

Kuwait's Parliament Decides Who Rules

[*Simon Henderson*](#)

Policy #1073

January 27, 2006

At a time when attention is focused on the problems democracy has brought in one part of the Middle East, such as the Palestinian territories, it has been easy to overlook how democratic processes were key to resolving a crisis in another Middle Eastern country: Kuwait. The January 15 death of Kuwait's emir, or ruler, Sheikh Jaber brought to power the physically and mentally incapacitated Sheikh Saad al-Abdullah al-Sabah. But the crisis engendered by his ill health and his refusal to abdicate was resolved quickly through democratic processes. On January 24, the parliament of the oil-rich Persian Gulf state of Kuwait exercised a previously unused constitutional power and voted to oust Sheikh Saad. The new emir, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah, is expected to be confirmed by parliament on January 29, and is now under pressure from some members of parliament to choose a prime minister from outside the ranks of the ruling al-Sabah family.

Kuwait's Political Culture

Kuwait is proud of its relatively well-established political culture. Compared with the other conservative Arab states of the region -- Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Oman -- Kuwait has been on the vanguard of reform, describing itself as a constitutional monarchy. The al-Sabah family, chosen in pre-oil days by other major local trading families to administer their affairs and provide security, dominates the government. But after independence from Britain, a National Assembly was elected in 1963. Cabinet members are automatically given seats, but elected members broadly form five blocs: conservative tribal leaders, young technocrats, radical Arab nationalists, Sunni Islamic fundamentalists, and representatives of Kuwait's Shiite Muslim minority. Perversely, the assembly has often blocked reform proposed by the al-Sabah emirs -- women were granted the vote only in May 2005 and will not be able to use it until elections in 2007. Tribal representatives and Islamists unsuccessfully opposed the appointment in June of the first woman cabinet minister.

The latest crisis emerged because of Kuwait's complicated succession system. The role of emir is meant to be taken within the al-Sabah family alternately by descendants of two of the sons of Sheikh Mubarak the Great, who ruled from 1896 until 1915 and is seen as the founder of modern Kuwait. Sheikh Jaber, who died on January 15, came from the Jaber line; Sheikh Saad, the crown prince, was from the Salem line, but was in fact older than Sheikh Jaber. The new emir, Sheikh Sabah, from the Jaber line, had taken on the role of prime minister from Sheikh Saad in 2003, breaking the convention that the heir apparent was also head of government. Hence the speculation that Sheikh Sabah, aged seventy-six and already fitted with a heart pace-maker, may choose a non-Sabah prime minister. Within the al-Sabah family, the new emir will face the challenge of deciding whether the heir apparent will come from the Salem or Jaber line and winning acceptance of his choice from the whole family. The logical choice -- a healthy man with experience of government and acknowledged good judgment -- is not necessarily the most likely outcome.

Regional Implications

Local reporting of the crisis depicts it as a victory for the constitution. Although at the last moment Sheikh Saad agreed to abdicate -- formal word of this did not reach the National Assembly until after the unanimous vote to oust him -- his decision was clearly influenced by the strong support for following constitutional procedures that gave parliament the final say about whether he would be deposed. The rulers of Kuwait's conservative Arab neighbors will likely view the events with consternation because of the example it offers to local populations. Saudi Arabia's king and crown prince are both older than Kuwait's late emir, deposed successor, and new ruler. The House of Saud has shown no inclination to share decisionmaking even with the kingdom's nonelected consultative assembly.

Several of the Gulf monarchies have faced problems with infirm rulers that caused political crises -- problems that could have been better addressed had there been in place consultative assemblies to decide whether the ruler was fit to continue. Sheikh Hamad of Qatar ousted his father in 1995; Saudi Arabia and the UAE later backed an attempted coup to reinstall him. King Fahd of Saudi Arabia was incapacitated for the final ten years of his life. And there could be some messy successions. In Oman, for instance, there is no nominated successor; Sultan Qaboos has written his preference in a letter to be opened after his death if the sultanate's notables cannot agree on a successor.

Besides aiding with succession, national assemblies can play an important role in increasing the legitimacy of

rulers. The tricky but apparently successful transition in Kuwait was closely watched by all its citizens but was notably without political demonstrations. What a contrast to the continuing violence in Bahrain, where a significant portion of the population resents the ruling family and its strict limitations on democracy. On January 21, the Bahraini Ministry of the Interior reiterated a policy of zero tolerance toward rioters and violent demonstrators, warning of ten-year prison terms. Two days earlier, an official said, masked men had blocked roads, burned tires, set garbage bins ablaze, and hurled Molotov cocktails in a commercial and shopping area. There has been tension since the arrest at the island's airport last month of a Shiite Muslim scholar returning from the Iranian holy city of Qom. He was accused of "making incendiary statements and undermining the state." Political activists in Bahrain's majority Shiite population -- the local royal family is Sunni -- have complained about police brutality and a lack of progress toward a fully elected parliament despite promises of constitutional reforms. When King Hamad assumed the throne in 1999, his initial approach of introducing some reforms, including a constitution and a partially elected consultative assembly, created hopeful openings to resolve the longstanding political tensions with the Shiite community, but lack of progress since has inflamed Shiite resentment.

U.S. Concerns

After the successes of Islamist forces in Egyptian and Palestinian elections, some would argue that President Bush's focus on democratic reform in the Middle East puts U.S. interests at risk. But it is also worth contemplating the advantages of a political system with open debate and checks and balances over an opaque system dependent on the will of one ruler. Kuwait's role as a logistical route for U.S. forces in neighboring Iraq is vital to the success of the mission there. Rather than have to worry about what ailing rulers may decide, the fact that political issues are aired in the national assembly -- which has much voice even in sensitive national security matters -- the United States can rest assured that Kuwait was prepared to bear the heavy burden created by the massive U.S. military presence related to the Iraq war. To be sure, democratically elected officials do not always adopt policies the U.S. government is promoting; Kuwait's national assembly for years opposed female suffrage and is only now, after years of lobbying by the al-Sabah family, preparing to accept foreign investment in the oil industry.

The United States seeks to prevent Iranian interference in the Gulf monarchies. Iranian-backed agents targeted the late Kuwaiti emir for assassination in 1985; trouble in Bahrain is often traced to Tehran, which once claimed sovereignty. The outcome of the Kuwaiti succession crisis is a notable boost to constitutional law, but it is also a reminder of the vulnerabilities of conservative Arab Gulf states.

Simon Henderson is senior fellow for Gulf and energy studies at The Washington Institute and author of the 2003 institute policy paper *The New Pillar: Conservative Arab Gulf States and U.S. Strategy*.