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Kuwait's New Political Crisis: Can Democracy Trump Sectarianism?

By [David Pollock](#)

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On March 19, Kuwaiti emir Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah dissolved the country's parliament and called for new elections to be held on May 17. This drastic step reflects two distinct sets of tensions, both of which Kuwait has overcome in the past: tensions between the executive branch and parliament, and tensions between fundamentalists from the Sunni majority and the Shiite minority. The conjunction of these divisions is unusual and poses a serious political test for this small but strategically vital state -- a nation that borders Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, pumps more oil than Iraq, and quietly hosts about 70,000 U.S. troops at any given moment. The political troubles have become all the more sensitive because many Kuwaitis suspect Iran of fomenting new sectarian strife within their borders.

Tensions between Cabinet and Parliament

Although Kuwait is ruled by a hereditary emir, it has many democratic features. These include an elected parliament with a majority of Islamist, Arab nationalist, and populist opposition figures who are quick to exercise their right to question cabinet ministers, many of whom are members of the ruling family. In 2007, two oil ministers resigned in quick succession rather than face such public scrutiny or the potential for a subsequent no-confidence vote.

When not occupied with such personal conflicts, the parliament had tended to focus on symbolic matters, often with a controversial Islamic bent. For example, it passed laws forbidding women from working after eight o'clock in the evening and segregating all schools by gender. And it officially denounced Denmark once again when the controversial Prophet Muhammad cartoons of 2005 were reprinted last month. Meanwhile, more substantive issues, including long-pending economic reforms, languished in legislative limbo, much to the frustration of many leading cabinet officials and businessmen.

The last straw for the cabinet, however, was a parliamentary intervention of a populist nature. Earlier this month, the cabinet proposed a pay raise for virtually all Kuwaiti workers (nearly 90 percent of whom are on the government payroll) of 120 dinars (around \$420) per month. Parliament countered by adding 50 extra dinars to this largesse -- along with a proposal to pay off each citizen's personal debt. Given Kuwait's immense windfall from \$100-per-barrel oil, even that dramatic measure would not have strained, let alone broken, the central bank. But it was on this relatively apolitical matter that the cabinet chose to take a stand, announcing that it had no choice but to resign in the absence of legislative "cooperation." The emir then exercised his authority under the constitution to dissolve parliament and call for new elections within sixty days.

New Sectarian Tensions

Over the past month, another, potentially more serious source of trouble has been brewing as well. On February 16, Hizballah terrorist mastermind Imad Mughniyeh was assassinated by a car bomb in Damascus. Two days later, a small but prominent group of Kuwaiti Shiites, including two members of parliament, held a public memorial ceremony for him.

Suddenly, vociferous objections emerged from a number of leading Kuwaiti Sunnis, mostly aligned with the Islamist faction in parliament -- the legislature's largest bloc, holding seventeen of fifty seats. They denounced Mughniyeh as a criminal rather than a martyr. This was not for his heinous terrorist acts against Americans, Israelis, and Jews, but for his suspected involvement in a 1985 attempt to assassinate Kuwait's previous emir, and in the deadly 1988 hijacking of a Kuwaiti airliner. They demanded that parliament lift the immunity granted to the two Shiite deputies who had mourned Mughniyeh and prosecute them. This would have left just two other Shiites in parliament, even though an estimated 30 percent of Kuwaitis hail from that sect.

Meanwhile, Kuwaiti authorities arrested a handful of other Shiite figures for allegedly forming a full-fledged Kuwaiti Hizballah affiliate in the wake of Mughniyeh's death. By mid-March, after vocal Shiite protests, all were released on bail. Yet at least some of these underlying tensions almost certainly remain, and they may play out in new ways during the upcoming parliamentary elections.

According to well-informed local observers, the publicly reported version of these events is far from the full story. Mughniyeh, though long a prime terrorist suspect, was never publicly listed as such by the Kuwaiti government. Therefore, when some Kuwaiti Shiites asked to hold a memorial for him, authorities made no initial objection. Only afterward, under pressure from Sunni fundamentalists, did the government react, and severely. Moreover, both Sunnis and Shiites were internally divided over the issue: some establishment Shiite personalities were quick to condemn both Mughniyeh and his commemorators at first, and some Sunnis later took issue with the government's seemingly draconian response.

Suspicious of Iranian Troublemaking

Most Kuwaitis believe, with good reason, that the terrorist incidents in their country during the mid-1980s were instigated by Iran, primarily as revenge for Kuwait's financial support of Baghdad during the Iran-Iraq War. Today, senior Kuwaiti security officers continue to believe that Iran is behind attempts to organize pro-Hizballah, extremist Shiite cells in Kuwait, intended as tools for intimidating the government and deterring any attack on Iran by implying a retaliatory terrorist response.

These concerns are not unwarranted. Sheikh Bakr al-Muhri, Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's personal representative to Kuwait, initially distanced himself from the Mughniyeh memorial, but later denounced the Kuwaiti government's reaction to it. And parliamentarian Andan Abu Samad, one of the leading organizers of the memorial efforts, is reportedly a frequent visitor to Hizballah camps in Lebanon, where Iranian trainers operate in full force. In addition to such prominent individuals, Kuwaiti officials worry that some fraction of the wider Shiite population might be receptive to Iranian appeals. Indeed, a 2007 public opinion poll showed that while Kuwait's overall population is widely suspicious of Iran, Kuwaiti Shiites as a group are considerably more sympathetic.

These and similar divisions have led many to fear that Kuwait's Sunni and Shiite fundamentalists could eventually manage to provoke each other into open conflict. Such a development could do great damage to the communal harmony that has generally been a hallmark of Kuwaiti society.

Prospects for May and Beyond

Much will depend on the outcome of the May parliamentary elections. One leading Kuwaiti pundit, Muhammad al-Rumeihi, recently wrote that the elections will be "like a plunge into uncharted waters." This characterization stems from the fact that, barring some last-minute hitch, they will be the first elections under the new districting system enacted by parliament in 2006. Currently, there are five districts with ten representatives each, instead of twenty-five smaller districts with just two representatives each. The intent was to dilute the impact of vote-buying and tribal factors by creating larger, more diverse constituencies. But no one knows for sure how this new system will turn out in practice.

The most likely scenario, given the essentially conservative nature of Kuwaiti society, is more of the same:

unresolved tensions but no major threat to the country's political stability, internal security, or sectarian coexistence. But if Sunni fundamentalists increase their already considerable share of the vote, both the government and the Shiite minority could be subject to even stronger pressures. Conversely, in the remote case of a surge in Shiite representation, there could be a backlash from some Sunni Salafist elements. (This scenario should not give Washington any false comfort -- despite their anti-Iranian sentiments, such elements are far from pro-American.) In the most optimistic scenario, pragmatic deputies might increase their presence in parliament, defusing overall tensions and permitting foreign investment in the oil and gas sector.

Given Kuwait's prime location, vast energy and financial resources, and crucial regional role in hosting U.S. forces and combating extremists, Washington must do what it can to help preserve the country's political stability and continued cooperation. When it comes to Kuwaiti domestic politics, however, U.S. interests are best served by a very low profile. In late 2005, for example, Kuwait's parliament finally acquiesced to the ruling family's desire to grant women the right to vote, with only modest and quiet American encouragement. Odds are that Kuwait's moderate majority will navigate the upcoming elections on their own as well, despite the new uncertainties and tensions.

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