

Kuwait's Political Crisis: Current Concerns and Future Anxieties

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Kuwait's political and national circles look to the 23rd of June as a crucial moment to cure one of the symptoms of the crisis that has hit the country, whereby voting on a document signed by ten members of parliament is scheduled to be held in a private session regarding the impossibility of cooperation with Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser Al-Mohammad Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah at the end of an interrogation marathon lasting around 7 hours. This is the third allegation of "non-cooperation" the Prime Minister has faced within ten cross-examinations throughout his leadership of seven successive governments from February 2006 to the present day.

The current inquest, which was presented by three members of parliament affiliated with the Development and Reform Parliamentary Bloc, came to Sheikh Nasser Mohammad al-Sabah following the performance of a new government sworn in on the 18th of May. This hence indicates a new political crisis in Kuwait whose main features came to light in a series of interrogations undermining relations between the legislative and executive. Its recent rise has brought about the early return of Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, known as the "Sage of Kuwait," from abroad though he was expected to spend more days of rest and relaxation after undergoing medical examinations in the United Kingdom.

The political crisis, whose signs appeared in the continuous escalation and tension between the government of Sheikh Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah and some MPs, led the country to a state of unprecedented political friction demonstrated by unfamiliar phenomena in life and political and media exercise in Kuwait.

Thus, this paper endeavors to shed more light on the manifestations of the current political crisis in Kuwait, observe its indications, and diagnose its causes as well as explore its future paths.

Dimensions and Manifestations of the Current Political Crisis

The current political crisis was not unpredicted for the political landscape of Kuwait at least since December 2009 has been like a volcano waiting to erupt, which is enough to demonstrate the size and degree of the peril of the political crisis that has provoked Kuwaiti political life. It is important to note that the National Assembly has been dissolved three times in three years (2006, 2008 and 2009) because of the tension and the continuing escalation between the two authorities; and this is out of a total of six times the Parliament has dissolved its thirteen legislative chapters, while ten full legislative chapters were dissolved in three of those times in 40 years (1963-2003).

Recently, the political crisis was evident in several aspects not familiar to political life in Kuwait. The most important of which are as follows:

- Transformation of the implicit competition between the dynasty of Al-Sabah to explicit conflict and its transfer from the internal domain of the dynasty to political, media and popular arenas.
- Intense escalation and aggravation between the successive governments of Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah and those of some MPs whom the government considers crisis-causing members of parliament.

This is demonstrated by the political acceleration continued by the MPs through the excessive use of interrogation, causing the loss of the regulatory and parliamentary apparatus's prestige and the deterioration of the legislative body in which political disputes have been incorporated.

- The emergence of political and parliamentary exercise particularly from the domain of Abdullah Al-Salem to the political arena, as he expressed himself by joining some MPs, especially from the Popular Action and Development and Reform blocs in what has become known to the media as "Friday of the Petition " which witnessed the signing of 16 MPs, a petition demanding the departure of the Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser Mohammad Al-Sabah and his deputy, and Sheikh Ahmad al-Fahd, the latter making his resignation in what became known as the "Document of Departure."

Determinants and Causes of Political Crisis

There are chief factors that have contributed substantially to the rise of the political crisis in Kuwait to its current peak and caused its extreme aggravation, most of important of which are:

- Intensification of competition among the second generation of the royal family to build centers of influence and over their roles within the family in addition to the acquisition and consolidation of popular and political presence outside the family, thus rendering the implicit competition between cousins in the Al-Sabah family a public conflict.

This, in turn, is the consequence of failing to resolve the future status of the younger sheikhs - especially those whose presence in the political and social scene is considerable - and/or semi-permanent representatives of government membership throughout the past decade.

Although the conflict between sheikhs of opposite poles is not new in Kuwaiti political life, it did not exceed the scope of the ruling family (*) in the past and was muted and suppressed, unlike the case today where it has become public and overt, turning competition into hostility and conflict.

- Poor political performance of the government and the limitedness of its economic achievements and development.

The concurrence of the escalation of conflict between some of the younger sheikhs, its exposure, its transition to a grave stage of difficulty, the weakness of the government, and its limited achievements have provided favorable conditions for political polarization especially with the involvement of National Assembly deputies and their alignment with certain parties according to private interests. Political and parliamentary polarization based on the conflict between some members of the ruling family is demonstrated in two cross examinations recently submitted to the Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser Mohammad al-Sabah, and his deputy, Ahmad al-Fahad. The severity of the polarization reached its peak in the voting session to transmit the interrogation report of Sheikh Ahmad al-Fahad to the Commission of Legislative and Legal Affairs in the National Assembly.

Voting results in this session illustrated the extent of the conflict between the two sheikhs, and the current and potential negative impacts of that conflict on the reality and future of democratic practice as well as overall political life in Kuwait.

- The negative role of local media, as factions of it have gotten entangled in political polarization, while others were lured into presenting controversy to increase propagation and popularity at the expense of professionalism and credibility.

Possible Consequences

At the forefront of these implications is the fear of escalation of conflicts and disputes within the ruling family to the point of no return. This, in turn, may result in its loss of prestige which Kuwaitis have long viewed as the "balancing force" in political life and the social safety valve. Accordingly, prospects of the foreseeable future are linked to the erosion of the central role of the Al Sabah family in the regime and the overall political and social life in case of renewed demands in the presence of a popular prime minister from outside of a ruling family and all this entails, including facilitating the exposure of political parties that possess leadership capabilities needed for the formation of government. Perhaps this also involves the relatively long term discussion of the need for amendments in the country's constitution in order for it to proceed to becoming a constitutional monarchy. Nonetheless, this may cause political instability and the continuous disruption of development as well as social and political implications seriously threatening to Kuwaiti national security both internally and externally.

Scenarios of the future course

Regardless of the possible scenarios of the voting session vis-à-vis the petition of representative non-cooperation with the Prime Minister, which varies from the submission of Sheikh Nasser Mohammad al-Sabah's resignation (if a sufficient number of MPs do not trust him to surpass the June 23rd session) to his success in securing an adequate number of supporters with help from partisan MPs of the National Action Bloc, thus safely passing the session. Current data indicates that the political crisis is expected to escalate in the future, especially since one of the parliamentary blocs, Popular Action, suggested carrying out a "rare" form of interrogation of the Prime Minister after the previous session. As for scenarios of the bigger crisis concerning the conflict between the poles of the second generation of sheikhs, there seems to be an urgent need for some form of "political cortisone" to mitigate the severity of the polarization and current political tension.

Correspondingly, a comprehensive review of the political behavior of the ruling family and the reaching of a political consensus based on clear and specific criteria for the future arrangement of roles and positions should be executed as this evaluative review is an urgent demand imposed by political reality and required by the social situation in Kuwait, and is necessitated by the future with all of its major challenges.

Perhaps, however, proposing to develop a mechanism to resolve differences within the family of Al-Sabah, to achieve the desired balance between its members, guarantees the absorption of new developments, and to deal with future changes is more appropriate in this context.

Note

(*) For more details about the conflict within the ruling family in Kuwait, refer to: Dr. Ghanim al-Najjar, *The Entrance to Political Development in Kuwait*, Dar Qurtas for Publication, T3, 2000, 45-47.