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## Whither Kuwait: Illiberal Democracy or Enlightened Autocracy?

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KUWAIT CITY, KUWAIT—The touchstone for American foreign policy today is support for democracy. Yet democracy sometimes has only a tenuous relationship with liberty. In fact, unconstrained democracy can threaten a free society. This tension is evident in Kuwait, a small Persian Gulf nation in which people are demanding greater democracy.

Kuwait was freed from British “protection” a half century ago. Since then Kuwaitis have established the region’s freest country: The elected parliament has real power and the independent media asks embarrassing questions. Moreover, non-Muslims are free to practice their faiths.

However, in December Kuwait held its second National Assembly election this year. The Emir unilaterally changed the voting system, triggering protests and a campaign boycott. A broad coalition ranging from liberal to Islamist is pressuring the government to change course—and eventually create an elected prime minister.

Khaled al-Fadhala, a student organizer, told the Financial Times, “The youth want change. Whoever will bring that change, the youth want. I don’t care if they’re Islamists, Muslim Brotherhood, Shia . . . as long as they win in a democratic election.”

Better to win in a democratic election than not. However, winning an election is no guarantee of support for freedom, as is evident throughout the Middle East.

For instance, Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak was an authoritarian who found favor in Washington because he generally backed U.S. policy. Unfortunately, this association did wonders—all bad—for America’s reputation in the Middle East.

Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Islamic Brotherhood, was elected president after Mubarak’s fall. Morsi has claimed the right to exercise near-dictatorial powers. The proposed constitution enshrines authority rather than liberty. And violent attacks on Coptic Christians have risen. Egypt is more democratic than before, but could end up less free.

Fears are rising that Kuwait might be traveling down the same road. Kuwait is not Egypt: The former is far more democratic, free, and prosperous. Kuwait's political community is smaller and more united. Most Kuwaitis realize that they have a huge stake in social stability.

Indeed, even opposition activists emphasize their support for Kuwait's Emir. For instance, Musallam Al-Barrak, a long-time parliamentarian who now is calling for sustained protests, told me when I visited in December that "there is a big difference between the Arab Spring and Kuwaiti movements. The Arab Spring was against the ruling system." Not so in Kuwait. Protestors want an elected government, but "that never means we are against the government or the ruling system."

However, an elected rather than appointed government would sharply curtail the Emir's powers. And, ironically, that might not be good for liberty.

The parliament elected in 2009 fell into disrepute, leading to elections in February, which I also observed. The opposition took two-thirds of the seats. And a majority of MPs were Islamists.

In general these men were moderate in temperament and fully integrated into Kuwaiti society. Nor did they bear Americans any ill will. For instance, I interviewed Dr. Naser al-Sane, a former MP active with the international Islamic Brotherhood. Dr. al-Sane had met with U.S. congressmen and his son attended college in America.

Nevertheless, liberty is not high on their list of national priorities. A religious bloc quickly formed, leading to talk about imposing a dress code on women. The group also called for making Sharia the source of all law, executing blasphemers, and closing down Christian churches. Only the Emir's "no"—for instance, the government explained that the constitution protected freedom of religion—prevented these measures from becoming law.

This is a society in which liberal Kuwaitis choose Western dress and tell you which brand of alcohol they prefer. They also freely share their doubts about the monarchy. One younger Kuwaiti complained to me that "I am not sure that monarchy is the best system for Kuwait. The royal family now believes the country, property, and people belong to them."

Indeed, the driving force behind the continuing protests that are challenging Kuwait's government is the young. Al-Barrak and other long-serving MPs provide the public face of opposition. But al-Barrak called the youth "the heart of the movement." My friend Shafeeq Ghabra, a political scientist at Kuwait University, estimates that 60 percent of Kuwait's population is under 26, and 70 percent is under 29. Everyone I spoke with said young people were spontaneously pressing for change out of personal conviction—they were under no one's control. "The youth are saying that this is their movement," explained Ghabra.

That's exciting. But it brings to mind Khaled al-Fadhala's comment. Is all that matters that officials are democratically elected? Or should one elect people who will use their authority to protect the liberty of those doing the electing?

As yet there is no Kuwaiti Mohamed Morsi in the wings, ready to exercise dictatorial authority in the name of democracy. Nevertheless, seemingly reasonable people already said they were ready to kill

blasphemers and destroy churches. One wonders if this is the world that young Kuwaitis hope to construct.

The ultimate objective in Kuwait, as in America, should be to create a free and tolerant society. Democracy is an important means to that end. But it is critical to limit State power before deciding who gets to exercise that authority