ARAB UPRISINGS

Kuwait's Moment of Truth

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The Project on Middle East Political Science

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Last night's violent clashes in Kuwait have brought its long-brewing political crisis to a dangerous point. It did not have to be this way, in a Gulf state that has long stood out for its robust public sphere, electoral traditions and vibrant parliament. But a series of unusually provocative steps by both the royal family and the opposition, in the context of a long-running battle over the powers of parliament and accountability for the royal family, have taken their toll and tempers are running hot. After months of growing popular mobilization and a complex crisis of political institutions, Kuwait's political future suddenly seems deeply uncertain.

Before it gets too late to de-escalate, the Kuwaiti leadership needs to offer meaningful political concessions, including standing down on its deeply controversial plans for a December election, relaxing its attempt to shut down public dissent, and allowing a greater parliamentary role in the selection of cabinet ministers. It seems to have instead decided that now is the time to crack down hard before things get out of hand. Its repressive turn and the galvanizing effect on a mostly moderate opposition offers a troubling echo of Bahrain's brutal path ... one which the Kuwaitis seemed uniquely well-placed to avoid, but now looms large. Kuwait's long-developing political crisis is discussed in depth in the essays collected in today's new POMEPS Briefing, "Kuwait's Moment of Truth."

Kuwait's problems have been evident for quite a while, as popular mobilization interacted with repeated efforts to assert parliamentary authority over successive governments appointed by the emir. Those political battles were moving ever closer to the royal family itself, particularly allegations of corruption (which last November drove the prime minister from office) and demands for parliament's right to interrogate royal government ministers. The long political stalemate at the top coincided with the growing assertiveness of a wired youth movement, the troubling rise of a new kind of sectarianism, and the success of Islamists and tribal figures in the February 2012 elections. Indeed, I included an assault by regime security forces on dissident Kuwaiti academic Obaid al-Wasimi in my January 5, 2011 essay on the crumbling foundations of the Arab order - before the fall of Ben Ali, before the Egyptian uprising, and before most observers sensed the impending regional Arab uprising.

Unlike many Gulf states, Kuwait's current crisis comes within the context of a long-history of public, contentious politics. To its great credit, Kuwait has a long history of parliamentary politics, and its vibrant and creative youth movement has been active for over half a decade. Its experience with contentious and parliamentary politics, along with massive oil wealth and solid U.S. political support, should have left Kuwait better equipped to handle rising political turbulence. But the popular and parliamentary challenges to royal authority seem to have knocked the emirate off-balance. The arrest of opposition figure Musallam al-Barrak for his public warning to the Emir ("We will not allow you, your highness, to take Kuwait into the abyss of autocracy.") and its ban on public demonstrations does not suggest a confident regime.

The popular mobilization in Kuwait should quickly dispel any notions of the Gulf being immune to the underlying drivers of the Arab uprising. The youth movement in Kuwait is every bit as wired, impatient and engaged as in other Arab countries — and has been active since at least 2006. Online activists and politicians besides Barrack have increasingly openly mocked and challenged the al-Sabah family and even the emir himself. Last November, in an unprecedented challenge to the authority of the royal family, parliamentary opposition and popular mobilization — which included the shocking occupation of the parliament building by protesters — forced the resignation of Prime Minister Nasser Mohammed al-Sabah over allegations

of corruption. The massive protest on October 21 was possibly the largest in the history of Kuwait. Opposition leaders are huddling to decide on a strategy after last night's clashes, but do not seem inclined to back down as a wave of popular anger pushes them forward. They plan a major protest on Sunday, November 4, in defiance of the regime's ban on public assembly.

After years of jockeying with its opponents, the regime has pushed back hard, in ways that look likely to backfire. In June, the emir suspended the troublesome parliament for the first time in Kuwaiti history, and then dissolved it after the Constitutional Court ruled the February 2012 election void. The emir then unilaterally announced changes to the election law that outraged the opposition, which has declared its intention to boycott the elections called for December 1. The government banned public gatherings of more than 20 people, and warns of even harsher penalties after the violent clashes last night. It is also reportedly planning to prosecute international NGOs for reporting on its human rights violations and political crackdown. Barrack, the opposition figure whose arrest galvanized the recent protest, will reportedly be charged with insulting the emir.

While the drivers of the tension in Kuwait have much in common with the other Arab uprisings, particularly the impatient and mobilized youth, it is important to keep local conditions well in mind. Many Kuwaitis support the regime against the opposition, and there is a long history of public politics to fall back upon. Crucially, this is not currently a mobilization for the overthrow of the regime. Most protesters want to see a constitutional monarchy and political reforms, not revolution. But the lessons of other cases — notably Bahrain — suggest that the Kuwaiti regime's current course of action poses a real risk of radicalizing its opposition and setting in motion unpredictable popular forces.

Kuwaitis are proud of their parliament, angry about corruption, and determined to see greater transparency and accountability. Their demands thus far focus on such relatively moderate reforms. But it is unclear whether the regime can make such concessions. Parliamentary selection or approval of the prime minister and cabinet, rather than appointment by the emir, would fundamentally change the enduring logic of family rule in Kuwait. As Nathan Brown noted last December, "the old [political order] is fraying, but it is not quite clear what is replacing it." POMEPS Briefing 15 "Kuwait's Moment of Truth," explains how we got here and what to expect next.

Marc Lynch, Director of POMEPS
November 1, 2012

Kuwait's balancing act

By Kristin Smith Diwan, October 13, 2012

On Sunday, Kuwaitis staged what is thought to be the largest protest in the country's history. Tens of thousands responded to the call for a "March of Dignity" in rejection of an emergency decree issued by Emir Sabah al-Ahmed revising electoral laws. Chanting, "we will not let you" they were met by security forces equally determined to enforce the interior ministry ban on marches in Kuwait City. As the tear gas clears and the crowds disperse, Kuwaitis can agree that this was an unprecedented event. But oddly, after this dramatic show of brinksmanship there is no more clarity about where Kuwait is headed and how it will resolve its long political standoff.

The confrontation proved a test of strength and unity between two sides that have unsteady stores of it. The ruling family has been back on its heels since a corruption scandal was seized upon by the parliamentary opposition and its youthful allies to force the resignation of the unpopular Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed al-Sabah, in November 2011, and then to elect a strongly oppositional parliament two months later. Al-Sabah found an unexpected reprieve when the 2012 parliament was voided after just four months due to a technical ruling by the constitutional court negating the dissolution of the previous parliament.

When efforts to revive the corruption-compromised 2009 parliament failed due to opposition, the Al-Sabah led government again turned to the constitutional court to review the country's election law. But the courts showed surprising independence in declining to declare the electoral districting unconstitutional. Faced with an electoral system that seemed certain to return the opposition, Emir Sabah al-Ahmed took matters into his own hands. Warning of the threat of "chaotic sedition that could jeopardize our country (and) undermine our national unity," he ordered the cabinet to change the voting rules in advance of parliamentary elections to be held on December 1.

The emir's invocation of sedition did not come in a vacuum. Earlier in the week the firebrand opposition leader Musallem al-Barrak stood before a large crowd of protesters in front of the parliament and challenged the emir directly: "We will not allow you, your highness, to take Kuwait into the abyss of autocracy." This audacious act threatened to break the social code — and constitutional order — elevating the emir above the political fray and safeguarding his unquestioned authority. The government seemed loath to directly confront the popular former member of parliament (MP), but they did arrest three others who had similarly criticized the emir. Reports in the press suggested that the ministry of interior was also seeking greater control over Kuwait's vibrant and boisterous social media by investigating some 800 twitter users for criticizing the emir.

Al-Barrak's challenge launched a popular new protest chant — "we will not let you" — but it likewise threatened to divide the opposition. Kuwait's opposition is composed of a diverse group of tribal populists, Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi Islamists, liberal nationalists, and leftists. Strong class and ideological differences separate them, as does the electoral competition among them. Many liberals and Salafi former parliamentarians were angered by what they believed to be an unnecessary provocation of the emir. They were also chastened by a first taste of conflict: a confrontation with security forces following al-Barrak's speech that resulted in the arrest of several youth activists, including the son of the former speaker of the parliament, Ahmed Saadoun.

Still the day following the emir's speech saw the opposition coalescing with pledges to boycott the parliamentary election and to plan a march in protest. They were aided by the resonance of the election reform issue among young activists and movement politicians. Kuwait's 2006 electoral law has a storied history. In 2006 Kuwaiti youth initiated a campaign for political reform and targeted the electoral

system, decrying Kuwait's 25 small districts as beset by vote buying and captured by tribes. Reducing the number of districts to five, it was thought, would discourage corruption and elevate citizens to more national issues. The "We want Five" campaign was a landmark in the Gulf for its use of the social media of the time — blogs — and for its success in setting the agenda for parliamentarians and ultimately the government. Movement politicians had more pragmatic reasons for opposing the changes. By reducing the number of votes Kuwaitis hold from four to one, the new system would disrupt the complex system of vote trading that Kuwait's politicians use to build alliances across political divides, endangering their ability to create a viable opposition.

Organizers of the March for Dignity tapped into the national reformist ethos and youthful activism of the 2006 campaign. The orange color chosen for the march established the continuity with the earlier electoral reform campaign and the more liberal and urban constituencies that had championed it, linking them to the more Islamist and more tribal activists of today. The theme of "dignity" elided the differences among them and resonated with the citizen demands of the early Arab Spring. Protesters demonstrated their expertise in civil disobedience and nonviolent struggle through speeches and videos quoting Gandhi and playing the U.S civil rights era protest song "We shall overcome."

The plans for the "March of Dignity" called for protesters to gather at three different spots, distinguished by electoral district and staffed with protest leaders, medics, and human rights observers. The marchers were then to converge on the Seif Palace, the seat of government and offices of the Al-Sabah leadership. Both the march through the city and its destination were calculated provocations, meant to indicate the people's autonomy and defiance of government strictures.

The decision by the Al-Sabah led government to confront the protesters directly with some force caught many by surprise. Yet despite the emir's pledge to preserve national unity in the face of tribal and sectarian forces, he was in fact facing a much broader alliance. Thus the decision to shut down the protest may have been calculated to break that fractious coalition, and perhaps to empower the radicals.

His October 19 speech announcing the decision to reform the electoral system gives some indication of the government strategy. In it he reminded Kuwaitis of the toll such "unreal crises" made on development plans and the country's standing. His message was reinforced by the decline in the Kuwait stock market in reaction to the protest earlier in the week. The invocation of loss resonates with many Kuwaitis who have seen their country passed by upstart emirates with more stable governments, but it especially speaks to the well off urban Kuwaitis who have more to lose. Their sentiment acts as a check on some in the opposition, especially those in the liberal nationalist camp, whose constituents fear the empowerment of the tribal populists.

The decision to stand tough, even with some violence, could also be part of a strategy to radicalize part of the opposition. In his speech, the emir spoke eloquently of the dangers of division and sectarianism. While some Shiites have joined the nationalists, mostly the exclusively urban Shiite political groups are remaining close to the Al-Sabah regime, fearful of the anti-Shiite sentiments expressed by some Salafi MPs in the opposition camp. The dependence of Al-Sabah on this voting constituency has increased as the opposition in parliament has grown. Thus mobilization against Al Sabah on sectarian grounds is a temptation for some in the opposition. The regional context of Gulf Coordination Council (GCC) competition with Iran facilitates the use of this sectarian rhetoric. Former Salafi MP Waleed al-Tabtaba'I tapped into this sentiment in a tweet portraying the electoral reform as a plot to install Iranian hegemony via a rigged parliamentary majority. Such portrayals of the Al-Sabah regime as disloyal may have precipitated Tabtaba'I's arrest on Sunday.

Still there is some evidence that this strategic suppression may backfire. Kuwaitis have a reverence for constitutional order and expect healthy constraints on power. In the past two years overreach by security forces — an attack

on a diwaniya gathering in 2010, the beating of student protesters in 2011 — pushed the key swing bloc, the liberal nationalists, back into the opposition fold. It was this broad coalition, backed by street activists, who forced the hand of the emir in accepting the resignation of the prime minister the very week he vowed never to do so.

To force more concessions and to achieve the increased parliamentary control they are seeking, the opposition needs to show restraint and strategic timing: to earn the public's trust in their leadership. The Arab Spring across the region shows ample examples of the dire consequences of a fragmented and radicalized opposition. Kuwaitis are walking a dangerous tightrope and they do indeed have much to lose.

And the entire Gulf region is tuning in to the spectacle. The Gulf twittersphere was full of commentary on the clashes: Saudi youth activists cheering on the Kuwaiti marchers streaming below the iconic Kuwait towers; Dubai Chief and anti-Muslim Brotherhood campaigner Dahi Khalfan asserting the primacy of Al-Sabah. The overwhelming majority of GCC citizens are not seeking revolution, but to harness the energy of the Arab Spring and its promise of citizen empowerment for the cause of reform? Kuwait may have lost its luster in the years of stalemate, but on Sunday night it proved its politics still have the ability to captivate.

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Kuwait's short 19th century

By Nathan J. Brown, December 15, 2011

In a visit to Kuwait these past few days, it was no surprise to discover that the country was once more in one of its periodic waves of political tumult. The cabinet had resigned under a combination of parliamentary criticism and public pressure, a wave of scandals had forced the dissolution of the parliament, lawyers and politicians tied each other in knots over whether the correct procedures had been followed, and the Kuwaiti citizenry prepared to be summoned to the polls for the fourth time in less than six years. But this time was a little different — in the current political crisis, all sorts of portentous precedents have been set. Demonstrators filled a public square shouting against the prime minister (a leading member of the royal family); a small number of them actually stormed the parliament building, and for the first time, a prime minister was actually brought down by intense popular and parliamentary pressure.

Is a new political order being born? Perhaps. The old one is fraying, but it is not quite clear what is replacing it. In some ways, Kuwait's political struggles more closely resemble those of 19th century Europe than the ones taking place in Cairo or Tunis. Developments in the city-state have to be viewed in part in terms of the country's own jerky political evolution rather than solely in a regional perspective.

Since the country was restored in 1991, Kuwait has undergone major political change. Kuwaitis have moved fairly quickly from a system in which the senior positions in the country were hand picked by a ruling family and placed outside of political contestation to one in which parliament has veto power over major policy decisions, senior royals can be brought down if they offend deputies, and the prime minister's status as a leading member of the royal family no longer immunizes him from aggressive

parliamentary questioning — to the extent that now a prime minister has actually been toppled. Politics has even found its way into matters of succession within the family. Until recently a new emir consulted only with his relatives before presenting his chosen successor to parliament for ratification. But the parliament was brought (unenthusiastically but unmistakably) into the last succession in 2006, and the downfall of the current prime minister will likely work some effects on who serves as emir in the future. While the ruling family still looms large on the political scene, it hardly acts coherently. Divisions and rivalries that were spoken of in hushed tones two decades ago are now on full public display, and no member save the emir himself is above what is sometimes ruthless public criticism.

Kuwaitis argue over whether they are passing through their own version of the Arab Spring. Those sympathetic with demonstrators tend to see events in a regional perspective. Those who worry that the struggle promises only turmoil and instability complain that Kuwait is hardly afflicted by the heavy-handed authoritarianism targeted by demonstrators, activists, and rebels in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Syria. And indeed both sides seem to be right. Youthful activists sound like their counterparts elsewhere in their disdain for the old political forces, their focus on corruption, and their eagerness to shape their own destinies rather than defer to aging leaders. Yet, as Kristin Smith Diwan pointed out last month in "Kuwait's constitutional showdown," the analogy is limited — those who speak in the name of the Kuwaiti people want neither the fall of the regime nor even the ruler; they want a constitutional monarchy.

And indeed, it is the stutter-stop moves in that direction that make Kuwaiti political struggles resemble those of 19th century Europe. In many European countries, parliamentary democracy did not come in a moment of sudden creation and certainly not in any moment of grand constitutional design but very unevenly out of difficult daily political struggles between monarchies and political actors claiming to represent the people in some fashion. The resulting system in some countries — in which a monarch ruled through ministers who were politically responsible to a democratically elected parliament — generally developed quite gradually through two processes. First, parliaments became more inclusive and democratic in their composition. Second, they wrested greater legislative prerogatives and obtained growing ability to oversee the work of senior political officials. Parliaments became less chambers for talk (as etymologically they should be) and more the locus for expression of popular sovereignty.

Like several 19th century European countries, Kuwait has a constitution (one that is now half a century old) that allows for, but hardly requires, such a gradual development. Through expansion of the franchise (first to various classes of citizens and then to women), parliament is no longer the preserve of wealthy commoners and an educated elite; it includes various elements of a surprisingly diverse social makeup. And the parliament has also slowly carved out a much greater oversight role. While what Kuwaitis sometimes refer to as a "popular government" — one that is formed only with the solid support of a majority and perhaps one headed by a non-royal — is still beyond the parliament's reach. The downfall of the former prime minister was an unmistakable step in that direction.

But if Kuwait is replicating what has occurred in earlier European history, it is not doing so in an unadulterated fashion. There are two major differences between the Kuwaiti and European experience, one which makes the path less certain but the other which is likely to make whatever steps that are taken more peaceful.

The first difference is the weakness in Kuwait of political parties and strong ideologies. The battles among liberals, socialists, and conservatives that made European electoral politics so contentious find only pale reflection in Kuwait. There are, of course, liberal, populist, Islamist, and Salafi currents but most are organized around prominent individuals rather than strong organizations. And their electoral significance has actually declined in recent years — there is some rise in sectarian voting but most marked is the growing role of tribal identities in determining the

preferences of many voters. With tribal structures having been converted in outlying areas to machines for the distribution of government benefits (a tendency Kuwait's rulers actually encouraged in an effort to cultivate allies against feistier urbanites), tribe trumps all other political alignments. A few years ago, I asked a leading member of Kuwait's Islamic Constitutional Movement (the closest the country has to a real political party organization), how the organization's deputies caucused. He explained a robust set of procedures for decision-making that bound Movement members of parliament (MPs) on most matters but one —votes of confidence. When I looked confused about why an elementary part of party discipline in a parliamentary system did not work in Kuwait, he replied, "We could not ask a member to vote against a minster from his own tribe." In recent years tribes have become far more assertive and sophisticated in using the parliament to milk government benefits; tribal deputies have evolved from meek distributors of government services to noisy claimants on constituents' behalf and some were deeply involved in the recent protest movement.

Thus a stronger role for parliament may not be a recipe for coherence but instead makes only for confusion as deputies resemble less a righteous crowd storming the gates of the government to demand that it follows the people's will and more an arena where representatives scurry in various political directions searching for short term material gains for whatever group put them in office. It is therefore no accident that some of Kuwait's radical reformers call for a system in which the country becomes a single electoral district where seats are allocated on a proportional basis to parties that run on ideological and programmatic platforms. And unless such a step is taken and has its intended effect (and it may not, even if adopted), Kuwait is likely to continue to have a political system in which liveliness is exceeded only by ineffectiveness, fragmentation, incoherence, and indecision.

But here we come to the second difference between Kuwait and the European path — while parliamentary democracy did emerge over time in Europe, it did so while passing through some detours, including revolution, civil war, and fascism. Deeply divided societies did not easily give birth to stable democratic mechanisms. And this is where Kuwait may be more fortunate. It has, to be sure, some strong divisions between Sunnis and Shiite; between old and new money; and between a long-settled core and a more recently settled Bedouin periphery. But the benefits of citizenship are so strong that a sense of national identity keeps all divisions in check. Kuwaiti political differences are intensely expressed but the means used are genteel by regional standards. Even the most radical reformers admit that they can speak freely — there are no disappearances, secret detentions, or military trials. Egypt's revolutionaries proclaimed that they all could be Khaled Saids. Kuwait's reformers are each secure in the knowledge that they will never become one.

And so for all its messiness, Kuwaitis cling fast to the idea that they will always retain both a strong sense of loyalty to an emir (if much less to his whole family) and to a constitution that has served Kuwait longer — and shaped itself — to the country's development, more than any other such document in the history of the region.

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Why reform in the Gulf monarchies is a family feud

By F. Gregory Gause, III, March 4, 2011

Kuwait and Bahrain have had two different experiences during the winter of Arab discontent. Manama has witnessed the violent suppression of popular protests, followed by the largest mass demonstrations in the state's history. The standoff between the al-Khalifa regime and the protesters continues. Kuwait has had its own issues, with a much less violent confrontation between political activists and security forces in late 2010, before the events in Tunisia got rolling, and more recent protests by stateless residents (biduns) seeking political and economic equality. But the largest public gathering of Kuwaitis during this period was in late February, when young and old took to the streets to celebrate 50 years of Kuwaiti independence under al-Sabah rule and the 20th anniversary of their liberation from Iraq in 1991. Despite these differences, these two small states — which combine a ruling family with an elected parliament — demonstrate how difficult political reform will be in the Persian Gulf monarchies.

The Gulf states are ruled by what Michael Herb, in his 1999 book *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution, and Democracy in Middle Eastern Monarchies*, dubbed "dynastic monarchies." Unlike monarchies in Jordan and Morocco, where the king rules but leaves the day-to-day operations of government to commoner prime ministers and cabinets, in the Gulf states (with the partial exception of Oman) whole families rule. The king or emir (prince) sits atop the pyramid, but ruling family members also fill many other important political positions, in the cabinet, the military, and other government agencies.

Before the unrest began in Bahrain, the prime minister, three of the four deputy prime ministers, and 10 of the 23 cabinet ministers were from the al-Khalifa family. They included the ministers of finance, foreign affairs, interior, defense, justice and Islamic affairs, and housing. Two of the al-Khalifa ministers were fired by the king in late February, but that hardly means an end to family rule in Bahrain. In Kuwait, the prime minister, the first deputy prime minister, two of the three deputy prime ministers, and eight of the 21 ministers are from the al-Sabah family. They include the ministers of defense, interior, foreign affairs, oil, and housing. The governor of the Kuwaiti Central Bank is also an al-Sabah. Similar proportions of ruling family members can be found in the cabinets of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E). The Sultan of Oman himself holds the portfolios of prime minister, minister of defense, minister of foreign affairs, minister of finance, and governor of the central bank — fewer family members in the government but no less of a hold on power by the al-Said family. Government in the Gulf is a family affair.

The dynastic nature of the Gulf monarchies helped them survive the last period of political upheaval in the Arab world in the 1950s and 1960s. They were not "one bullet" regimes. The families had a range of talent upon which to draw to run the state. Their wide presence in society provided a built-in intelligence service, keeping the families close to those they ruled. They knew what was going on and thus did not get too far ahead of, or fall too far behind, their subjects. Many heads were better for monarchical survival than the single heads of monarchs in Egypt, Libya, Iraq, and Yemen that were lopped off, either figuratively or literally, in the Arab revolts of that earlier age.

While family rule served the cause of regime stability for the past 40 years, the nature of the current demands raised by political activists in Bahrain and Kuwait are turning the dynastic nature of these regimes into a stumbling block on the road to reform, if not into a potential liability for the rulers themselves. Those Bahraini protesters who are not demanding the replacement of the entire regime are, at a minimum, calling for a government that will be responsible to parliament. In Kuwait, the immediate situation is not as dire for the al-Sabah. However, the recent history of tension and stalemate between the government and the parliament contains a similar logic. Prime Minister Sheikh Nasir Muhammad al-Sabah has

presided over six governments and three elections in the last five years and just barely survived a no-confidence vote in January. Kuwaiti opposition groups are now calling not only for a new prime minister, but also for constitutional changes that will require the government (now appointed directly by the emir) to receive a vote of confidence from parliament before it can take up office. Reform petitions in Saudi Arabia are calling for the separation of the offices of king and prime minister (which have been jointly held since 1964) and an elected rather than appointed legislative body with the power to remove ministers through confidence votes.

It is highly unlikely that cabinets responsible to elected parliaments will comprise as many members of the ruling families as is the case now. So while Gulf kings and emirs can keep their jobs in political deals that make concessions to protesting citizens, becoming more like their friends in Jordan and Morocco, their relatives will very likely lose theirs. Since the first constituency of any dynastic monarch is his own family, proposing political reforms that would vastly decrease family power is likely to excite opposition not just to the reforms, but possibly to the ruler himself. It would take a strong figure to bring his family to heel and accept such a reduced political role. Both the al-Sabah and the al-Khalifa contain plenty of divisions and factions that could be mobilized against the rulers, and neither King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa nor Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah has the reputation as uncontested leader of his extended family. Should either respond to opposition demands and propose constitutional changes that make their governments more responsible to parliament, political reform in the Gulf states could very well become a family feud.

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Kuwait: too much politics, or not enough?

By Kristin Smith Diwan, January 10, 2011

On Dec. 28, Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed al-Sabah, prime minister and nephew to the ruling emir, stood before the Kuwaiti National Assembly to face intensive questioning from representatives of Kuwait's three main opposition groupings. The parliamentary "grilling"— in Kuwait's colorful parlance — came in response to his government's use of force to break up a meeting of academics and parliamentarians, a gathering which itself was called to protest alleged constitutional violations by the government. Eight days later, the premier narrowly escaped a vote of no confidence by the Kuwaiti Parliament which would have forced the emir to relieve him of his post or dissolve the parliament and call for new elections.

Such legislative oversight and popular accountability is unheard of in the Arab Middle East. Yet few Kuwaitis stopped to celebrate this hard fought step toward a genuine constitutional monarchy, and few Gulf citizens looked to Kuwait in envy. Indeed, in this boom era of oil prosperity, Kuwait — once the exemplar of the Gulf — has increasingly come to be viewed as a mess.

The most recent grilling of PM Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed was the eighth of his tenure, a tumultuous five year period which has seen six different governments and three elections, two after constitutional dissolutions of the parliament due to repeated conflict between lawmakers and

the executive. The political instability has taken its toll on the economy: while Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (U.A.E.), and even Saudi Arabia have surged ahead with bold projects of infrastructure development and economic diversification, Kuwait has stayed much the same. No one can deny the constitutional empowerment of its parliament, or the dynamism of its civil society organizations and media. Yet some have come to question their value: what has all of this popular participation achieved for Kuwait and its people?

It is just such doubts that delivered a defeat for most of Kuwait's organized opposition movements in the May 2009 election, returning the most pro-government parliament since liberation. Yet just a year and a half later, this same parliament fell just a few votes short of voting a standing prime minister, and royal family member out of office. How did this reversal of fortune happen?

It is notable that the center of gravity of the opposition has moved from Kuwait's urban center to the more populous and once reliably pro-government "tribal" outer districts. These relatively late-arriving citizens — most of whom were naturalized after Kuwaiti independence in part as a ruling family strategy to dilute the influence of urban Arab nationalist movements — are becoming better educated and less willing to accept blind loyalty to the rulers. While politically organized as tribes, economically they have long been sedentary and are mostly dependent on state employment. They have therefore been defending their economic interests in the parliament where they have numerical advantage, seeking to forestall privatizations which they believe will benefit the better placed urban merchants while endangering their stream of state benefits. This socioeconomic cleavage animates the hadhar-bedu, or urban-rural divide so prevalent in Kuwaiti politics today.

The ruling family has been using this political cleavage to its own advantage, playing on urban resentment against tribal nepotism and obstructionism toward large development projects. Indeed, the May 2009 elections for the National Assembly delivered more pro-government MPs from the "hadhar" inner constituencies of Kuwait city based on just such sentiments. Their stronger position in parliament allowed the Al Sabah to shift tactics vis-a-vis the opposition: confident of majority support, the Emir chose to have the Prime Minister stand for votes of no confidence, rather than shuffling the cabinet or forcing new parliamentary elections. The first "grilling" of the premier by the new parliament in December 2009, carried out by a tribal MP accusing the prime minister of a misuse of public funds, resulted in a lopsided no confidence vote of 13 to 35 in favor of the government.

In the past year, however, the government has overplayed its hand. First, the government sought to strip the parliamentary immunity from the tribal MP who questioned the prime minister, a move perceived by many as a heavy handed attempt to silence the opposition. This was compounded by the arrest and prosecution of a popular journalist, Mohammad Abdulqader al-Jasem, who has been sharply critical of the government and the prime minister. These events prompted the creation of a new "defense of the constitution" movement, made up of opposition tribal and Islamist MP's supporting their colleague's attempt to keep his parliamentary immunity, but with broader support from liberal MP's fearing the government encroachment on political freedoms. The attack of special forces on a meeting of this group on Dec. 8 which resulted in the injury of parliamentarians and the arrest of a constitutional scholar united all the parliament's opposition groupings — liberal, Islamist, and tribal populist — in criticism of the current government. Augmented by urban liberals, this broader coalition fell only three votes short of upending the PM by a no confidence vote of 22 to 25.

This impressive showing belies the fragility of the coalition. The current interpolation battle saw the opposition shift its tactics toward a populist ground game, with opposition MPs from Kuwait's outer districts encouraging people to rally outside the houses of fence-sitting MPs to pressure them to back the vote of no confidence in the prime minister. Yet as opposition tribal MPs pledge to continue their campaign to oust the prime minister through street protests, they risk alienating their urban allies in the parliament, who face constituents who see the rise of tribal populism as a greater threat to civil liberties than the strong arm tactics of the government.

Chief among those viewing the rise of tribal populism as a threat are the Shiite, who have watched with trepidation the rising influence of Salafi anti-Shiite thought in Kuwait, particularly in the Sunni tribal outer districts. Increasingly, the government has come to rely upon the Shiite, who did extremely well in the past election and form a key supportive urban voting bloc for the Al-Sabah. The Sunni tribal opposition, have been quick to impugn the Al-Sabah with this alliance, adding a disturbing sectarian angle to the debate.

As Marc Lynch noted in his posting "The wages of Arab decay," Arab states harbor many social problems concealed under the heavy screen of security states. Kuwait's relatively open and dynamic politics offer an open view of these tribal and sectarian conflicts, and a forum for negotiating them. However, the institutions as they exist — incomplete constitutional monarchy, unrecognized political parties, pervasive private interests in media — seem to be exacerbating rather than alleviating these political conflicts. How Kuwait navigates this dangerous terrain may be a harbinger for political futures well beyond this tiny city state.

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Ahistorical Kuwaiti sectarianism

By Lindsey Stephenson, April 29, 2011

Sectarian violence in Bahrain has led many to nervously speculate about the potential for these events to set rapidly into motion a downward spiral of Sunni-Shiite relations in the rest of the Gulf, and the catastrophe that could arise should the violence pit the regional religious rhetorical powers of Saudi Arabia and Iran against each other. One vital question is how much weight will the turmoil in Bahrain have over other Shiite communities in the Gulf, namely the large Shiite population in Kuwait, perhaps the U.S.'s strongest regional ally and strategic partner in the region?

Fortunately, in Kuwait sectarianism has always been a non-starter. Though aware of sectarian differences, these were never highly politicized. The Shiite in Kuwait have been an integral part of society before there was even a polity to speak of. They make up roughly one half of the country's merchant class, and around 30 percent of the population. Unlike in Bahrain, the Shiite hold high government positions and 9 of Kuwait's 50 elected members of parliament are Shiite. Although some neighborhoods are becoming more homogenously Shiite, contrary to the situation in Bahrain, the vast majority of Sunnis and Shiite live beside each other — and have for decades as houses generally stay within families. Simply put, the Shiite are fully Kuwaiti, and have long been regarded as such by the government and Kuwaiti Sunnis. And yet, events in Bahrain have provided fuel for those in Kuwait who wish to make waves.

The open Kuwaiti media has proven itself to be an incessant instigator of sectarianism and a forum for outlandish comments that were previously only said in private and often written off as nonsense. Bahraini government as well as predominately Shiite news channels have also been influential in stoking the flames. Kuwaiti Sunnis and Shiite alike have commented that once the TV is on, there is no

escaping sectarian discussions (indeed, many TVs these days sit muted in the background). The state of Kuwaiti newspapers is similar.

There are two issues for which talking heads have raised unfounded questions; namely Shiite origins and loyalty. Polemical comments about "weird things Shiite do" have played into deliberate othering tactics in efforts to drive a wedge between Sunni and Shiite communities, and have unfortunately been picked up by the masses. Setting aside the historical fact that many Kuwaitis of Arab origin are Shiite and Kuwaitis of Persian origin are Sunnis, many programs are propagating an idea that Shiite have Iranian origins and are thus an alien presence. This has seeped into common rhetoric and fostered suspicion amongst some Sunnis that they don't really know who their neighbors are anymore. One Sunni women from a merchant family explained that, "In school we used to know all of our classmates. Now their are lots of families who say they are Kuwaiti, but we don't know them." Initially thinking she was speaking about Bedouins, I asked if that was who she meant. "I don't know," she said. "They're from Iran, these kinds of places."

Furthermore, the notion of Shiite religious authority being centered in Iran (although many Kuwaiti Shiite are followers of Ali al-Sistani, the senior Shiite cleric in Iraq) has conveniently lent itself to polemics which aim to demonstrate that the loyalty of Kuwaiti Shiite is first to Ayatollah Khamenei in Iran and second to Kuwait. Shiite themselves however are under no false assumptions about Persian affinity for Arabs. One Kuwaiti woman who lived in Qom for many years while her husband was in seminary school put it very plainly: "Iranians hate Arabs. I only go back for pilgrimage." Many other Kuwaiti Shiite echoed her comments. Much of Iranian animosity toward Arabs stems from the long war with Iraq in the 1980s, but it seems that Kuwaitis themselves have carved out a unique impression. In colloquial Farsi, the word "Kuwait" has become an adjective describing something "requiring very little effort." In essence, Iran is not a place where Kuwaiti Shiite feel particularly welcome (although some do make short vacation trips during the summer). Iran may be home to important sites of religious pilgrimage, and distant relatives, but it is not a country to which they feel any particular political loyalty.

The issue of loyalty to Kuwait is particularly pertinent as the Gulf War is still very fresh on the minds of Kuwaitis, and stories of the families who aided Saddam are widely circulated. Ironically the group whose loyalty was most in question during that time, those of Bedouin origins, are the very ones at the forefront of the accusations about Shiite loyalty. Sunni merchant families, having built the Kuwaiti state alongside the Shiite, are less willing to buy this rhetoric, but ideas about the "strangeness" of Shiite practices is increasingly prevalent.

Anti-Shiite sentiment has come at a particularly delicate time for the Shiite in Kuwaiti national politics, as they must juggle their relations with the populous and the government, who are themselves at odds. The ruling family, with whom they have a very good relationship, continues to front a very unpopular prime minister, leading to countless stalemates within parliament. Although Shiite MPs are now in solidarity with those who wish to oust the "corrupt" prime minister, the initial reluctance of some to do so (and potentially jeopardize relations with the ruling family) was identified as proof that the Shiite do not really want what is best for Kuwait.

This othering and at least rhetorical marginalization is obviously not very helpful, and in many ways is a problem because it could become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If the Shiite are made to feel separate from the rest of society, the community will inevitably become more insular and particularist. Already insignia of Shiite identity are on the rise, such as the wearing of a particular kind of ring. Sunnis are keenly aware of these expressions of Shiite identity, particularly since some of them — such as car decals bearing the names of the Prophet's family in a font mimicking dripping blood — are found offensive. One woman from an urbanized Bedouin family was keen to note this change in attitude. "When my father was young, he lived in Bayan. There are so many Shiites in Bayan, but there were no problems between them. At that time

everyone was just Kuwaiti, no one displayed their differences."

Some Shiite have discouraged these practices that distinguish them from the Sunnis, especially in the wake of the current tensions. Others however are less concerned and remain confident that their strong position in business and politics will protect them. Indeed the ruling family and Kuwaiti government has reassured the Shiite of their respected position, both by sending a delegation of Shiite officials to Bahrain in attempts to arbitrate (which was turned down by the Bahraini government), and by refusing to send any Kuwaiti troops in the GCC coalition to intervene in the situation. The information minister however, did take legal action against Al- Dar newspaper, which labeled the GCC intervention a "Saudi invasion" into Bahrain, stating that, "The government will never let any extremist from the opposite ends of the spectrum to achieve a political gain at a cost to the national unity."

This line has been a fairly consistent theme from the Kuwaiti government in recent years, whose regional security strategy is (quite necessarily) a practical one. In a closed meeting in 2008, a high-ranking MP explained that Kuwait cannot take a hard-line position against Iranian nuclear ambitions because, "They are our neighbors, they always have been neighbors and they always will be neighbors." Being a small country wedged in between two powerful and often at odds neighbors, Kuwait certainly has a vested interest in keeping the neighborhood peace and moderating polemical rhetoric.

Kuwait's open society and political system does have the capability to absorb this potential crisis, and will likely do so. Shiite presence in society and their relatively equal access on an institutional level educationally, professionally and politically does not afford any Kuwaiti a context devoid of members of the other sect. This helps to maintain an integrated society where people know one another and are thus less likely to vilify members of the other group. However, a continuation if the sectarian polemics could translate into more discriminatory hiring practices and a breakdown of this integration essential to sectarian harmony.

Kuwait will not become Bahrain in terms of outright violence, but if media in Kuwait continues to draw lines in the sand between the sects, these lines could very well become perforations over time, and perhaps more quickly if tensions in Bahrain continue to escalate. For a country located between the poles of Sunni and Shiite Islam, a weakening of Kuwaiti national unity could translate into unwanted meddling and a loss of autonomy for the whole.

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Kuwait's impatient youth movement

By Kristin Smith Diwan, June 29, 2011

On June 23 Kuwaiti Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed al-Sabah survived a parliament vote of no confidence, the third opposition bid to oust him. Yet with another parliamentary challenge already in the works, Kuwait's contentious politics are far from contained and have even spread beyond the walls of parliament. Earlier in the month, a rally of several thousand was held in Kuwait City demanding the prime minister's dismissal. This was not an exceptional event, but rather the latest maneuver by a new force: youth movements taking to the streets to force a change in Kuwaiti politics.

The Kuwaiti youth share many characteristics with the region's broader protest movements. Their chief complaint is corruption, the "political money" that, in their view, distorts the emirate's governing institutions and threatens its constitutional order. Like the youth in Tunis and Cairo, they are working toward a more civic order, grounded in constitutional rights and realized through citizen activism. Yet while clearly in harmony with the uprisings across the Arab world, the movement predates them and is driven by developments in Kuwaiti politics and society which have brought the historically dynamic emirate to its current malaise.

The protesters are seeking unity at a time when Kuwait is wracked by division. Three confrontations predominate: a leadership competition within the ruling family; a constitutional showdown between the parliament and the ruling cabinet; and a class struggle between state-dependent civil servants and the commercial elite. The interaction among these leadership, constitutional, and class struggles — played out in the context of a historic oil boom and financial bust — has raised political tensions to the boiling point.

The dysfunction in Kuwait's political system begins at the top with the ruling Al-Sabah. The problems within the monarchy became apparent in the 2005 succession when a standoff between two branches of the ruling family over the replacement for the incapacitated Crown Prince Saad Abdullah provided an opening for the opportunistic parliament to step in and depose him. The ultimate resolution of this intra-family power struggle came down squarely in favor of one branch of the royal family, which now holds all important posts save one. Nonetheless, this consolidation removed the balance between the two branches, and — significantly — moved the succession debate on to the next generation.

The competition among these future claimants to the throne has intensified with ill effects. First, the endemic leadership struggles have paralyzed the executive branch of government and seeded corruption through the bureaucracy, imperiling Kuwait's future development. Second, the rivals have used members of the National Assembly as proxies, encouraging parliamentary challenges to weaken the other's position within the cabinet. The competition between the prime minister and Deputy Prime Minister Sheikh Ahmed al-Fahad reached unprecedented levels earlier this month when parliamentarians loyal to Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed withdrew their support from Sheikh Ahmed over a parliamentary grilling, forcing him to resign.

The open political warfare of ruling family members shocked a Kuwaiti public inured to government instability. The five years of Nasser al-Mohammed's leadership have seen 11 parliamentary interpolations, forcing six resignations of the cabinet and the dissolution and early election of parliament three times. While the political opponents of Sheikh Nasser are convinced of his ineffectiveness and political corruption, at heart there is a deeper ambition: to advance Kuwait's constitutional monarchy. Having already forced the concession of separating the prime minister position from the office of the crown prince, the opposition now seeks to establish the principle that the prime minister can be dismissed

by parliament. The removal of a royal prime minister by popular action is an important step toward an elected prime minister and a genuine parliamentary monarchy.

The ability of the parliament to advance this objective, however, has been compromised due to their own internal divisions. The liberal versus Islamist competition that dominated the first decade of the reinstated parliament after Kuwait's liberation remains, but it has been eclipsed by other social divisions. Prominent among them are urban-tribal tensions whose cultural character masks a strong class component as the late-arriving tribes, more dependent on state employment and subsidies, challenge the urban commercial elite. Sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shiite have escalated sharply, certainly over regional issues — Bahrain chief among them, but also due to the prime minister's reliance on the urban Shiite vote to maintain his majority and his premiership.

Kuwait's youth movement arose in response to this weakening of political institutions, both royal and parliamentary. In the face of this political dysfunction and in reaction to a creeping encroachment on civil liberties, they offer a straightforward message to the prime minister: leave. Youth activists have been criticized for the simplicity of their message and street tactics. Yet prominent activists in the movement describe this as a necessary first step. Political change requires a cultural change: to convince Kuwaitis that protests are a right. It is this conviction that drives their insistence on choosing the location of their protests in the commercial center of Kuwait City, a site with a historical connection to constitutional struggles of the 1950s. The government has countered by limiting protests to a park in front of the National Assembly where the first student protests, the successful campaign for electoral reform known as the Orange Movement, were held in 2006. The escalating tension between the defiant youth and the government is evident in the heavy police presence in the downtown Safat Square and in the emir's recent speech calling for order and the enforcement of the law.

In spite of their defiance, the youth movement cannot fully escape the political perils of Kuwait's redistributive order. There are persistent rumors of their links to competing elements of the ruling family — rumors sure to gain more traction as a dissident member of the Al-Sabah just voiced his support for the protesters and even for a popularly elected prime minister. Others see them as being led by the opposition in parliament. These attacks on their independence surfaced in a protest in late May when youth activists shouted down the populist Kuwaiti MP attending their rally, evidence that some in the movement are worried about the co-optation that they see as endemic to Kuwait's patronage-fed political system.

Their antidote to the "political money" that corrupts and divides Kuwaiti society is social solidarity. And the movement can indeed claim some success in bridging communities and drawing supporters from across the ideological divide. One former Muslim Brotherhood youth prominent in the movement spoke animatedly about his political transformation: "You can't just look at everyone as potential converts to your Islamic program; you have to work with all elements of society as they exist." Still, the protests of today contrast markedly with the coed rallies organized by the U.S.-educated activists of the Orange Movement. There has been a pronounced shift toward the middle class and tribal Kuwaitis. Overcoming these cultural and class divisions remains a challenge.

Organizational cohesion is also a problem for the youth movement. On the eve of their high profile March 8 rally which sought to capture momentum from the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian street activists, the movement fragmented into two and later three separate organizations, falling out over personalities and tactics. Still, as Kuwait confronts the weakening of all its organized political forces, from the ruling family to its political societies, the logic of re-formation is a powerful one. The emergence of the new Kuwaiti youth movements should be seen as something hopeful: evidence that a capacity for change — or at least the desire for it — still exists.

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Jailed for tweeting in Kuwait

By Priyanka Motaparthy, August 14, 2011

Armed security officers wearing balaclavas led Nasser Abul, blindfolded and shackled, into a courtroom in downtown Kuwait City on July 19. Accused of crimes against the state, he answered the judge's questions from a wood-and-metal cage in the courtroom. His mother, watching the proceedings, hoped her 26-year-old eldest son would finally be released after nearly two months in detention. The judiciary has refused to grant her wish.

Abul found himself in jail because of a few tweets. Twitter was wildly popular in Kuwait even before protests began in Tunis and Cairo, and its use in Kuwait surged as the Arab Spring provided daily inspiration for news updates and commentary. Between January and March, people in Kuwait wrote over 3.69 million tweets — more than any other country in the Middle East, according to a June report by the Dubai School of Government.

Kuwaitis' prolific Twitter use makes sense in a country known for allowing greater freedom of expression than nearly any other country in the Middle East. But as the government steps up internet surveillance, Abul's arbitrary and seemingly indefinite detention reflects broader willingness to cast such commitments aside in times of regional instability. Like many Kuwaitis, Abul posted on events in nearby countries, with some postings criticizing the ruling families of Bahrain as well as Saudi Arabia. The particular tweets in question included off-the-cuff remarks calling the Saudi and Bahraini ruling families "impure," criticizing their crackdown against anti-government protesters in Bahrain, and describing them as interchangeable pairs of bathroom slippers. He provoked the wrong people when he criticized the Gulf monarchs' club and their efforts to stifle dissent.

Security forces questioned several other tweeters in recent months, according to local activists, and threatened Mohammad al-Jassim, a well-known blogger, that they would shut down his blog if he kept up his criticism. Jassim was jailed last year for 45 days and faced charges (later dropped) for insulting the prime minister. In June, authorities also detained another Kuwaiti man, Lawrence al-Rashidi, for posting a YouTube video in which he read a poem insulting the emir.

Meanwhile, Abul faced physical abuse at the hands of government authorities, and has spent a nightmarish two months in detention with no end in sight. It began on June 7 when Kuwait's state security department called Abul and ordered him to come in for questioning. When he arrived, officers questioned him and detained him overnight. His lawyer said the officers beat him, shone bright lights in his cell to prevent him from sleeping, and insulted him repeatedly, mocking him for being a Shiite. The next day, they transferred him to Kuwait's state security prison. For the next several weeks, Abul was only allowed to see his lawyer and family when he went to court.

Days after Abul was detained, Sheikh Abdullah Mohammed bin Ahmed Al Fateh Al Khalifa, a member of Bahrain's ruling Al Khalifa family, publicly thanked Kuwait's state security office for investigating and detaining him. The sheikh said he intended to file a private libel and slander suit against Abul on the royal family's behalf.

Kuwait's efforts to insulate itself from regional political currents go beyond harassing and arresting those whose comments question the ruling elite. Government forces have also tightly controlled political protests. In February and March, riot police violently dispersed demonstrations calling for the rights of Bidun, longtime stateless residents of Kuwait, severely beating and injuring demonstrators and throwing smoke bombs into the private homes to which they fled. And during the last two weeks, when protesters gathered in Kuwait City to demand the expulsion of Syria's ambassador, the government threatened to deport any non-citizens who were involved. At the demonstrations, police turned away all would-be demonstrators who were

not Kuwaiti, though over half the people who live and work in Kuwait aren't citizens.

During a time of regional instability, some commentators have mistakenly called the Gulf region (minus Bahrain) an oasis of calm. No doubt the billions in petrodollars — and the generous welfare states they fund — have helped buy popular quiescence. But the calm also stems from these governments' willingness to repress even the most nascent signs of criticism. In April, the United Arab Emirates jailed five democracy activists, charging them with insulting the country's top officials. Just last week, a Dubai interior ministry official said that the government would be closely monitoring the internet for signs of unrest. In June, Qatar's cabinet approved a new media law that allows the government broad authority to punish journalists for what they write about "friendly countries."

In Kuwait, the recent attacks on people who have done nothing more than express opinions only discredit the government as paranoid, defensive, and woefully out-of-touch with the calls for democratic reform sweeping the region. Instead of policing the internet for any sign of discord, the Kuwaiti authorities should release Abul and give him and others the freedom to speak, and tweet, their minds.

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Kuwait's constitution showdown

By Kristin Smith Diwan, November 17, 2011

The world awoke to a new front in the Arab Spring as thousands of protestors fought through guards to occupy Kuwait's Parliament on Wednesday night. Chanting "this is our house" and "the people want the removal of the Prime Minister" the youthful crowd, accompanied by opposition parliamentarians, certainly looked the part of Arab revolutionaries. Yet Kuwait has been working toward this climax since before Tunisians took to the streets of Sidi Bouzeid. And while drawing momentum from Arab brethren in Egypt and elsewhere, Kuwait activists are not seeking regime overthrow but rather something even more rare — a genuine constitutional monarchy in the Gulf.

Kuwait is a natural candidate for such a distinction. Its proud tradition of civic activism goes back to the 1930s when prominent merchant families formed their own municipal council and then forced upon the governing sheikh the first elected Majlis in the Gulf. With its independence in 1961, Kuwait's elite gathered in a constitutive assembly, which established Kuwait's ruling order: an emir who stands above the fray appointing a government headed by the ruling al-Sabah family, but with significant powers of legislation and oversight held by an elected parliament. Twice the ruling family has done away with the nuisance of parliament through its unconstitutional dissolution. But since its reinstatement following Kuwait's liberation from Iraq, the Parliament has assumed a central position in Kuwaiti life. It is fair to say that the National Assembly is essential to Kuwait's very identity.

Yet there remains a key distinction between Kuwait's order and a genuine constitutional monarchy — a distinction that maintains the primacy of the ruling al-Sabah, and generates endless friction with elected representatives. The elected political factions (Kuwait has no legal parties) do not select the cabinet, whose members stand as

ex-officio members of parliament (MPs), providing the government with a key voting bloc. Elected MPs are thus unable to set pro-actively the policy of government, having only the power to call the ministers to account through parliamentary grillings, and to dismiss them if they can summon the majority in a vote of no confidence — a vote to which ex-officio members are excluded.

This "negative" power has been used increasingly in the post-liberation order. During the tumultuous five-year reign of the current prime minister, Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed al-Sabah, parliamentary grillings and the threat to withdraw support for ministers have resulted in the shuffling of seven cabinets, and on three occasions have compelled the Emir to dismiss the parliament and call for new elections. This dizzying return to the ballot box eased only after the 2009 elections decimated the organized Islamist political blocs, and returned a parliament with more independents and a less coherent opposition. The augmented support for the government allowed the Nasser al-Mohammed government to shift tactics: confident of success, the premier for the first time stood for a vote of no confidence in December 2009, and won.

However the election of Kuwait's most pro-government parliament since liberation did not end the political intrigue. For the conflict between Kuwait's executive and legislative branches has been matched by the in-fighting within the ruling family itself. Since the contentious succession of 2006, rival princes have been fighting a proxy battle for influence through Kuwait's expanded private media and through the parliament itself. This leadership struggle has stymied government-led economic diversification plans, further eroded the effectiveness of public services, and sown corruption throughout Kuwait's governing institutions.

New evidence of the growth in corruption has been mounting for months. In August reports leaked to the media indicated that Kuwait's two largest banks were looking into the transfer of $92 million dollars into the accounts of two members of parliament. By September, Kuwait's Public Prosecutor took the unprecedented move of opening an investigation into an ever-broadening number of politically suspicious transactions, resulting in allegations that around 16 MPs received about $350 million in bribes to vote in support of the government earlier this year. In October, the scandal spread to the foreign ministry on accusations by the parliamentary opposition members that the prime minister had diverted public funds to personal accounts abroad. This prompted the resignation of Foreign Minister Mohammed al-Salem al-Sabah, the lone minister from a rival branch of the ruling al-Sabah, who cited his unwillingness to serve in "a government that does not carry out true reforms regarding the multi-million bank deposits."

The scandal eroded the premier's already declining support with the public, and (ironically) hindered his ability to mount an effective defense in parliament. Opposition MPs returning to a new parliamentary session in October boycotted committee meetings, refusing to sit with colleagues rumored to be corrupt. In November, the defection of the nominally supportive secular and pro-business National Action Bloc marked a turning point: the opposition now had the votes it needed to put through a vote of no confidence in the prime minister. This left the Emir with poor options. He would have to yield to the demands to replace his nephew — implicitly conceding greater parliamentary control over government leadership — or dissolve the parliament, and face new elections in a very anti-government environment.

Returning from the Eid recess on Tuesday, the al-Sabah-led government played a final card. A controversial ruling returned by the constitutional court in October stated that the prime minister could not be grilled for violations committed by his ministers, only for issues under his direct authority. Using the ex-officio cabinet members as a voting bloc, government supporters scrapped a proposed grilling of the prime minister, signaling a new strategy to sidestep any future moves toward a vote of no confidence over the graft scandal. Opposition lawmakers decried this as "a clear attempt to prevent the lawmakers from exercising their constitutional right to question the prime minister," and a dubious means of escaping popular accountability.

The blockage in the National Assembly presaged a return to the extra-parliamentary strategy of popular mobilization. Declaring that "no medium of escalation would be spared" the opposition led by the tribal populist Popular Action Bloc had for weeks been holding seminars across electoral constituencies pushing for the trial of those involved in the bribery scandal, new elections, and the ouster of the government and its leaders. Youth movements, emboldened by the success of popular movements across the Arab world, set up an encampment in the public park outside the parliament. On Wednesday one youth leader tweeted that "no solution will come from within the parliamentary halls of Abdullah al-Salem, but instead must come to it." On Wednesday night, in the course of a raucous protest, they did just that.

While it is clear that the storming of the parliament crosses a threshold, it is unclear what is on the other side for Kuwait. The youthful protestors broke other red lines in directly taunting the emir: a constitutional offense for which a number of Kuwaiti cyber activists were recently jailed. Will the public see this as going too far? Most Kuwaitis want reform but there is no appetite for revolution in this wealthy oil monarchy. A sign of such wariness can be seen in the statement issued by the liberal National Action Bloc that "the storming of the parliament is no less dangerous than what the government is doing." There exist deep social cleavages in Kuwait — sectarian and also urban elite fears of the empowerment of the largely tribal classes which have been at the forefront of the protests — which the ruling family can accentuate in drawing the public to the side of a law and order government. Yet too strong a crackdown will likely backfire against the government, just as it did in December of last year after the police attacked a political gathering of oppositionists, beating academics and parliamentarians.

The Kuwait opposition also faces difficult decisions about how to position itself on Kuwait's constitutional order. Thus far popular action has been framed as a defense of Kuwait's constitution in the face of official corruption and political subterfuge. Yet, the recent government maneuvers in the parliament reveal more than ever the weaknesses in Kuwait's constitutional system. Already one of Kuwait's opposition parties, the Islamist Reform and Development Bloc, has called for amending the constitution to deny the voting rights of the ex-officio members. Yet opening the constitution to change carries substantial risks as well, especially as the constitution forms a bedrock for national unity — a point made repeatedly this past week as Kuwait celebrated 49 years since its enactment.

It is equally unclear what Kuwait's dalliance with the Arab Spring may mean for the broader Gulf. Watching Wednesday's events is the Qatar government happy that they pro-actively announced parliamentary elections for Spring 2013, or are they regretting opening the Pandora's box of an elected legislative body? Is Saudi Arabia, with troops in Bahrain, anxiously eyeing another popular rebellion on the Gulf littoral, or are they privately enjoying "democratic" Kuwait's troubles?

All turns on the outcome of Kuwait's constitutional struggle. The Kuwaiti youth who took the seats of lawmakers and cabinet members in Abdullah al-Salem hall may have basked in their capture of the people's house. But occupying the parliament is not the same as assembling an effective opposition within it, an opposition able to appoint its own government and form a majority coalition that works for the betterment of all Kuwaitis. For that, a long political struggle remains, and the jury is still out.

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The identity politics of Kuwait's election

By Gwenn Okruhlik, February 8, 2012

Thursday's parliamentary elections in Kuwait reflected the intense drama unfolding in the country over the last four months — youth-led street protests, corruption charges that implicated 13 Members of Parliament (MPs), the November storming of the parliament to protest corruption, the dissolution of parliament by the emir, and the resignation of the embattled prime minister. The election campaign was marked by vitriolic rhetoric and violence. And the results empowered a loose Islamist-tribal coalition of opposition candidates which disappointed liberals and set the stage for continued political fireworks in the coming months. Despondent moderates surveying the outcome repeatedly complained that, "nobody is representing the middle."

The election revolved around competition between a coalition of opposition candidates demanding greater transparency and candidates who have been loyal to the government. Important political issues loom large in the background in Kuwait — things like an elected prime minister, allowance of genuine political parties, an independent judiciary, parliamentary independence from the government, and general progress toward a constitutional democracy. However, demographic changes and the material issues of welfare and corruption seem to have driven the election results — particularly fury over evidence of official corruption and the absence of accountability. This resulted in a 54 percent turnover in the parliament.

The loose Islamist-tribal coalition of opposition candidates won about 34 seats in the 50-seat parliament. Islamist candidates won 14 seats, while tribal candidates, half of whom might be called Islamist, took 21 seats. The opposition group is clearly tapping into voter sentiment. Tribal opposition MP Musallam al Barrak from the Fourth District was elected with the highest number of votes ever cast for a candidate.

At the same time, the so-called Islamist-led opposition is far from a monolithic coalition. Some Islamists are ideologues; others are not. Religious fervor was not a central campaign call. Islamist candidates proved themselves to be better organized and more politically savvy, articulate, and eloquent. Many younger candidates have risen through social organizations and civil society. They have been "groomed" to be effective leaders over the years. Nor are tribal voters a monolithic bloc. There is an emerging generational divide among tribal voters as many tribal MPs were implicated in the corruption scandal. Interestingly, the controversial tribal primaries were not an accurate predictor of the tribal vote in the general election.

Liberals fared poorly, however. None of the four women MPs elected in the last parliament won seats; in fact, not one of the 23 female candidates was elected. Liberals saw their seats reduced from eight to five, and Shiite from nine to seven.[1] Shiite MPs have generally voted pro-government. Further, the Shiite MPs include five supported by the Shiite institutions while only two identify as liberal and nationalist. There are only four Independents. Columnist and former Minister of Information Sami al Nesf called the election results "a tsunami of wrath and fury against governmental and legislative corruption...and against moderate voices."[2] Columnist Waleed al Rujaib sees it as a "clear manifestation of tribal and sectarian sentiments and a continuation of corruption in our society."[3] But for their own part, the relatively small liberal contingent is divided and does not work together in any coherent way. One liberal voter summed the electoral outcome this way, "We deserved this! We allowed this to happen."

There is real frustration, even anger, among Kuwaiti voters about the state of the economy and development projects.

1 The two they lost were previously held by women, neither who were 'religious' candidates.

2 Al Anba, February 4 2012.

3 Al Rai, February 4 2012.

In my small poll among female voters in the Third District, they voiced concrete concerns about the lack of jobs for Kuwaiti youth, the lack of housing for single and divorced women, the absence of nurses in grade schools throughout Kuwait, and that Kuwait has fallen far behind the economic powerhouses of Dubai and Doha, even behind Saudi Arabia which has burgeoning new economic cities. They also complained of too much *wasta*, the rise of sectarian tension, and the uneven implementation of the constitution. For example, "The constitution is not the problem. It's the way they pick and choose what to implement."

The most powerful force driving the success of the opposition appears to have been widespread anger at official corruption. That rage will permeate the new parliament's political agenda. The penal code stipulates that those involved in corruption should not be allowed to occupy public office, a law that opposition figures are now using to challenge some of the election results. At least 14 voters have filed an appeal to demand the annulment of the election of Mohammad al Juwaihel, who was charged with corruption. Law professor and newly-elected MP from the Fourth District, Obaid Al Wasmi, spoke in alarming tones, "I swear by the Almighty God that I will be scrutinizing the files of all those corrupt...I say to you that you have 24 hours to leave the country, I would not advise you to stay."

For some, the electoral results are not the issue. Political Science professor at Kuwait University Ghanim al Najjar said before the elections, "It does not matter who win or loses. What is important is how we move on from there."[4] And here, many worry about the rising trend of sectarian agitation, derogatory, anti-tribal rhetoric, sexist discourse, and violent clashes among competing camps.

Some liberals do fear the Islamists will "turn Kuwait into Saudi Arabia." Upon his election, MP Mohammed Al Haif announced that, "The ground is now fertile to amend the second article of the constitution to facilitate the road to change making sharia the sole source of legislation in Kuwait." The simple revision of one article — changing "a" to "the" — alters the legal framework of the state of Kuwait. An official spokesperson soon countered that the government will not stand idle in the face of such efforts. Women, in particular, fear the imposition of dress codes and increased gender segregation. Two winners, MP Mohammed Hayef and MP Faisal Al Mislem, had, in fact, previously formed a Committee to Curtail the Negative Phenomena at Kuwait University. They set limits on women's dress and integration on campus. They also targeted feminine men and masculine women. But others point out that Islamists have long competed in Kuwaiti elections and been represented in parliament, and are unlikely to behave in fundamentally different ways today than in the past.

The greater fears lie in the backlash against the rising salience of tribal voters. Many liberals view the tribes as something other than civil citizens. It is reported that before the election, some tribes convened in front of parliament and sang traditional war songs for its dissolution. There is a sense that a "tribal mentality" is growing and that it will destroy the institutions of civil society as tribal MPs lack any platform of national development. Instead, they seek material incentives and patronage — higher salaries, more contracts, and the erasure of private debt. They will take the law into their hands and defend their tribal MPs, right or wrong. This is said to be their breaking point with the Islamists. One person said, "At least the Islamist positions are based on rational thinking, even if I disagree with it."

In some ways, the Kuwaiti government brought the "tribal" problem on itself. In the 1960 and 1970s, when the government was fighting against the liberals and nationalists, they brought in an estimated 200,000 tribal people from Saudi Arabia and gave them Kuwaiti citizenship. As one person explained, "They were given huge parcels out [in] the suburbs. There was no mingling or assimilation so the new bedu formed neighborhoods in isolation from larger Kuwaiti society." The strategy has backfired. The government has lost their loyalty and their vote. Tribes are now the largest bloc in the opposition. The government still retains the enormous welfare costs of the

4 In Isabel Coles, "Kuwait Elections Offer Slim Chance for Reform," Reuters, January 18, 2012.

"new bedu" and their many offspring. The tribes do indeed agitate for more material benefits from the state — which they consider only their fair share vis a vis the hadhar.

In a similar way, entire neighborhoods were constructed of only Shiite citizens. An elderly voter bemoaned, "What is all this Sunni-Shi'a talk? I never heard this growing up. There is no difference. We are all Muslim." Another supported her saying, "In the past, Shi'a and Sunni lived together. It was good. People try to make this division now." These incidents must be coupled with the volatile anti-new bedu rhetoric of Al Juweihel and the ensuing mob violence. And that unfortunately, exists alongside heightened sectarian tensions that overlap the *bedu/hadha*r tensions as the Shiite community is primarily urbanized. Taken together, it appears that socio-political discourse in Kuwait has grown more strident.

What now? First, the convoluted and critical process of naming people to a new cabinet is underway. A new cabinet must be formed before the first session of the new parliament, which convenes on February 15. It is important to keep a close eye on which, if any, opposition MPs are named to the cabinet. If the prime minister appoints 4 to 6 members of the opposition, as it did in 1992, it may well dissipate the opposition majority in parliament and pave the way for some cooperation. Further, the government can frame this action as "our respect for the democratic vote." But this would require that the ruling family stand down from a confrontational path.

Secondly, much rides on the outcome of the vote for the speaker of the parliament, selected by the MPs and the 15 members of the cabinet. Ahmed Al Sadoun, the oldest Member of Parliament and a former speaker, is a long-time leader of the opposition and a strong contender. He is focused on increasing parliamentary control over the ruling family. Thirty-three MPs have publicly announced their backing for Al Sadoun, including 18 Islamist MPs who met yesterday, making him the clear frontrunner. If he wins, expect the parliament to forcefully challenge the government.

Sadoun's main rival for the speakership appears to be pro-government MP Mohammed Jassim al Saqer. He appeals to *hadhar*, liberals and merchants, and would likely push for a more conciliatory approach to the government. MP Ali al Rashid withdrew his name in an effort to boost the prospects for al Saqer, calling for "a new era of forgiveness and to forget the past...for all Kuwaitis to unite."[5] This seems unlikely in the face of the election campaign. If he wins, there will likely be turbulence inside the parliament.

Thirdly, once the parliament begins its work, expect a push for relatively quick passage of new anti-corruption and financial disclosure laws. Many clamor for an independent anti-corruption commission. Some people want to try the former prime minister on corruption charges and to demand full disclosure of oil revenue and sovereign wealth funds. Those issues would respond to the popular mood, but will likely prove too contentious to go forward.

The other potential source of conflict in the early days will come over the place of Islam. The Popular Bloc announced that it would support the move to amend the Kuwaiti Constitution so that Islam is the sole source of legislation. This move, strongly opposed by liberals and the ruling family, requires two-thirds of the assembly to approve it as well as the approval of the emir. It is unlikely to pass at this juncture but the debate will reveal much about the internal dynamics of coalitions.

While this sounds alarming, it is worth recalling that Kuwait has a long experience with parliamentary politics, a vibrant civil society, and a robust political discussion that is open when compared with its Gulf Cooperation Council neighbors. Still, the repeated elections force actors to expend tremendous resources, time, and intellectual energy on campaigns that might be better spent tackling concrete issues of political accountability and national economic development.

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5 Al Watan, February 4 2012

Political showdown in Kuwait

By Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, June 20, 2012

Kuwait's Emir on Monday took the unprecedented step of activating article 106 of the constitution, giving him the right to suspend the National Assembly for one month. It marked the first time in Kuwait's 50-year parliamentary history that the assembly has been suspended in this way, although it was twice dissolved unconstitutionally (in 1976 and in 1986), and has been dissolved constitutionally four times since 2006 alone. Two days later, the Constitutional Court issued an even more momentously abrupt decision as they ruled that the February 2012 election was void and ordered the return of the previous assembly. The ruling by Kuwait's highest court is final and cannot be challenged, and followed a challenge to the constitutionality of December's decree that called for new elections following the dissolution of the previous assembly on December 6, 2011.

Both actions took politicians and the public completely by surprise. They herald the beginning of Kuwait's deepest political crisis since the post-liberation restoration of parliamentary life in 1992. Leading opposition MP Musallam al-Barrak, who had gained the highest number of votes in Kuwaiti electoral history in the February election, immediately described the court ruling as "a coup against the constitution." While unexpected, these moves did not occur in a vacuum. Rather, they represent the culmination of a period of escalating instability as two broader trends in oppositional politics intersected with deep divisions within Kuwaiti society.

The February 2, 2012 election had produced an opposition landslide, as predominantly Islamist and tribal candidates won 34 out of the 50 parliamentary seats. Their gains came largely to the detriment of Kuwait's well-established liberal and merchant elites (as well as the four female MPs who all lost their seats). The results reflected the sharp bifurcation in Kuwaiti society, in part between a traditional political class dominated by *hadhar* (settled) urban elites tracing their lineage back to the pre-oil era, and newer arrivals largely from tribal backgrounds (*badu*) as a result of the large-scale naturalization projects of the 1960s and 1970s. Although far from monolithic in social or political objectives, debates and clashes over the direction of policy often took on cultural and class-based overtones and became as much a struggle for the future orientation of Kuwait as a contest for political power.

In addition to this volatile mix, an intergenerational shift has added to the reconfiguration of Kuwait's political culture. Since 2006, new youth movements have appeared on the scene. Initially mobilizing around demands to change Kuwait's electoral districting, they became known as the "Orange Movement" in a reference to Ukraine's color revolution in 2004-5. In a precursor to the methods of political organization that so powerfully reshaped the parameters of protest in North Africa in 2011, they used text messaging, internet blogging, and online social networks to coordinate and plan their activities and articulate their demands for reform.

The emergence of these new social groups tested Kuwait's creaking parliamentary machinery to its limit. In particular, they exposed the weaknesses in the balance of power between an elected parliament and an appointed cabinet. Uneasy at the best of times, it has become almost unworkable over the past decade. Beginning with the separation of the posts of crown prince and prime minister in 2003, the bar of oppositional politics has steadily risen, encompassing such milestones as the first interpellation of a sitting Prime Minister in 2009, and culminating in the mass popular demonstrations that eventually ousted Sheikh Nasser Mohammed Al-Sabah last November. Although the separation of powers in 2003 was motivated largely by the crown prince's debilitating illness, it nevertheless signaled that the prime minister was fair game for political opposition and public criticism.

The result has been political paralysis and a succession of stalled development projects. Constant friction and

an inability to work together hampered the five-year premiership of Nasser Mohammed. Three elections failed to produce decisive results, and seven different cabinets rose and fell with depressing regularity. Meanwhile, a series of major projects, such as the planned construction of a fourth oil refinery and a $17 billion joint venture between the Petrochemical Industries Company and Dow Chemical, were cancelled after parliamentary threats to scrutinize and reopen the agreements. With neighbouring Qatar and the UAE powering ahead with regional mega projects and Saudi Arabia massively expanding its own petrochemical and value-added industrial sectors, Kuwait became a laggard in a region it had once led in development.

This decade-long trajectory of opposition converged in 2011 with a second set of protests inspired by (but not derivative of) the momentous changes taking place across the region. Initially small-scale, anti-government protests started in June and called for the resignation of the prime minister. They escalated exponentially in September following the uncovering of a political corruption scandal involving the transfer of funds and payment of bribes to up to 16 MPs. Furthermore, a wave of strikes involving oil sector and customs workers and employees at Kuwait Airways added to the perception that the government was floundering and losing its grip. So, too, did the resignation of the capable Foreign Minister, Sheikh Mohammed Sabah Al-Sabah, in October, in protest over allegations that overseas money transfers to MPs were made through Kuwaiti embassies without his knowledge.

Popular and political tensions peaked in mid-November after the Constitutional Court blocked a parliamentary attempt to question the prime minister over the corruption scandal. Around 100 protesters stormed and briefly occupied the National Assembly building on a night of high drama on November 16, and attendance at rallies calling for the resignation of the Prime Minister swelled to tens of thousands. Despite the emir's vows not to bow to street pressure, a final, mass demonstration on November 28 drew more than 50,000 people and culminated in the replacement of the prime minister and the dissolution of parliament a week later.

However dramatic these events were, even to seasoned observers of Kuwait's rumbustious politics, they failed to address the root causes of Kuwait's flawed political structure. The new prime minister, Sheikh Jabir Mubarak Al-Sabah, was previously the deputy prime minister, and while he was more popular than his predecessor, the fundamental fault-lines running through Kuwaiti politics remained unchanged. These were on full display both during the turbulent election campaign — which featured an attack on a television station and the burning down of one particularly divisive candidate's campaign tent — and in its aftermath, as all sides digested the opposition landslide. It took nearly two weeks of tense negotiations to form a government, with the opposition Majority Bloc demanding nine cabinet positions (out of 16) and then rejecting the government's offer of three posts. That would in itself have been a milestone in Kuwaiti politics, but the opposition refused to join the cabinet, setting the stage for the fireworks that followed.

In the four short months of its existence, Kuwaiti parliamentarians filed eight interpellations against government ministers, two of whom resigned — Finance Minister Mustafa al-Shamali on May 23 after a marathon grilling session, and Minister of Social Affairs and Labor Ahmed Abdullatif al-Rujeib on June 12, ahead of a scheduled interpellation. In addition, firebrand opposition MP Mohammed al-Juwaihel had filed a motion to question the Minister of Interior, Sheikh Ahmed Homoud Al-Sabah, on Tuesday, but that was overtaken by the Emir's decree suspending the assembly.

The parliament also became known for a series of measures proposed by tribal and Islamist MPs that appeared to threaten Kuwait's record of being the most tolerant and politically progressive society in the Gulf. After an early attempt to amend the constitution to make sharia *the* rather than *a* source of legislation failed, conservative lawmakers called for the introduction of "morality police" to monitor the behavior of women in public spaces, overwhelmingly approved a legal amendment stipulating the death penalty for blasphemy (subsequently rejected by the government), and generally reinforced the atmosphere of growing conservatism that saw one man (Hamad al-Naqi) sentenced

to ten years imprisonment for a tweet deemed insulting to Islam and to the rulers of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. At the weekend, another MP called for putting on trial "screeching crows" who criticized Saudi Arabia's recently-deceased Crown Prince Nayef on Twitter.

So where does Kuwait go from here? Aside from the troubling indications of spiraling social and political tensions, there is a danger that the opposition will respond to the voiding of the election by urging its supporters to once again take to the streets. Individual (now-ex) MPs threatened to do precisely this even before the brazenly provocative judgment of the Constitutional Court deprived them of their parliamentary success. Having witnessed how the mobilization of tens of thousands of supporters effectively forced the Emir's hand last November, an emboldened opposition may well attempt to repeat the trick this time around.

In terms of due process, the ruling by the Constitutional Court cannot by itself dissolve the parliament. This the emir must do, by reconvening the previous assembly elected in May 2009 in order to dissolve it (correctly) and announce fresh elections, presumably sometime after the end of Ramadan in August. There is already feverish speculation about the ways that the opposition could try to obstruct or derail the process, and the road ahead undoubtedly has many twists and turns. Yet if one thing is clear from Kuwait's dramatic last three days, it is that the convergence of longstanding tensions (and distrust) between the executive and legislative branches of government have brought the country to the brink of political meltdown.

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