



Freedom in the World 2017 - Kuwait

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Freedom Status: Partly Free

Aggregate Score: 36 (0 = Least Free, 100 = Most Free)

Freedom Rating: 5.0 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Political Rights: 5 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Civil Liberties: 5 (1 = Most Free, 7 = Least Free)

Quick Facts

Population: 4,000,000

Capital: Kuwait

GDP/capita: \$29,301

Press Freedom Status: Partly Free

OVERVIEW

Kuwait is a constitutional emirate ruled by the Sabah family. While the monarchy holds executive power and dominates the judiciary, the elected parliament plays an influential role, often challenging the government. Partly due to friction between lawmakers and the executive, government turnover and snap parliamentary elections have been frequent since 2011. In recent years, with a surge in demands for greater political rights, state authorities have narrowed freedoms of speech and assembly.

Key Developments in 2016:

- A 2015 cybercrimes law that took effect in January criminalized online criticism of state officials, members of the royal family, religious figures, and foreign leaders, prescribing prison terms of up to 10 years.
- In April, some 20,000 oil workers went on strike to protest austerity measures linked to low global oil prices. The walkout, which nearly halved Kuwait's oil production, ended after three days to allow for negotiations.
- Amid criticism in the parliament about the government's management of the economic crisis and moves to raise fuel prices, the emir dissolved the legislature in October, prompting elections in November.

Executive Summary:

Persistently low oil prices strained Kuwait's economy in 2016 and put pressure on its extensive social benefits. In July, the government said it had posted a rare budget deficit of some \$15 billion in the fiscal year that ended in March. Authorities responded to the crisis by adopting austerity measures, including public-sector job cuts and reduced subsidies for water, electricity, and fuel. Some members of parliament challenged the government on its policies and alleged profligacy by senior officials and members of the ruling family.

In an apparent effort to ward off further criticism, the emir dissolved the parliament and called new elections for November. Opposition factions – including Islamist, nationalist, and liberal groupings that had boycotted the last elections in 2013 – won 24 of the 50 seats, though the system is formally nonpartisan. Only 20 of the incumbent members were reelected; voter turnout was high at about 70 percent. One woman was among those who won seats.

Also during the year, the authorities arrested and punished a number of government critics for their speech online, aided by a new cybercrimes law that took effect in January. A separate law adopted that month required all online media to obtain a government license, and legislation passed in June barred electoral participation by those convicted of blasphemy or insulting the emir. Among other individual cases during the year, in March authorities arrested Salam Abdullah Ashtil Dossari, an expatriate who had been living in Britain, for insulting Gulf Cooperation Council leaders online. In April, former lawmaker Mubarak al-Dowaila, who had been acquitted in 2015 of insulting the United Arab Emirates on television in 2014, was sentenced to two years in prison by an appellate court. In May, three members of the ruling family were sentenced to five years in prison for insulting the judiciary on social media. In September, human rights activist Sara al-Drees was arrested for insulting the emir on social media; she was released on bail pending trial, but faced up to five years in prison.

Shiite Muslims, who comprise about a third of the population, enjoy equal political rights but have experienced increased harassment in recent years. In January, a court sentenced two Shiite men, one of them an Iranian citizen, to death as part of a larger trial of suspected members of the Iranian-backed militant group Hezbollah. Some of the defendants accused the authorities of torturing them to extract confessions.

Explanatory Note:

This country report has been abridged for *Freedom in the World 2017*. For background information on political rights and civil liberties in Kuwait, see [Freedom in the World 2016](#).

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