

Kuwait Prepares for Upcoming Elections in the Wake of Last Month's Dissolution of Parliament

Last month on August 2nd, Crown Prince Sheikh Meshal al-Ahmad al-Sabah announced the formal dissolution of the Kuwaiti parliament via decree and a plan to hold elections on September 29th. The move to dissolve parliament is far from a first in Kuwaiti politics. Since the current political system was put into place in 1963, parliament has been dissolved 10 times, and each time, parliament has been dissolved in an effort to revive paralyzed talks between the government and parliament. This particular case was no different. In the time since the election of the recently dissolved parliament in December of 2020, mass resignations of cabinet members had taken place four times in response to votes of no confidence from parliament. As for the members of parliament (MPs), there had been considerable contention with Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Khalid and Speaker Marzouq al-Ghanim, both of whom were thought to be too pro-government to cooperate with them. Al-Khalid has since been replaced by more open-minded Shaykh Ahmed Nawaf al-Ahmed al-Sabah and there will be a new speaker of parliament following the upcoming early elections on September 29th.

In reality, the “dissolution” of parliament is really a call for such early elections, and less troubling in regard to authoritarianism than one might think, according to political scientist at the University of Kuwait, Dr. Ghanim al-Najjar. During a Gulf International Forum (GIF) panel discussion with other experts on earlier this week on Tuesday, Dr. Ghanim explained in great detail that the political problem in Kuwait is not fair elections, but the whole of the government structure. The parliament is also known as the National Assembly, which works with the royal family-dominated government to enact policies under Kuwait’s semi-democratic system. The 50 MPs hold important roles, although it is the royal family that is allowed the final decision on all matters, according to the constitution. Dr. Ghanim explained that the power balance created by such a system always places the ruling family and the “bureaucracy” in a position to make all of the real decisions. Dr. Courtney Freer, a Middle East researcher at GIF and the Middle East Centre in London, elaborates further on Dr. Ghanim’s point in a recent publication. She claims that the reason that Kuwaiti politics continue to become deadlocked is because the members of cabinet are also voting members of the National Assembly, despite the fact that they are not elected by the people or by the MPs, but rather by the ruling family. As a result, any changes that the “opposition” tries to make are immediately stifled by the government’s overbearing presence. Additionally, Kuwait’s MPs have a history of trying to create change through constant interpellation of cabinet members rather than trying to move legislation through the proper channels.

But despite the fact that history has repeated itself almost a dozen times in 60 years, there is hope among Kuwaitis that the elections taking place in less than two weeks will be a new beginning for Kuwaiti politics. This is the first time in Kuwait’s history that the dissolution of parliament has been government-led, which some hope signals a renewed spirit of collaboration. Since the dissolution of parliament, the ruling family has also put several new electoral laws into place that are popular among the people. One such regulation is that all Kuwaiti citizens are now automatically registered to vote, which increases the total electorate by 25% and by up to 40% in some districts. In addition, “tribal” elections – a form of primary election that advantages candidates from large tribes – have been cracked down upon, and Prime Minister Shaykh Ahmed Nawaf al-Ahmed al-Sabah has assured that the government will not interfere in the election of the next speaker of parliament. These changes come at an important time in Kuwaiti politics, as the former parliament left countless issues unresolved, including housing, the diversification of the economy, and the approval of the budget for the 2022/23 fiscal year.



Unfortunately, there is significant doubt that the September 29th election will do anything to foster a smoother relationship between parliament and the government. Experts, including Dr. Ghanim and Dr. Freer, strongly believe that what is occurring in Kuwait is nothing new. Dr. Ghanim has made it clear that electoral rules change very frequently in Kuwait – but what has not changed is the power dynamic. Barring unforeseen events, it is unlikely to change now.