branch has supremacy, including the right to form the government. Of particular note, fifteen of the sixteen appointed cabinet members are allowed to vote in parliament, giving the government an immense voting advantage.

Although the parliament has limited powers, it has grown accustomed to using what little resources available to challenge and weaken the government's grip on power. Parliament members regularly grill ministers at hearings, making it uncomfortable for the latter to blithely carry out the government's every wish. Recently, even leading members of the Sabah family have been exposed to such treatment, including votes of no confidence. This situation has led to a string of government crises and frequent dissolutions of parliament resulting in new elections.

A deeper crisis in the emirate country was expressed by a series of strikes in 2011. Teachers, customs workers, jurists, and other professionals organized these protests, which prompted major losses for merchants; the government had no choice but to agree to most of the demands of the striking sectors. Lacking a tradition or system of human resources, the Kuwaiti government is not equipped to negotiate with organized labor, and its proposal to institute a merit-based system has brought the country to an unexpected juncture.

A central problem for the Kuwaiti labor market is that most of the country's university graduates have government jobs. Indeed, an astounding 90 percent of the Kuwaiti workforce is employed by government. International consultants have advised that growth in the private sector be encouraged, but such a transition has only been carried out to a limited extent. And most Kuwaitis themselves remain attracted by the government's relaxed working hours, along with its generous salaries and vacation policies.

In fall 2011, as hinted at before, a Pandora's box was opened when banks leaked information revealing the exorbitant accounts of some fifteen parliamentarians, whose holdings included deposits of millions of dollars, in some cases with no indication of the funds' origins. Colleagues and many in the public accused the MPs of accepting bribes in return for voting with the government. In October, Foreign Minister Muhammad al-Sabah resigned in protest over funds transferred through his ministry without his knowledge.

The scandal and the tension it created reflect a pattern of changing relationships among social groups in Kuwait. In the second half of the twentieth century, respected businessmen lost considerable power to the oil-producing state. Now these merchants and their allies have an interest in reform and a merit-based economy. On another front, the

country's shifting demographics have come to favor the desert, as tribes with high expectations and potentially higher demands now constitute almost 65 percent of the population. These tribes have emerged as a strong base for opposition candidates, who have agreed to be their voice. Youth have also thrown their support behind opposition members of the dissolved legislature.

The February elections are but one episode in the transformation and democratization of Kuwait. The balloting will likely bring more members of the opposition into the National Assembly and push reform one step further. Central to the new politics of Kuwait will be the formation of political parties, challenging of corruption in government, transformation of Kuwait into a single district, parliamentary independence from the executive branch, constitutional amendments that deepen democracy at every level, and a popularly elected prime minister. Following the elections, the issues will be clearer and the dividing lines between supporters of change and the status quo will be better delineated. While the parliament will be stronger in its opposition, the government will respond by trying to perform better. Both, however, will probably end up in the same deadlock experienced by previous leaders, owing to the limited powers of parliament and the limited capabilities of government.

Still, if the government adequately addresses the desire for political reform, Kuwait could sail along smoothly. If it does not, the country's youth are likely to return to the streets for sit-ins and other peaceful gatherings and demonstrations. Having discovered their ability to move the government, they will continue to push the political class, in parliament and in the public sphere, toward meaningful reform.

Shafeeq Ghabra is a professor of politics at Kuwait University. ❖

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022



Simon Henderson

[\(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy\)](#)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022



Ben Fishman

[\(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis\)](/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022



Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

[\(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven\)](/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

[Arab & Islamic Politics \(/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics\)](/policy-analysis/arab-islamic-politics)

[Democracy & Reform \(/policy-analysis/democracy-reform\)](/policy-analysis/democracy-reform)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Gulf States \(/policy-analysis/gulf-states\)](/policy-analysis/gulf-states)