

كسر القوالب Breaking the mold

#Breaking_The_Mold

Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making

Country: **Kuwait**

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Leave! Contentious Politics in Kuwait during the 'Arab Spring' | Daniel L. Tavana |

On November 28, 2011, Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah resigned as prime minister of Kuwait. This was unprecedented: never before had a prime minister resigned before going on to become Emir. The resignation followed a series of political crises caused by allegations of corruption and bribery. These crises were punctuated by protests that grew in size and frequency throughout 2011. Ultimately, these protests coalesced into what became known as *Irhal*: a movement dedicated singularly to the resignation of Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad. This case study places *Irhal* ["Leave"] in historical context, analyzes key features of the movement, and assesses the reasons for the movement's success.

BACKGROUND

In late January 2006, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah succeeded Sheikh Saad Al-Abdullah Al-Sabah as Emir of Kuwait. The ascension of Sheikh Sabah resolved a succession crisis prompted by the passing of Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah on January 15, 2006, after nearly 30 years of rule. Since 2003, Sheikh Sabah had served as prime minister of Kuwait. One of his first decisions as Emir would be to appoint a new prime minister who would be responsible for managing the day-to-day business of government and overseeing relations between the Council of Ministers (Cabinet) and the Kuwait National Assembly (KNA). Sheikh Sabah appointed his nephew, Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Sabah, to the position. Sheikh Nasser had significant experience in government, including both diplomatic posts abroad and ministerial positions in previous governments.

Over time, a number of scandals engulfed Sheikh Nasser and members of the Council of Ministers in a near constant state of controversy. These scandals forced the Emir to dissolve the KNA in May 2006, March 2008, and March 2009. As protests spread throughout the region during the events of the Arab Spring, Sheikh Nasser's government was implicated in a graft scandal: allegedly, bribes had been paid to pro-government MPs in exchange for

their compliance in the KNA. Protests intensified in fall 2011, when a group of protesters and opposition MPs briefly entered and occupied the KNA. Two weeks later, Sheikh Nasser resigned.

TIMELINE

Sheikh Sabah's ascension as prime minister in 2003 marked a turning point in Kuwaiti politics. Since 1978, Sheikh Saad Al-Abdullah had served both as crown prince and as prime minister. Throughout his tenure as prime minister, Sheikh Saad was perceived as nearly untouchable. Having a crown prince also serve as prime minister meant that those who criticized the prime minister would in effect be criticizing a future Emir. Though there had been some previous discussion of separating the two positions, combining them insulated the ruling family (particularly the prime minister) from attacks in parliament. The deterioration of Sheikh Saad's health—and Sheikh Sabah's ascension as prime minister while Sheikh Saad was still crown prince—was without precedent. Sheikh Jaber's decision to separate the roles of crown prince and prime minister empowered a broad spectrum of opposition MPs, including Islamists, liberals, and populists, who could now criticize a possible candidate for Emir and the government he led as prime minister.

Sheikh Jaber's passing in 2006, as well as the subsequent succession crisis his death prompted, presented the KNA with its first major crisis since the liberation of Kuwait in 1991. Rumors spread quickly that Sheikh Saad would not be able to assume the role of Emir, due to his old age and deteriorating health. The speaker of parliament, Jassem Al-Kharafi, managed the crisis well, balancing rival ruling family claims to the throne against a parliament eager to assert its constitutional obligation to approve the new Emir. It seemed as if a crisis had been averted: Sheikh Saad became Emir, but he abdicated just as the KNA moved to replace him (Tétreault, 2006a; Tétreault, 2006b).

When Sheikh Sabah became Emir, he kept the roles of crown prince and prime minister separate, appointing his half-brother, Sheikh Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, and nephew, Sheikh Nasser, respectively. Though the dual transitions that brought Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad to power were relatively seamless, the early years of his rule were characterized by a series of political crises that appeared to gradually erode public support for the ruling family. Sheikh Jaber and Sheikh Saad were towering figures, having ruled the country for nearly 30 years. Sheikh Jaber's death and Sheikh Saad's abdication brought tensions within the ruling family into the open and strained relations between the Council of Ministers and the KNA.

These tensions became apparent less than four months after Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad's ascension, when legislators in the KNA—backed by Nabiha Khamsa [“We Want Five”], a popular, youth-led civil movement—demanded reform of the very electoral system Sheikh Jaber had introduced in 1981. In May 2006, Sheikh Sabah dissolved the National Assembly and called for early elections. The success of the Nabiha Khamsa movement exposed divisions among both the ruling family and members of Sheikh Nasser's government.

After Nabiha Khamsa, from 2006 to 2011, a number of crises crippled the government and galvanized opposition to the prime minister. By June 2011, MPs in the KNA had interpellated 11 ministers, forced six resignations of the Cabinet, and caused the dissolution of the legislature two more times, in May 2008 and May 2009 (Diwan, 2011a). It seemed as if the government was hobbling from crisis to crisis: allegations of corruption and government mismanagement were a near constant feature of Kuwaiti politics throughout Sheikh Nasser's five-year tenure.

CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS, STRATEGIES, AND TACTICS

The Irhal movement had much in common with its predecessor, Nabiha Khamsa. Nabiha Khamsa succeeded because a diverse group of young activists were able to use new technologies to form common cause with opposition MPs in furtherance of a clear, singular goal: an amendment of the electoral law that would reduce the number of electoral districts to five.

Irhal united several disparate youth movements in furtherance of yet another singular goal: the resignation of the prime minister. These movements included Kafi, Al-Sur Al-Khamis, Hirak, Hadam, Ma'ak, and Nihaj, among others. Throughout 2011, these movements staged a number of sit-ins across the country, organized various reform-themed symposia, and published various lists of demands. These demands ranged from the resignation of the prime minister and a commitment to holding new elections, to the establishment of a constitutional monarchy, whereby the KNA would exercise greater control over government policy. Though many of these movements mirrored popular youth movements that were emerging throughout the region, they drew heavily from existing activist networks that emerged after Nabiha Khamsa.

INFLUENCING FACTORS AND TRANSFORMATIVE MOMENTS

In early 2011, a number of protests led by Kuwait's stateless bidoun community received support from different members of the Kuwaiti opposition. As events elsewhere in the region heightened popular criticism of unelected regional governments, several MPs moved to interpellate three ministers who were members of the ruling family. A large sit-in demanding the resignation of the prime minister was held in early March. The government resigned less than a month later after opposition MPs presented requests to interpellate three ministers, all of whom were members of the ruling family. Despite the government's resignation, Nasser Al-Mohammad kept his position. As the protests continued,



members of the government were forced to resign yet again in June. This time, Sheikh Nasser's chief rival, Minister of Housing and Development Sheikh Ahmad Al-Fahed Al-Sabah, resigned. Yet again, Sheikh Nasser kept his post as prime minister.

Throughout the summer of 2011, as protests and calls for Sheikh Nasser's resignation grew, new allegations of a graft scandal implicated the prime minister directly. This was a transformative moment for the broader movement concerned with mobilizing Kuwaitis to support Sheikh Nasser's resignation. In August, media sources began reporting that Kuwait's two largest banks were investigating the deposit of 92 million USD into the accounts of two MPs (Diwan, 2011b). A month later, the public prosecutor opened an investigation into several similar transactions, whereby roughly \$350 million USD was transferred into the accounts of at least 16 MPs (Al Shayji 2011; Stack, 2011). It was later alleged that the funds were transferred to the overseas accounts of these MPs with the assistance of the foreign ministry. This allegation prompted Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammad Al-Salem Al-Sabah to resign, apparently in protest.

The scandal convinced many of the protesters—as well as the general public—that the prime minister needed to resign. Once the scandal implicated roughly a third of the KNA, the protesters expanded their demands to include a dissolution of the legislature itself. It became increasingly clear that both the prime minister and the pro-government MPs supporting him would not survive the crisis. Although a number of earlier scandals and protests provided a foundation for the Irhal movement, the movement itself did not secure broad public support until the scandal had transformed and amplified calls for Sheikh Nasser's removal.

On November 15, the government maneuvered to remove a request to interpellate Sheikh Nasser from the KNA's agenda in a private session. In response, on November 16, several opposition MPs and protestors entered the KNA and briefly occupied it. The protestors sang the Kuwaiti national anthem and left soon after. The Emir described “Black Wednesday” as an attack on Kuwait and demanded accountability for all those involved. Soon after, the KNA again moved to interpellate Sheikh Nasser, forcing his resignation.

POLICY OUTCOME

Soon after Sheikh Nasser resigned, Irhal claimed victory. The Irhal movement was seen as a success: it forced the resignation of an unpopular prime minister who many Kuwaitis perceived as corrupt. The movement mobilized a broad spectrum of Kuwaiti citizens, successfully called for a new prime minister, and brought disparate opposition movements together in furtherance of a common goal. In doing so, for the first time, it could claim that the ruling family succumbed to pressure for popular control over government policy: a rare event in any electoral authoritarian regime. In elections held soon after, in February 2012, opposition MPs won a majority of seats. Many of these new opposition MPs were themselves involved with Irhal.

Though Irhal's emphasis on Sheikh Nasser's resignation unified the movement, it did not seriously challenge the ruling family's ability to appoint government officials and set the government's policy agenda. Even though the Emir appointed a new prime minister, the government's underlying approach to the KNA did not change. Though graft, misuse of funds, and other forms of "political money" were scrutinized, the government developed new methods to secure compliance in the legislature and blunted the efficacy of parliamentary opposition by switching to an SNTV electoral system after the February 2012 legislature was itself dissolved after only four months.

In many cases, MPs and other movement leaders associated with Irhal exploited traditional cleavages—particularly tribal and sectarian—to mobilize citizens. The February 2012 elections were particularly tense, as rhetoric against different social groups intensified. Elected movement leaders did not help their cause by advocating for a range of particularly narrow causes once in the KNA. In May 2012, for example, the KNA passed an amendment to the penal code that called for the imposition of severe penalties—including death—for public blasphemy. A month later, the Emir rejected the law and the Constitutional Court dissolved the KNA. Support for the opposition dwindled: many Kuwaitis viewed these efforts as a step too far and unrelated to the underlying problems these MPs were elected to solve. To this day, parliamentary opposition remains weak.

CONCLUSION

Irhal was a popular movement that began in response to widespread government corruption. The movement's ability to unify disparate opposition groups, work with opposition MPs, and focus singularly on the resignation of the prime minister led to its success. Eventually, Sheikh Nasser resigned in the face of mass public pressure by citizens that had been mobilized by a cross-coalitional group of activists and MPs. For the first time, Kuwaitis could claim that they had forced the ruling family to remove a prime minister that had lost the confidence of his people. However, the unintended consequences of the movement's failure to push for deeper institutional reform, as well as the opposition's behavior in the KNA, led to the court's dissolution of the KNA and a subsequent change to the electoral law by Emiri Decree. Though the movement succeeded, in many ways, the opposition's errors encouraged a quick depletion of popular support for reform and a return to the status quo.



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BREAKING THE MOLD PROJECT

In mid-2018, the "Civil Society Actors and Policymaking in the Arab World" program at IFI, with the support of Open Society Foundations, launched the second round of its extended research project "Arab Civil Society Actors and their Quest to Influence Policy-Making". This project mapped and analyzed the attempts of Arab civil society, in all its orientations, structures, and differences, to influence public policy across a variety of domains. This research produced 92 case studies outlining the role of civil society in impacting political, social, economic, gender, educational, health-related, and environmental policies in ten Arab countries: Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Yemen, and the Arab Gulf.

Over two dozen researchers and research groups from the above countries participated in this project, which was conducted over a year and a half. The results were reviewed by an advisory committee for methodology to ensure alignment with the project's goals, and were presented by the researchers in various themed sessions over the course of the two days.

THE CIVIL SOCIETY ACTORS AND POLICY-MAKING PROGRAM

at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, examines the role that civil society actors play in shaping and making policy. Specifically, the program focuses on the following aspects: how civil society actors organize themselves into advocacy coalitions; how policy networks are formed to influence policy processes and outcomes; and how policy research institutes contribute their research into policy. The program also explores the media's expanding role, which some claim has catalyzed the Uprisings throughout the region.

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