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Freedom in the World 2008 - Kuwait

Capital: Kuwait City
Population: 2,800,000

Political Rights Score: 4
Civil Liberties Score: 4
Status: Partly Free

Overview

The Kuwaiti parliament leveled allegations of corruption against several cabinet ministers in 2007, forcing a change of government in March and the resignation of the oil and transportation ministers in June. The political rights of women suffered a setback in August when the minister of health was forced from office under pressure from her Islamist critics in parliament. Kuwait granted citizenship to 2,000 members of its large *bidoon* (stateless) population in 2007, but as many as 130,000 continued to live in poor conditions.

For more than 200 years, the al-Sabah family has played a role in ruling Kuwait. A year after the country gained its independence from Britain in 1961, a new constitution gave broad powers to the emir and created the National Assembly. In August 1990, Iraqi forces invaded Kuwait. A military coalition mandated by the United Nations and led by the United States liberated the country in February 1991.

Emirs have suspended the National Assembly two times, from 1976 to 1981 and from 1986 to 1992. After its restoration in 1992, the parliament played an active role in monitoring the emir and the government, often forcing cabinet ministers out of office and blocking legislation proposed by the ruling family. However, the legislature has also served as an impediment to progressive political change by rejecting measures on women's rights and economic reform.

After 28 years of rule, Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah died in 2006. Despite fears of a contentious succession process, the cabinet and parliament removed his heir for health reasons and elevated Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah as the new emir.

Parliamentary elections were held in 2006. They were originally scheduled for October 2007 but were brought forward to break a deadlock over the drawing of electoral districts. Of 249 candidates competing for the 50 seats, 27 were women. In 2005, women had won the right to vote and run for office, and the new national elections were the first in which women participated. A coalition of liberals, Islamists, and nationalists campaigning against corruption won 35 seats, with Islamists winning 21. Four

Shiite Muslim candidates were voted in, but none of the women candidates were elected. The opposition in parliament continued to press for an end to corruption in 2007, forcing the resignation of two prominent ministers.

Kuwait, which has about 10 percent of the world's proven oil reserves, continued to enjoy strong economic growth as a result of high global oil prices. Oil dominates the economy, accounting for nearly 90 percent of public revenues.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Kuwait is not an electoral democracy. The ruling family largely sets the policy agenda and dominates political life. The emir has overriding power in the government system and appoints the prime minister and cabinet.

Under the constitution, the emir shares legislative power with the 50-member National Assembly, which is elected to four-year terms by a limited popular vote involving only about 15 percent of the country's 900,000 citizens. The emir has the authority to dissolve the National Assembly at will but must call elections within 60 days. The parliament can overturn decrees issued by the emir while it was not in session, and it has exercised this power in a number of cases. It can veto the appointment of the country's prime minister, but then it must choose from three alternates put forward by the emir. It also has the power to remove government ministers with a majority vote of elected members.

Formal political parties are banned, but political groupings, such as parliamentary blocs, have been allowed to emerge. In 2005, a group of Kuwaiti Islamists announced the formation of the Umma Party, but like other political groupings, it was not granted a permit by the government. After the Umma Party announced its formation, the government imposed a travel ban on 15 of its top members and interrogated several of its leaders. On December 8, the National Action Bloc proposed a law legalizing political parties.

The parliament continued to pursue cases of alleged corruption by cabinet ministers in 2007. In March, fears that lawmakers would open a corruption investigation against Health Minister Sheikh Ahmed al-Abdullah al-Sabah led the government to resign. The emir reappointed the prime minister two days later. In June 2007, the oil and transportation ministers resigned over corruption allegations. Kuwait was ranked 60 out of 180 countries surveyed in Transparency International's 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index.

In spite of a 2006 press law, under which officials are no longer permitted to close down newspapers without a court order, the authorities continue to limit criticism and debate on politics in the press. In March 2007, the popular television show *Al-Diwaniya*, in which guests discuss sensitive issues, was temporarily taken off the air for broadcasting an episode about Arab blogs. In August, an editor of the daily *Al-Jareeda* was arrested for an anonymous comment insulting the emir on his blog. Kuwait has more than ten daily and weekly Arabic newspapers and two English-language dailies. The state maintains a significant presence in the broadcast media, with four television stations and nine radio stations. There are also a number of private outlets, including the satellite television station Al-Rai. Foreign media outlets work relatively freely in Kuwait. Kuwaitis have access to the internet, though the government has directed internet service providers to block certain sites for political or moral reasons.

Islam is the state religion, but religious minorities are generally permitted to practice their faiths freely in private. Shiite Muslims make up around a third of the population. They enjoy full political rights, although they are subject to some discrimination and harassment. In September 2007, the Ministry of Information banned a television series for criticizing Shiite beliefs and practices. Christian churches operate freely.

Academic freedom is generally respected. Kuwait has a tradition of allowing relatively open and free private discussion, often conducted in traditional gatherings and usually

including only men, called *diwaniyas*.

The government imposes restrictions on freedoms of assembly and association, although those rights are provided by law. In 2006, a court ruling removed 27-year-old restrictions on freedom of assembly that had required government approval for public gatherings. Kuwaitis must notify authorities of a public meeting or protest but no longer need a permit. The change did not result in an increase in demonstrations in 2007. The government routinely restricts the registration and licensing of associations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), forcing dozens of groups to operate without legal standing or state assistance. In August 2004, the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labor officially recognized the existence of the Kuwait Human Rights Society, which had been founded 10 years earlier but operated without official status. Representatives of licensed NGOs must obtain government permission in order to attend foreign conferences and gatherings on behalf of their organizations. Workers have the right to join labor unions, but the government mandates that there be only one union per occupational trade.

Kuwait lacks an independent judiciary. The emir appoints all judges, and the executive branch approves judicial promotions and renewals of appointments. Authorities may detain suspects for four days without charge. The Ministry of the Interior supervises the main internal security forces, including the national police, the Criminal Investigation Division, and Kuwait State Security. An Egyptian man who was released from prison in August 2007, having been accused of forging his work visa, claimed that he and a second Egyptian were tortured while in Kuwaiti custody. The government permits visits to prisons by human rights activists, who report adherence to international standards, though with some concern about overcrowding.

Stateless residents, known as *bidoon*, are estimated to number between 90,000 and 130,000. They are considered illegal residents, do not have full citizenship rights, and live in wretched conditions. In October 2007, the government extended citizenship to 2,000 *bidoon*. Kuwait is a destination country for human trafficking, with many people coming from Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka. From May 1 to June 30, 2007, the government granted amnesty to expatriate workers who were in violation of the residence law, allowing them either to leave the country and be permitted to return in the future or to extend their expired visas pending the payment of a fine. Both male and female citizens have the right to own property and establish businesses.

The 1962 constitution provides men and women with equal rights. Nevertheless, women face discrimination in several areas of law and society and remain underrepresented in the workforce. Regulations stemming from Sharia (Islamic law) discriminate against women in matters like divorce and inheritance. Kuwait is a destination country for the trafficking of women. Domestic abuse and sexual harassment are not specifically prohibited by law, and foreign domestic servants remain particularly vulnerable to abuse and sexual assault. In April 2007, lawmakers jeered Nuria al-Sbeih, the appointed minister of education, for appearing in parliament without wearing a hijab. In December 2007, Islamist members of parliament called for a no-confidence vote on al-Sbeih, charging her with mismanagement, compromising religious values, and undermining the country's educational system. In May, the prime minister appointed Masouma al-Mubarak, a member of the Shiite minority, as minister of health. She had become the country's first female cabinet minister in 2005, in spite of fierce opposition from Islamist members of parliament. Al-Mubarak resigned under pressure from her critics in August, after two patients were killed in a hospital fire. Women comprise more than 60 percent of the student body at several leading universities in Kuwait. Kuwaiti women have the right to vote and run as candidates in parliamentary and local elections.