Kuwait's Democratic Experiment: Roots, Reality, Characteristics, Challenges, and the Prospects for the Future

Mohammad Torki Bani SALAMEH & Mohammad Kanoush AL-SHARAH ①

(Department of Political Science, Yarmouk University & Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan)

Abstract: *This study aims to shed light on the Kuwaiti democratic experiment by reviewing its historical stages from the establishment of the state, until the present; its most prominent characteristics, the central role of political leadership; major political, economic, social and cultural challenges; proposals to address these challenges and finally predictions in light of local, regional, and international variables. The study then concludes with an evaluation of this pioneering experience and its potential development and progress.*
Key Words: *Challenges; Democratic Experiment; Kuwait; Gulf Studies*

I. Introduction

Kuwait has the longest modern history of political participation in the Middle East, being one of the first Arab Gulf states. Historically, a council of the most powerful tribes in the city-state chose the Al-Sabah family for an individual leadership role rather than having rule imposed on the Kuwaiti people by force. The government was based on consultation, consensus, and cooperation between business families

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① Dr. Mohammad Torki Bani Salameh, Department of Political Science, Yarmouk University; Dr.Mohammad Kanoush Al-sharah, Acting Dean of Students Affairs, Al-Zaytoonah University of Jordan.

and the ruling family. The business families provided financial support for the system as well as income and goods for Kuwait's economy. The limited number of people involved in this relationship helped to create a close relationship between the ruling family and the Kuwaiti society. As a result, there was a popular consensus on the rule of Al-Sabah family.

The earliest beginnings of the democratic process in Kuwait were instituted in 1938, when the first legislature in the history of the country was elected. The independence of the country in 1961 began the march of democracy in a more modern sense based on the existence of political institutions and the adoption of a contractual Constitution. It emphasized that people be the source of power, espoused the principle of separation of powers, and identified the relationship between the authorities and their respective roles. Under the new Constitution, people elect representatives to fifty seats in a legislature titled the National Assembly. The Amir is given broad powers including: ability to suspend the Constitution, dissolve parliament, and participate in the legislation as the ultimate decider on legislation.

Due to a shift in economic power towards a self-reliant government, political life in Kuwait experienced a growing conflict between the ruling family and parliament, prompting the Amir to dissolve the parliament more than once, as happened in the years 1976, 1986, 1999, 2006, 2008, and recently in 2009. The strained relationship between parliament and government can only be interpreted as an immature experience of democracy in Kuwait.

On occasion, the Parliament played a detrimental role toward democratic reforms; the most prominent example being a refusal to grant political rights to women including the abilities to vote and stand for elections. The government also bears a large part of responsibility for the lack of democratic progress. The Amir's government does not always accept or play by the rules of democracy. The government does not wish to be questioned or held accountable to the Parliament and resorts to the dissolution of Parliament to escape serious efforts to develop democratic reform in this area. Despite this,

Kuwait leads the Gulf in particular and the Arab World in general in democratic development. Holding periodic and free elections since 1992, the political opposition in Kuwait has shown to be an active and effective force introducing political reforms whether accepted by the government or not. The Kuwaiti political system has proved flexible enough to accommodate the opposition into the political process. This stands far from the methods of repression and exclusion prevailing in the most Arab countries.

The spread of education, development of media, growing awareness of the concepts of democracy, citizenship, and human rights have paved the way for further political reforms. The most visible manifestation of such developments was the successful campaign to grant political rights to women in 2007.

This study observes that the role of the Amir remains essential to the system and the evolution of the democratic experience in Kuwait. The Amir has broad powers and the state still plays a key role in economic activity. Extending from this, we can say that democracy in Kuwait still faces a number of obstacles and challenges.

This study attempts to present the historical development of the Kuwaiti democratic experiment, discuss its most prominent characteristics, highlight the challenges it faces, and make some proposals and recommendations to strengthen the democratic process. Finally, the study will look to the future of the Kuwaiti democratic experience in the light of local, regional and international developments.

II. Historical Background

Kuwait was established in the seventeenth century by a group of tribes that migrated from the Arabian Peninsula and settled in the region of Kuwait. In the beginning, relations in the new society were organized in a way similar to a social contract. The ruler was voluntarily selected from the Al-Sabah family to undertake the responsibility and burdens of governance. The people will be responsible for production and supporting the ruling institution

financially, personally, and politically. That legacy of joint governance endured before the discovery of oil. The state had to rely on economic activities linked to the sea, such as the pearl industry, shipbuilding and trade. [①]There is no doubt that the work of Kuwaitis in trade exposed them to democratic experiments in other countries, especially India (Jamal, 2007: 92).

This unwritten agreement has resulted in a type of joint governance involving mutual understanding between the ruler, "the Sabah family" and the ruled, "The Kuwaiti Society". It seems this agreement later had an impact on the nature, characteristics, and qualities of the people, who are loyal to the Amir and submit to his rule, and the ruler, who responds to the wishes and aspirations of the people and works to take care of their interests. Therefore, we find that the rule was not imposed by force but by mutual consent and agreement; and that the government is based on consultation where the ruler does not enjoy absolute power.

Thus, a concept of historical legitimacy was established for the Sabah family as a ruling family in Kuwait. Over the years, power was transmitted traditionally among the members of the Al-Sabah family. This style of governance continued until 1899, when the ruler of Kuwait signed a secret agreement with Britain and Kuwait became a British protectorate (Al-Najjar, 11). The agreement altered the balance of power in Kuwait, shifting from joint rule to an authoritarian style of government supported by an external force in the form of Britain. Considered a departure from the principles of joint rule, the decision led to widespread dissatisfaction among influential families in the country, particularly the merchant class. These feelings led to what is known as the events of 1921, which represents a starting point in the march of the Kuwaiti democratic experiment where protesters called for a written Constitution (Al-Najjar, 14).

[①] For background information on the early history of Kuwait, see M.A. Abu-Hakima, *History of Eastern Arabia 1750-1800*,*The Rise and Development of Bahrain and Kuwait*, Beirut: Khayat, 1965; Jacqueline Ismael, *Kuwait: Social Change in Historical Perspective*, NY: Syracuse, 1982; and Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

III. The Development of the Kuwaiti Democratic Experiment

Despite the long history of experience of joint governance in Kuwait dating back to the 18th century, a popular desire for Kuwaitis to participate in government in an institutionalized form found a voice in 1921 and remained vocal until independence in 1961. A struggle for democracy continued in the subsequent years but results were different depending on the local and regional circumstances and variables. This process can be reviewed in three basic stages:

1)The First Phase from 1921 to 1960: Joint Governance

The events in 1921 are a starting point for the march toward the Kuwaiti democratic experiment. Kuwait witnessed in that period political chaos because of differences between members of the royal family. This led dignitaries to appeal to the ruling family, demanding an end to internal conflicts and to name one member of the ruling family as a prince for the country. A second demand included the formation of an advisory board in which citizens participate in decision-making process and management of the country based on justice and equality. The ruling family responded to the appeal and Sheikh Ahmad al-Jaber was named the ruler of the country. The first advisory council in the country's history, named Shura Council was also formed and consisted of 12 appointed members. The council stressed that the people are the source of authority and that the Shura Council alone has the right to legislate, and all treaties and concessions are null and void if not ratified by it. However, soon the council began to question the privileges of oil awarded by Al-Sabah to the British, prompting the British backed Amir to dissolve the Council (Salim, 2006: 5).

In spite of the limited powers of the first Shura Council and its short duration, the importance of the events is not diminished for the following reasons : (Jamal, 2007: 97)

1. It reveals the early political awareness of Kuwaiti society and their belief in democratic principles as well as the people as the source

of authority. These principles remained vivid in the minds of the people until independence in 1961 and the formulation and promulgation of the Constitution.

2. The response of the Amir to the demands of the people and his faith in people's right to participation in and dialogue about the management of the country reveals his liberal tendencies.

3. It shows the awareness and influence of traders as an influential group in the political life in Kuwait.

4. It revealed Britain's role in anti-democratic governance when it conflicts with its interests as is demonstrated by the dissolution of the Council under pressure from Britain which was once viewed as the "the Dean of the Western Democracies".

In the subsequent years, public demand and political struggle continued. A second attempt at a consultative council was in 1938, when a Constitution was promulgated and another Shura Council was formed. However, it was also dissolved after a mere six months. The dissolution was accompanied by incidents of violence not seen in Kuwait before. The attempt was more mature than the one in 1921 and was linked to external factors including events in Palestine, attempts of the Kuwaiti people to support the Palestinian uprising, and an Iraqi factor. This factor consisted of a royal parliamentary political system referred to as a model system of governance for Kuwait by many of its intellectuals who had been educated in Iraq and exposed to the Iraqi democratic experiment (Al-Najjar, 24-28).

Afterward, Kuwait witnessed a period of relative calm especially during the Second World War (1939-1944) and this political stability continued until 1950. In the early 1950sKuwait witnessed growing political activity with nationalism playing a major role in these activities. The largest manifestations of political activity included the emergence of civil society institutions such as clubs, professional associations, petitions by the people, and the use of political pamphleteering as a means to express discontent with the general situation in the country. These events prompted the Amir to return to a principle of election for some government boards such as municipalities and boards of education. Rather than leading to greater

political openness, and strengthening of trends in institutional reform, the return to elections resulted in a faltering, unsteady, and retreating democratic process. The reaction of the government towards political activities was to close clubs, stop the issuance of the press, and to continue restrictions on political life until the declaration of independence in 1961 (Al-Najjar, 55).

2)The Second Phase 1961-1990: The Constitutional Emirate

In response to the declaration of independence of Kuwait as a sovereign state, Iraqi President Abdul Karim Kassem declared Kuwaiti dependency to Iraq and invalidity of its independence. However, pressure from influential Arabs such as Abdel Nasser and international support, by Britain in particular, led to the end of the crisis. The impact of the Iraqi threat to Kuwait continued in subsequent years, particularly with regard to the growth of democracy (Shwadran, 1966).

After independence, Kuwait announced that it would adopt a parliamentary system. The government called for a general election to elect a constituent assembly whose essential task was to create a new Constitution. Several factors that prompted the ruling family in Kuwait to introduce a semi-parliamentary system are as follows:

1. Enthusiastic merchant class pressures for genuine political reform and the adoption of some form of parliamentary rule.

2. Popular support won by the governor during the crisis of independence because of the Iraqi threat.

3. Positive development of the relationship between the ruler and the political forces who claim popular participation (Al-Najjar, 66).

After the elections, a committee was formed to draft the Constitution. During the process Amir Abdullah al-Sabah played a conciliatory role between the various elements within the constituent assembly in general, and within the Constitutional drafting committee in particular. He crafted many compromises that were the subject of criticism in some circles of the ruling family. This critical role played by the Amir is acknowledged through his title "The Father of The Constitution". The constituent Assembly approved and the Amir ratified the Constitution in 1962, which is now the oldest Constitution

in the Gulf. The most prominent features of the Kuwaiti Constitution are as follows: (*Constitution of Kuwait*)

1. The Constitution stipulates that the throne of the Emirate is hereditary in the Al-Sabah family (Article 4), the Amir is not responsible for any liability or not subject to any political accountability (Article 54), and the Amir chooses his heir, who must gain the approval of Parliament.

2. The Constitution states that the regime in Kuwait shall be democratic, and that sovereignty belongs to the nation, which is the source of authority (Article 6), where the people choose their representatives in accordance with regular free and fair elections.

3. The Constitution emphasizes the principles of equal rights without discrimination because of sex, origin, language or religion (Article 29).

4. The Constitution guarantees many political, economic, social and civil rights and liberties to the citizens. Besides the right to vote, personal liberties are organized in Articles 30.31, 32, 33.34, 35, freedom of expression in Article 36, freedom of the press and media in article 37, freedom of communication in Article 39, and the rights of education and work in articles 40 and 41 respectively.

5. Article (43) declares the freedoms of association and trade unions without the inclusion of a provision on the freedom to form political parties.

6. Article (50) explicitly declares the principle of the separation of powers.

7. The National Assembly has the power of control and accountability of the executive power under articles 98, 99, 100, 101, but with some exceptions. Unlike the parliamentary regimes, the Constitution did not give the Parliament the power to overthrow the ministry as a whole while giving the Council the power to withhold confidence from the ministers on an individual basis. However, under Article (102) the Council can declare non-cooperation with the Prime Ministry, which leaves the matter to the Amir to settle either through the dissolution of parliament, or re-formation of the government. In this case, the Amir is to judge, and decide, as he deems appropriate to

the interests of the country.

8. Under the Constitution, the right of the Amir for the dissolution of the Council is restricted. The dissolution of the Council is not allowed twice for the same reason, and new elections are required no later than two months from the date of dissolution or full Constitutional powers are restored to the dissolved assembly.

It appears from the most prominent features of the Constitution that the Kuwaiti system is a combination of parliamentary and presidential rule, with a tendency toward a parliamentary system. The Kuwaiti Constitution, which incorporates many of the theoretical principles of democracy, is one of the best Arab constitutions. It is certainly the best among the constitutions of the Gulf States. However, while theoretical principles and constitutional provisions are one thing, real practice is something entirely different. This is seen clearly when reviewing the democratic process in Kuwait since the issuance of the Constitution in 1962.

After the promulgation of the Constitution, the first elections were held to choose the National Assembly's 50 members. The Council exercised its role normally until 1964, when a new government was formed and the participation of some ministers in the government was considered in contravention of Article (131) of the Constitution (Jamal, 2007: 173) while other ministers were accused of corruption. This prompted the Prime Minister to ask the Amir to dissolve the Council, but the Amir refused and ordered the Prime Minister to form a new government and to take the views of the Council into consideration. It is worth mentioning that both all the members of the royal family and the opposition respected the Amir of Kuwait, Sheikh Abdullah Al Salem Al Sabah. He played the role of a safety valve between members of the royal family, who opposed the existence of the National Assembly and other political forces, and thus played a prominent role in the stability of the political system (Salim, 2006: 6).

In other words, it is clear that Sheikh Abdullah al-Sabah was a true believer in the principles of democracy and participation in government between the ruling family and the community. However, his successors, Sheikh Sabah Al-Salem (1967-1975) and Sheikh Jaber

al-Sabah (1975-2006) were not inclined to constitutional and parliamentary principles, which will be detailed later in this article.

After the death of Sheikh Abdullah, Kuwait witnessed many political events between 1966 and 1970. Among these events were the dissolution of municipal councils, the dissolution of the Parliament, and the holding of new elections, which were marred by irregularities, forgery, and government intervention in favor of some candidates. In 1971, the opposition was well represented in a new election. Shortly afterward, the 1973 Arab-Israeli war impacted politics and economies in the region leading to high oil prices and subsequently a decline of the democratic process. An increase in oil production allowed the Kuwaiti government to free itself from dependence on traders for financial support and the oil provided the government with the opportunity to achieve greater economic prosperity for its society. This came at the expense of political openness, and the government did not hesitate to dissolve Parliament and suspend the Constitution. This supports some arguments that the ownership of oil resources can hinder democracy (Ross, 2001: 325-361).

In 1975, elections were held for a new Council that was dissolved in 1976. Prominent regional circumstances had caused a retreat in the democratic process where events such as the civil war in Lebanon led to fear that democracy in Kuwait might lead to chaos and a coup d'état (Al-Najar, 99-100).

In 1981, new elections were held in which all political forces in Kuwait (traders, tribes, pro-government elements, the Shiites, and Islamic groups) were allowed to participate. In this election, elements of the pro-government movement won and the opposition lost, while sectarian, ethnic, and tribal dimensions emerged. The Iranian Revolution in 1979 and the Iraq-Iran war (1980-1988) had a clear impact in fueling the sectarian dimension (Al-Najar, 117-118).

The Council continued until 1985 when new elections were held, and some opposition members managed to return to Parliament, but the Council was dissolved again in 1986 for similar reasons to dissolution of the Council in 1976. The Parliament remained absent until 1989 when the government responded to demands to return to

parliamentary life. An interim representative council named the National Council was formed in a way that brought together both appointed and the elected leaders. Despite motions toward democracy, the National Council was interrupted and ceased to work in 1990 due to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait (Assiri, 1994).

3) TheThird Phase 1991-2010: Restricted Democracy

The Iraqi-Kuwaiti crisis began in the summer of 1990 with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. The crisis ended a year later with the defeat of Iraq and the liberation of Kuwait. The Iraqi occupation and the events that followed formed an important turning point in the political life in Kuwait.

During the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait, a conference was held in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia in the presence of a group of prominent Kuwaiti nationals and a number of members of the royal family. The participants agreed at the conference to renew their support for al-Sabah as a ruling family for the country, in exchange for a commitment by the ruling family to constitutionalism including the return of parliamentary life (Ibrahim, 2006). This agreement was more like a renewal of the old political contract between the ruler and the ruled. It is worth mentioning that during the Iraqi occupation of Kuwait the political opposition emerged and played a role in the resistance. Because of its activity in the resistance, the political opposition became more acceptable to the Kuwaiti people and to the ruling family after liberation.

The Amir responded to popular demands for elections, which were held on schedule in 1992. The opposition gained representation in Parliament, allowing them the opportunity to participate in forming the government. This led to many achievements such as the cancellation of the State Security Court as a violation of the Constitution, the opening of files for officials involved in issues of corruption including the former oil minister of the Sabah royal family, and finally the appointment of a woman as the president of the University of Kuwait. These achievements are attributed to the opposition and they resulted in the strengthening of the growth of the democratic experience in Kuwait (Elhinny, 2006).

The democratic process in Kuwait continued to move forward with parliamentary elections being held in 1996, 1999, 2003, 2006, 2008 and 2009. The most prominent features of the period from 1999 to 2009 were a series of recurring crises between the Parliament and the government, which typically ended in the dissolution of Parliament or dismissal of the government.

In 1999, The Amir announced the dissolution of Parliament for the third time since its inception in 1962. The election period was short with accusations of government intervention in the election in favor of some candidates.

In 2003, the new elections, fairer than previous elections, were held. However, in 2006 the Parliament was dissolved again and there was a call for new elections. Since 2006, Kuwait has witnessed strong parliamentary clashes between the Council and the government including votes of no confidence and the questioning of ministers. This led to the instability of both the government and the Parliament, and political life suffered from paralysis or disability.

In 2006, the Amir Sheikh Jaber Al-Sabah died, and the country entered what looked like a political succession crisis after the failure of Sheikh Saad to take power. The P]arliament played a decisive role in resolving the crisis with the removal of Sheikh Saad and the Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah was chosen to head the country. This new precedent in the history of Kuwait enhanced the role of the Council in political life in the country (Ibrahim, 2006: 1).

Among the political developments in Kuwait in 2006, was the challenge of the constitutionality of the law, which prohibits gatherings and public meetings. The court ruled the law unconstitutional, which encouraged the opposition to demand expanded political reform and to amend the electoral law to reduce the number of constituencies from 25 to five in order to reduce or remove a number of negative phenomena such as vote-buying and unfair regional representation. The government proposed a compromise of 10 districts but the opposition refused, prompting the Amir to dissolve Parliament and hold new elections under the existing law with 25 constituencies. The elections witnessed by Kuwait in 2006

were unprecedented in the history of the country. It was the first election in which Kuwaiti women were allowed to both vote and to stand as candidates. Despite accounting for 57% of voters, none of the 28 women candidates won a seat in Parliament. It seemed that Kuwaiti society was not yet ripe to allow women to join the Council (Ibrahim, 2006: 3).

The results of the elections benefited the opposition, prompting the government to agree to amend the law and accept the principle of the five constituencies. This led to major changes in the electoral system, and the government responded to pressures of the Council on a number of issues, including those related to corruption and freedom of information (Salim, 2006: 10).

The relationship between the Parliament and the government entered into a new stage of crisis at the end of 2007 in the form of political escalation, which led to dissolution of Parliament. In 2008, new elections were held and 28 women ran again, but none gained membership of the Council through election. However, three women were appointed as members of the Council of Ministers and by virtue of their jobs they became members of the Council of the Nation.

Finally, the Council was dissolved and new elections were held again in 2009. The most prominent results of those elections were the arrival of three women to the National Assembly and the declining popularity of Islamic groups in the Council but there is no guarantee that the Council will not be dissolved before the end of its term in 2013.

Given this political history of Kuwait, there is no doubt that the next elections in 2013 will have important implications for the future of political and democratic development.

IV. Characteristics of Kuwait's Democratic Experiment

A number of things characterize Kuwait's democratic experiment. Some are shared with the rest of the Arab Gulf states and third world countries, while others exist almost exclusively in Kuwait as an experiment of a special character. Perhaps the most distinguishing

features of Kuwait's democratic experiment are as follows:

1. The nobility and authenticity of the experiment dating its beginnings to the eighteenth century. Early political consciousness of the Kuwaiti political society of the virtues and benefits of democratic governance encouraged political struggle, to seek institutionalization of the governance through the popular demands, and to participate in government by elected councils or the so-called legacy of joint rule. The Constitution lays the foundations for a quasi-parliamentary system; the Constitution was based on a number of principles and provisions that emphasize the values of freedom, democracy and respect for human rights. Throughout modern history, the Kuwaiti people showed a genuine desire for political participation and reform and faith in the virtues of democracy.

2. The central role of the leadership of the Amir to lead and strengthen the democratic process. Historically, a number of rulers of the Al Sabah family played prominent roles in the leadership and strengthening of the democratic process, whether by responding to popular demands, or reconciling the conflicting interests of the ruling family and political forces, or the provision of political initiatives such as granting women their political rights. The ruling family in Kuwait is the most important player in the political system; they constitute a safety valve for the state and a source of stability to a society where there is consensus on the legitimacy of the ruling family and there is no alternative for it in the Kuwaiti society.

3. The openness of the political opposition and the belief in the role and importance of the opposition as a safety valve and a political necessity as long as it respects the rules of the political game. The vital role played by the opposition in Kuwait's political system is different from the reality of the opposition in all Arab world countries where opposition suffers from exclusion and marginalization and accusations of treason.

4. Lack of political participation and low voter turnout. When the first elections were held in 1920, they were attended by only a handful of dignitaries. Participation has expanded gradually in subsequent years, although it included only a majority of Kuwaiti males over the

age of 21 until 2006 when women gained the right to vote and stand for elections. However, there remains exclusion for a large number of male citizens who have recently received citizenship, in addition to approximately 100,000 stateless people (Bedoon).

5. The ability of the democratic experiment to further progress and development.   The experiment, which began with the legacy of joint governance and culminated in the current Constitution, is today at the forefront of the successful democratic experience in the Arabian Gulf in particular and the Arab world in general. Today, Kuwait has the strongest parliament in the Arab region, in spite of tense relations between the Parliament and government and dissolution of Parliament more than five times since 1962. The Kuwaiti Parliament has strong constitutional powers and Kuwait is a model of democratic transformation in the Arab Gulf states.

6. The legitimacy of the regime. Legitimacy is a fundamental issue for any political system as embodying the exercise of power based on popular consent. The Al-Sabah family has enjoyed this legitimacy under the unwritten social contract since the establishment of the State in the eighteenth century and until the Iraqi occupation in 1990. After the removal of the occupation, the commitment of the re-legitimized royal family to the Constitution was reinforced with the resumption of the democratic process and the return of parliamentary life.

7. The predominance of the peaceful nature of democratic and political reform in Kuwait. Whether from the political opposition, or political associations and forces, or to the response of the ruling family to the popular demands, the Kuwaiti experience stands far away from the violence, militancy, arrests, and exile that exist in most Arab countries.

V. The Challenges Facing Kuwaiti Democracy

The Kuwaiti democratic experiment, like many experiences of democracy in the Arab and third world, is still restricted and incomplete. It is to be expected that this experiment faces many political, economic, social and cultural challenges and obstacles.

Domestic as well as external challenges imposed by the regional and international conditions may work to impede the growth of democracy in Kuwait and thus lead to a pause or even a retreat. The main challenges and obstacles may be summarized as follows:

1. Differences within the ruling family: particularly in the wake of the crisis of political succession that broke out between sub-Jaber and Al Salem in the Al-Sabah family in 2006. These differences became known to all Kuwaiti people and made the royal family subject to criticism from the Kuwaiti society.

2. The instability of the regional environment: Kuwait is neighbored by larger countries that have differences with Kuwait, especially Iraq and Iran. This is the biggest challenge to the democratic experience in Kuwait. The forementioned states have a history of hostility toward this small and rich country. Iraq and Iran often tried to influence and interfere in the internal affairs of Kuwait. The Iraqi occupation of Kuwait in the past, and the arrest of a network of Iranian spies recently is the best proof that the security and stability of Kuwait is the biggest challenge facing the democratic experiment in that country, thus pushing the political leadership of Kuwait to accept the permanent presence of American military bases.[1]

3. Lack of democratic political culture. The most prominent feature of the democratic system of Kuwait is the elections, whether municipal or parliamentary. Elections require competition for votes, forcing the candidates to resort to often non-democratic practices, values, and institutions in order to obtain votes, such as vote buying (Ibrahim, 2006: 2) and the use of traditional tribal, ethnic, and religious structures. Kuwaiti society suffers from sectarian division of Sunnis and Shiites, and with neighboring Iran, the sectarian considerations stand out dramatically where Shiites believe that Iranian influence in the region represents a historic opportunity for political gain

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[1] There is a substantial literature on the security challenges, facing Gulf States, see for example Gawat Bahgat, "Military Security and Political Stability in the Gulf", *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Fall 1995), and Vahn Zanoyan, "After Oil Boom: The Holiday Ends in the Gulf", *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 74, No. 6, (Nov-Dec. 1995).

long-denied in the past (Brown, 2009: 6). On the other hand, the Sunni groups fear the Iranian influence and expansion, particularly with the weak government in Iraq, which used to counterbalance Iran's influence. In addition, Kuwaiti society is divided into urban, and rural or Bedouin populations, with the Bedouins consisting of 65% of the population. Many Bedouin political and social relations are still impacted by tribal life.[①] It is evident that exacerbated sectarian dimensions contrast with the values and culture of democracy, which emphasizes citizenship, participation and loyalty to the state; away from sectarian and religious considerations and other sub-loyalties.

4. Economic challenges: the political development in Kuwait is unmatched by the development of the economy. Kuwait is advanced politically and stumbling in economy and development. It is still mainly dependent on oil, and has been unable to diversify sources of income in order to lift its dependence on oil as the sole source of income. Ninety five percent of the workforce is employed by the state, and state controls on the economy leads to the control of the society (Kuwait Ministry of Planning, 1997: 32). Thus, there is a general feeling prevailing in Kuwait that any problem in Kuwait could be solved with money (Ibrahim, 2006: 41). The most prominent manifestation of the economic challenges is that Kuwait became a risk for investment because of non-political stability. Kuwaiti investments abroad are more active and prosperous than Kuwaiti investment at home, and so democracy in Kuwait became an impediment to economic growth (Abdullah, 2007).

5. Absence of political parties and the weakness of civil society: the institutions of civil society, especially the political parties are the backbone of democracy; one cannot imagine a mature or complete

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[①] A number of works have been written on the structural problems affecting the development of democracy in Kuwait and the Gulf States in general, see for instance, Joseph Kostiner, *Middle East Monarchies: The Challenge of Modernity* (Boulder and London 2000); Michael Herb, "Emirs and Parliaments in the Gulf", Journal of Democracy, Vol. 13, No. 4 (October – 2002); and Shafeeq Ghabra, "Kuwait and the Dynamics of Socio-Economic Change", *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Summer 1997).

democracy in the absence or weakness of civil society, particularly political parties. The Kuwaiti Constitution has not banned political parties but does not permit their establishment. Therefore, the vacuum left by the absence of political parties is filled by resorting to other alternatives such as tribalism, which does not help to foster a culture of democracy and thus the growth and development of the democratic experiment.

6. The empowerment of women: Kuwaiti society, like many communities of the Gulf remains patriarchal and conservative. Women have remained politically marginalized and unable to participate in the political life until 2006. However, it was not until the elections of 2009 that any female candidates joined the National Council. These facts demonstrate the vulnerability of women's political participation in Kuwait, which is due to cultural and social constraints that hinder women's political participation.[1]

7. The problem of stateless people (Bedoon) and expatriates: Based on the reports of international organizations concerned with human rights, such as Human Rights Watch and the Human Rights Council of the United Nations, the record of Kuwait shows a lack of respect for human rights particularly in regards to citizenship for stateless persons "Bedoon" and expatriates. The population of stateless persons is estimated at about 120,000 citizens, and is the most marginalized group in Kuwaiti society. They suffer from a clear discrimination where they are unable to obtain government documents such as a marriage or birth certificate, passport, or work with government; making it difficult to own real estate or to found a family legally. [2]

As for expatriates, the group most vulnerable to human rights

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[1] For more information about women's political struggle in Kuwait, see for example Nouriah al-Sudani, The Historical March for Kuwait Women's Political Rights: for the period between 1971-1982, (Dar al-Siyash: Kuwait, 1983); and Haya Abdulrahman Al-Mughni, "The Politics of Women' suffrage in Kuwait", *Arab Reform Bulletin*, Vol. 2, issue 7, (July 2004).

[2] For studies and information about the status of human rights in Kuwait, see for example, *The Bedoons in Kuwait: Citizens without Citizenship*, New York: Human Rights Watch (Middle East), 1995; *Kuwait: Five Years of Impunity: Human Rights Concerns Since the Withdrawal of Iraqi Forces*, London Amnesty International, 1996.

violations is a class of migrant domestic workers. There are more than 660,000 expatriate workers in Kuwait, many of whom suffer from abuse and non-compliance with the terms of the employment contract on a large scale. Kuwaiti newspapers speak of cases of suicide almost daily for some migrant workers.

Not all of these challenges are intractable. Solutions may be found for some of these critical challenges, or to mitigate the effects of others. A political vision committed to the democratic path and the values of citizenship, freedom, loyalty to the state, respect for the Constitution, and faith in the values of justice, dialogue, tolerance, renouncement of violence, extremism, and subsidiary tribal, ethnic and religious loyalties needs to be adopted. Perhaps the following proposals can contribute to solving the above-mentioned challenges, and work to enhance and strengthen the democratic process in Kuwait:

1. An end to the differences between the members of the royal family. The differences between members of the royal family are normal, but these differences must be addressed in a manner consistent with the provisions of the Constitution and the traditions of Kuwaiti society. These differences should not be at the expense of society and the state.

2. Strengthening democratic culture through the institutions of political socialization, starting with the family, educational institutions, and the rest of institutions in the society. Through the emphasis on democratic values such as participation, pluralism, the rule of law, renouncement of intellectual and material violence and extremism, and emphasizing a culture of respect for human rights.

3. Supporting and encouraging the institutions of civil society, particularly political parties, there is some accurate correlation between civil society and democracy. There is no doubt that a free and vital civil society will play a prominent role in strengthening the democratic process. This needs to review the Constitution and the legislation governing political action to allow the establishment of political parties as one of the most important institutions of civil society that can replace the traditional structures and institutions that impede democracy.

4. Radical economic reforms: Reduce economic dependence on oil and search for alternative sources of income. Encourage investment and create an environment attractive to investment in order to expand the role of the private sector in the economy and move away from the concept of the reinter state (Luciani, 1990). Finally, reduce military spending.

5. Empowerment of women: the Kuwaiti society cannot move forward with half of it marginalized and isolated. This requires legislation to increase the representation of women and strengthen their presence in political institutions. A quota system as an interim measure to ensure the presence of women in elected assemblies is one of the means that can be used in this area. This will require work to change the cultural and societal habits and values that hinder women's participation in political action.

6. Solving the problem of stateless people (Bedoon) and expatriates: The stateless people are persons who are residents living in Kuwait since the founding of the state but failed or did not attempt to obtain citizenship in a timely manner and cannot now apply for citizenship. In light of the democratic approach adopted by Kuwait and its commitment to the principles of human rights, it is necessary to solve the problem of (Bedoon) and reintegrate them into the society. For expats, in particular the rights of domestic workers, Kuwait, which considers itself a leader in the field of respect for human rights must protect the rights of domestic workers and the application of labor contracts and punish violators, is necessary if Kuwait is to clean its record in this regard.

VI. The Prospects for the Future of Democracy in Kuwait

The future of Kuwait's democratic experiment depends largely on its ability to face internal, regional, and international challenges. At the internal level, Kuwait is facing serious political, economic, and social challenges, and it needs to take decisive actions. It is imperative to bridge the differences among the ruling family, strengthen the foundations of cooperation between the executive and legislative

branches, spread a culture of political democracy, strengthen the role of civil society, and activatie the institutions and policies of anti-corruption. It is significant that the responsibility to address these issues does not lie with one entity, but jointly with state institutions, society, and the forces and elements of democracy.

There is no doubt that there are developments on the domestic level that may lead to strengthening the democratic process in Kuwait, including the emergence of the middle class as a result of policies pursued by the state in education, health, housing, employment, and social welfare. This has become one of the pillars of the democratic process and a main force driving political reform in light of the problems faced by the rentier state and its inability to continue its role in the purchase of silence of the citizen through its gifts, privileges, and facilities. It is now imperative to implement radical political reforms to address the economic problems on the one hand and to respond to the demands of the forces of reform and enhance the legitimacy of the political system on the other (Ai-Najjar, 2000).

In general, at the domestic level, the experience of Kuwaiti democracy is suited to achieve more success and progress as the Kuwaiti political system enjoys many political advantages such as its openness and stable political institutions especially the Constitution which had not been modified since five decades (Brown, 2009: 6). These circumstances have led to advance the democratic process in Kuwait's steps forward, as represented in a number of features, including: major reforms in the electoral system, subjecting members of the government and ruling family to interrogation, women's suffrage, the existence of a large margin of freedom of the press, and positive and vital role of the opposition. All of these lead to optimism about the future of the democratic experiment. However, optimism has its limits since it is not likely that Kuwait will become a constitutional monarchy in the future.

At the regional level, Kuwait is located within an unstable region, which has witnessed three major wars during the last three decades: the Iran-Iraq War, the first Gulf War, and the US/UK occupation of Iraq. There are also some prospects of a fourth war between Iran and

the United States of America. Under these circumstances, the priority will be political stability and security, as the absence of stability is an obstructing factor for political reform and democratic development. The most serious threat to Kuwait is instability in the region, the future of the situations in Iraq, Iran, and Palestine will have a great impact on the Kuwaiti democratic experience and the future of democracy in the Gulf and the Arab world in general. In the short and medium term, the deteriorating security situation has a potential to affect negatively the growth of democracy in Kuwait.

There is no doubt that the stability of the region and the success of the Kuwaiti democratic experience will have positive effects on the growth of democracy in the Arabian Gulf in particular and the Arab world in general. In the past decades, Kuwait held the role of an ideal example for some Gulf States. For example, the formulation of the Bahraini Constitution of 1973 was modeled along the lines of the Kuwaiti Constitution. Moreover, by avoiding the specter of war, Kuwaiti democracy will bring to the Gulf and Arab world a strong example (Brown, 2009: 9).

At the international level, the international environment is now more favorable than any time in the past towards a more democratic transformation in the Gulf in general and the Arab world in particular. This will positively reflect on the future of the Kuwaiti democratic experience. In the past, as a result of Cold War considerations, and in the process of a search for allies, The United States and Western countries turned a blind eye to issues of democracy and human rights principles in friendly countries (Al-Khateeb, 2005). With the end of the Cold War, Western powers led by the United States began to criticize sharply a number of Arab countries against the background of political reform and human rights. The pace of political reform accelerated following the 9/11 events, where the United States recognized that the absence of democracy in the Arab and Muslim world has contributed to creating an enabling environment for the growth of terrorist groups which attacked the United States on September 11, 2001. The United States began demanding countries in the region to take serious steps on the road to democracy and has

made many initiatives in this area (Ottaway, 2003).

However, the United States faces the problem of balancing between its interests in the region of oil access, military presence, maintenance of security and stability, and promoting democracy and respect for human rights. As such, we find that the US role in promoting democratization in the Arab Gulf including Kuwait is a secondary role. Moreover, the United States in the era of Obama is occupied in hot spots in Iraq, Palestine, Afghanistan and Iran.

At the international level, there are other developments that have implications for the future of Kuwait's democratic experience. For example, globalization and the information and communication revolution that provides independent sources of information for people have positive effects on the Gulf countries including Kuwait. Citizens have access to the modern communication tools of the satellite channels and Internet. Finally, the prevalence of the values of democracy and human rights in light of what Samuel P. Huntington called the third wave of democratization as democracy has achieved a historic victory and has become the only system of government which enjoys legitimacy at the global level (Diamond, 2003).

In general, internal factors are critical in the evolution of Kuwait's democratic experience while the role of international and regional factors is secondary. It is more likely that the coming years will witness further political reforms in Kuwait, which still have a long way to complete its democratic experiment. It is necessary to foster the principles of peaceful transfer of power at the level of the government, assurance of the independence of the judiciary, real balance of powers between the legislative and executive, freedom to form political parties, guarantees of respect for human rights, and spreading and promotion of civic culture to take root.

VII. Conclusion

Compared to the rest of the Gulf, the Kuwaiti experience of democracy is a leading one and is one of the best experiences of democracy in the Arab world. Despite all the shortcomings of this

experience, it does provide an opportunity for citizens from different political tendencies from nationalists to Islamists and liberals to express their opinions through parliamentary elections and the media, and it has been the only on going democracy in the region for over 50 years.

Through our review of the stages and characteristics and challenges of the Kuwaiti democratic experience, we show the high level of awareness of the Kuwaiti people to the principles of democracy. The many efforts to enshrine these principles and to broaden the participation of citizens in public affairs through elected councils, as well as the claim to preserve public funds, fight against corruption through the strengthening of legislative powers, and control of the National Council are also outlined. We also find an often-positive response of the royal family to many of these demands. The royal family plays a key role in engineering and nurturing the process of political reform.

However, this process has been marred by some setbacks along the road. Many crises and tensions have stood in the way of democratic growth and there are still many challenges to face, which will have some impact on the future of political development in Kuwait. The non-partisan character of the Parliament and the absence of political parties, the weakness of democratic political culture represent two of the largest obstacles. Strong political reforms for the promotion and development of Kuwaiti democratic experiment must allow the establishment of political parties and enhance dedication to the principles of citizenship, respect for human rights, and the establishment of a democratic political culture.

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