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The Politics of Kuwait

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Introduction

Kuwait occupies a unique and influential position in the political landscape of the Persian Gulf. As a nation balancing tradition and modernity, it stands apart from many of its regional neighbors through the existence of its vibrant, albeit contested, parliamentary system and relatively active civil society. The country's experiment with constitutional governance since the early 1960s has made it a political outlier in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), characterized by both the promise and pitfalls inherent in blending hereditary rule with elements of representative democracy.

The roots of Kuwait's political system are deeply entwined with its history, social structure, and economic transformation. The ascendancy of the Al Sabah family, the negotiation of power between rulers and merchants, and the eventual codification of governance in the 1962 constitution have all shaped the distinctive features of the modern state. This constitution lays out a system that, while granting considerable power to the Emir and ruling family, also embeds a separation of powers and guarantees certain rights to Kuwaiti citizens. However, the practical application of these principles has often been complex and contentious.

Kuwait's political environment is marked by recurring tensions and dynamic interplay between the elected National Assembly and the appointed executive branch. The Assembly's notable ability to scrutinize officials, debate public matters, and challenge government ministers has set the stage for frequent clashes, parliamentary dissolutions, and political standoffs. These frictions, while disruptive, have also facilitated a public sphere in which major social, economic, and political issues can be openly contested. The episodic nature of political crises reflects both the activism of Kuwaiti citizens and the enduring constraints of monarchical authority.

Compounding these internal dynamics are the intertwined issues of citizenship, identity, and social equity. The exclusion of significant segments of the population—most notably the stateless Bidoon community and large numbers of expatriate workers—from political participation reveals the limits of inclusion in Kuwait's model of governance. Meanwhile, tribal affiliations, sectarian differences, and the evolving roles of women and youth contribute additional layers of complexity to the political landscape.

Externally, Kuwait's strategic position and oil wealth render its politics susceptible to regional pressures and global economic shifts. The country's foreign policy navigates complicated relationships with larger neighbors, and its domestic reforms are often shaped by both external expectations and internal deliberations. As the state faces mounting demands for greater accountability, transparency, and inclusion, the

question of how it will reconcile tradition with calls for democratization remains at the heart of its political future.

This book, *The Politics of Kuwait: A Guide to Politics and the Political System in Kuwait*, provides an accessible and comprehensive overview of Kuwait's unique political experiment. Through an exploration of its history, institutions, actors, and ongoing challenges, readers will gain insight into why Kuwait matters, both for its own citizens and for understanding wider trends in Gulf and Middle Eastern politics.

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CHAPTER ONE: The Origins of a Sheikhdom

Kuwait, a name that conjures images of vast oil wealth and a skyline dotted with modern towers, has a history that stretches back long before the discovery of the black gold that transformed its fortunes. The political roots of this Gulf state are not found in the boardrooms of international oil companies, but in the ebb and flow of nomadic tribes, the cut and thrust of maritime trade, and the subtle dance of power between local leaders and larger regional empires. To understand the Kuwait of today, with its unique blend of hereditary rule and a lively, often boisterous, elected parliament, one must first journey back to its humble beginnings as a collection of settlements on the northwestern coast of the Arabian Gulf.

The story of modern Kuwait is often said to begin in the early 18th century. At this time, groups of families, primarily from the 'Anizah tribe in the interior of the Arabian Peninsula, migrated northwards. They were seeking a new home, perhaps driven by famine or the search for better opportunities. These settlers, known as the Banu 'Utub, eventually established themselves in the area that would become Kuwait. This was not an empty land; archaeological evidence suggests human habitation on islands like Failaka dates back millennia, with connections to ancient civilizations.

The collection of settlements that grew into Kuwait City was strategically located, offering access to the sea and potential for trade. The early economy was diverse, relying on fishing, boatbuilding, and, most significantly, pearling and maritime trade. The waters of the Gulf were rich in pearl oysters, and for centuries, pearling was a major source of income for communities along its coasts. Kuwaiti pearl divers became renowned, and the trade in these iridescent gems connected Kuwait to markets in India, Persia, and even Europe. This maritime focus fostered a merchant class that would play a crucial role in the political development of the nascent sheikhdom.

As the settlement grew, the need for a more formalized leadership structure became apparent. In 1756, the settlers made a pivotal decision: they chose a sheikh to lead them from the Al Sabah family. This marked the formal foundation of the autonomous Sheikhdom of Kuwait and the beginning of the Al Sabah dynasty's rule, which continues to this day. Initially, the power within the developing sheikhdom was shared, with the Al Sabah holding the reins of political authority while other prominent families, like the Al Khalifa and Al Jahalma, managed trade and maritime affairs.

The 19th century saw Kuwait develop into a thriving independent trading community. Its strategic location at the head of the Gulf made it a valuable port. Trade routes were diverted through Kuwait, boosting its boatbuilding and trading activities. Kuwaiti ships were well-regarded, traveling to ports across the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent,

and East Africa. This period of prosperity further empowered the merchant class, who, having a vested interest in stability and predictable governance for their commercial ventures, began to exert influence on the ruling sheikhs.

However, this growing prosperity and strategic importance also attracted the attention of larger regional powers, particularly the Ottoman Empire, which sought to extend its influence in the Gulf. Some rulers, like Sheikh Abdullah II, showed leanings towards closer ties with the Ottomans. This trend was dramatically reversed with the accession of Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah, known as Mubarak the Great, in 1896. His rise to power, which involved the assassination of his brother, was a moment of uncharacteristic violence in Kuwaiti political history.

Facing increased pressure and threats of annexation from the Ottoman Empire, Sheikh Mubarak made a strategic decision that would fundamentally alter Kuwait's trajectory. In 1899, he signed a secret agreement with the British Empire. This Anglo-Kuwaiti Agreement effectively placed Kuwait under British protection. In exchange for an annual subsidy and British assurance of security against external threats, Mubarak pledged that Kuwait would not cede territory or receive representatives from foreign powers without British consent. This agreement, initially a defensive measure against the Ottomans, effectively gave Britain control over Kuwait's foreign policy and marked the beginning of a long period of British influence.

With the onset of World War I, Kuwait's status as a British protectorate was solidified. The British imposed a trade blockade on Kuwait during the war because its ruler had shown support for the Ottoman Empire, a move that severely impacted the local economy. In the years that followed the war, Britain played a key role in delineating Kuwait's borders. The 1922 Conference of Al-Uqair established the border with Saudi Arabia, though this came with some territorial loss for Kuwait. A memorandum in 1923 outlined the border with Iraq, based on an earlier, unratified convention.

The period between the two World Wars saw the decline of Kuwait's historic economic backbone: pearling. The global economic depression reduced demand for luxury goods like pearls, and the development of cultured pearls in Japan offered a cheaper alternative. This economic hardship led some merchant families to leave Kuwait in the early 1930s.

It was also in 1938 that the first Iraqi claim to Kuwait surfaced, a claim that would tragically resurface decades later. Iraq asserted a vague historical title to Kuwait, even though neither Iraq nor the Ottoman Empire had ever truly ruled it. This coincided with a merchant uprising against the Emir in Kuwait, known as the Majlis Movement, to which Iraq offered some rhetorical support. The failure of this movement did not deter Iraq from continuing to press its claim, particularly to the strategic islands of Bubiyan and Al-Warbah.

The economic downturn from the collapse of the pearling industry and the lingering border issues with its neighbors set the stage for a transformative discovery. While oil was discovered in Kuwait in 1938, its large-scale exploitation would only begin after World War II. This discovery would fundamentally alter Kuwait's economy, society, and political landscape, shifting it from a maritime trading and pearling center to a major player in the global energy market. The vast wealth generated by oil would reshape the relationship between the ruling family and the populace and fuel the development of the modern Kuwaiti state.

Kuwait remained a British protectorate until 1961. On June 19 of that year, Britain formally recognized Kuwait's independence, marking a new chapter in the country's history. However, the ink was barely dry on the independence documents when Iraq renewed its claim to Kuwait. This claim was ultimately rebuffed, first with British assistance and later by Arab League forces. Iraq would eventually recognize Kuwait's independence and borders in 1963, though the underlying tensions and claims would sadly persist and erupt again much later. Thus, the historical roots of Kuwaiti politics are a complex tapestry woven from tribal movements, maritime commerce, the strategic maneuvering of regional and global powers, and the seismic impact of oil discovery, all of which laid the groundwork for the political system that exists today.

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