

The Providence Journal

Arab Spring comes to Kuwait, sort of

By: DOUG BANDOW January 2, 2013

Kuwait is a friend of the U.S. and offers a liberal model for other Persian Gulf states. But it faces increasing internal political strife.

Kuwait is among the most pro-American of nations. "Kuwaitis always remember the sacrifices of the American people in liberating Kuwait," [from Saddam Hussein's Iraq in 1991] Undersecretary of Information Salman Sabah al-Salem al-Homoud al-Sabah told me.

Although an Islamic monarchy, Kuwait has the Gulf's oldest elected parliament, most free media and greatest religious liberty. However, politics has become unusually ugly.

The National Assembly elected in 2009 gained an unsavory reputation. New elections were held in February, which yielded a strong opposition and Islamist majority. An Islamist parliamentary bloc pressed to make Sharia the source of all law, penalize blasphemy with the death penalty, and block any new Christian churches. The emir, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, said no to all three measures.

In June the Constitutional Court reinstated the previous parliament on technical grounds. The old MPs were no more popular than before, and in October the emir properly dissolved the body.

The emir changed the voting system "to preserve national unity," he explained, but his decision was criticized for being both unfair and unconstitutional. Public protests ensued, followed by an electoral boycott.

The actual vote went smoothly. An international delegation concluded that the election process was "very good in general," with confidentiality in voting and transparency in operation.

Turnout was down but still seemed respectable at 40.3 percent. While touring polling places I met supporters of candidates from smaller tribes as well as the Shia minority, who believed that they finally had an opportunity to win.

But the legitimacy of the process was sharply contested. Former Member of Parliament Saad Bin-Tefla figured that the government was "cheating on the voting," that turnout was 33 percent maximum. Worse, he argued that the fewer votes necessary to elect someone made it easy to buy seats.

The boycott joined tribes, youth, Islamists, liberals, and the opposition. Said liberal political scientist Shafeeq Ghabra, "Almost all of the political forces boycotted." Bin-Tefla told me that "This is going to escalate. I know it is not going to stop." Demonstrations continued after the vote.

Ghabra told me that Kuwait was at a "political crossroads, whether Kuwait would move toward more democratization." The government recognizes the public's increased expectations. Said Undersecretary al-Homoud al-Sabah, "The big challenge is to persuade the people that the new government will execute."

However, most people appear to want more than an improved status quo. Former MP Faisal al-Muslim demanded an elected prime minister, fully independent courts, and financial disclosure for government officials and MPs. The basic issue, argued Ghabra, is a "popularly elected government."

Nevertheless, opposition leaders emphasized their commitment to the emir. Long-serving MP Musallam al-Barrak told me that "we want to have an elected government. That does not mean we are against the ruling system."

The driving force behind the protests is the youth movement. Seventy percent of the population is under 29! The young people I talked with varied in their views but generally were skeptical of the government.

Everyone now is peering through the glass darkly. The emir has called the new assembly into session and Undersecretary al-Homoud al-Sabah advocated that "after this election we should put our hands together and look to the future." However, the opposition is adamant.

The Constitutional Court could void the emir's electoral amendment, a decision he said he would respect. Protests could force the government to back down but pose the greatest risk of violence and conflict.

The third possibility, according to al-Muslim, is "the political way" led by opposition MPs. He predicted a government reversal, since "in many different decades Kuwaitis have protested against the leadership and have always won."

The longer the controversy persists the more likely it is to undermine the monarchy. Ghabra said "the hierarchical system is breaking down." Al-Muslim acknowledged that there is "no leadership, control" over protestors and predicted that "there will be clashes with the people." If a demonstrator is killed, there could be a popular explosion.

Another concern, at least to an outside observer, is the wisdom of liberals allying with Islamists. One student organizer, Khaled al-Fadhala, told the Financial Times: "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." However, what if the result delivers less liberty? Such as a parliament determined to kill blasphemers and close churches.

"Only God knows where things are heading," said bin-Tefla. Kuwaitis ultimately may find themselves with something closer to a popularly elected government. Unfortunately, however, experience shows that this may not make them freer.