

Looking for Revolution in Kuwait

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In the *New York Review of Books*, Hussein Agha and Robert Malley imagine the results of the Arab revolts as the possible beginning of a reconstitution of the Ottoman Empire. They see the regional unrest as media-driven, with various partisans asserting their own versions of reality to mobilize popular support. Outsiders fumble for understanding as forces push back and forth, now winning and now losing. Some see Islamists as the only ones with moral standing, yet Islamists in power seem ready and eager to “compromise” with the West to attract money and space to pursue their domestic projects. Aside from the almost obligatory — and quick — nod to events in Bahrain and gerontocracy-ruled Saudi Arabia, the Gulf disappears from the conversation. The “non-revolution” Agha and Malley describe is centered elsewhere [1].

If one were looking for a revolution in the Middle East, however, the Gulf might be the place to start. The usual mental images of revolutions feature teeming masses and blood in the streets, and there are examples of each in the Gulf. But to see a revolution that may be in progress one has to look for autocrats who rely upon a “British” rather than a “French” strategy for controlling the populace. [2] Think 1688, a designation that subsumes long years of British resistance to authoritarian rule. The Stuart king, last in a long string of autocrats, was replaced by a Dutchman who agreed to cede significant powers to the parliament. Then think Kuwait, where the emir became an autocrat only a little over a century ago. Kuwaiti scholar Fahed al-Sumait finds “memories” of democracy among Kuwaitis that challenge the dominion of the ruling family, the Al Sabah. [3] Kuwaitis themselves have taken political action resisting that autocracy for almost as long as it has been exercised. As 2012 draws to a close, they will reach another fork in the winding path toward the future. The autocrats hope for full steam ahead, confirmation of their absolute right to rule as they please. The democrats hope to take the road less traveled, the one leading to constitutional monarchy.

Divide-and-Rule Tactics

Resistance to authoritarian rule in Kuwait began during the reign of Mubarak, the first autocratic emir, but the storied beginning of Kuwaiti “democracy” is the 1938-1939 parliamentary movement. Kuwaiti merchants were afraid that Sheikh Ahmad al-Jabir, the emir at the time, would keep all of the country’s oil money for himself. They decided to establish a representative body to advise — and direct — the ruler. They chose 150 electors who voted for the members of Kuwait’s first parliament, an institution whose energy shook the foundations of Al Sabah authority by creating government agencies, reforming the tax system and writing a constitution. When this body demanded that the

emir relinquish payments from the oil company, he resisted. Sheikh Ahmad called for a new parliament to be chosen by an enlarged electorate, but the result was a second parliament that looked like the first. The emir sent the police to retrieve the parliament's records, including the regime-changing constitution. When the security forces came to seize the documents, one person was killed, several were injured and the rest went into hiding. The emir is said to have danced in Safat Square that evening, delighted with the outcome and convinced that Kuwaitis' parliamentary ambitions had been vanquished for good.

This setback for participatory governance in Kuwait left two legacies. The Al Sabah learned that they could crush popular movements if they were willing to use force. But Kuwaitis' brief experience with a parliament convinced them that they were a democratic nation. However deficient the subsequent institutions, the "1939 parliament" created popular attitudes that have persisted ever since.

Kuwait acquired its present constitution in 1962, when Arab nationalism was riding high and the newly independent state was seeking to construct a Kuwaiti nationalism able to command popular loyalty to the regime. It remains the most liberal constitution in the region. In addition to a parliament with actual, if limited, legislative powers (the Majlis al-Umma), the 1962 constitution established limits on executive authority to curtail citizen expression. It guaranteed civil liberties such as a free press and the right to assemble. It also had limitations — for example, nominating the family rather than the individual as the basic political unit of the state, thereby supporting patriarchy, making Islamic law one of the foundations of positive law, thereby diluting the document's promise of freedom of religion, and placing the emir and crown prince beyond the reach of public criticism. Nonetheless, the constitution has served as a bulwark against perpetuation of the regime's frequent extra-legal behavior.

The parliament and the civil liberties it guarantees present constant challenges to the regime. One emir attempted to destroy them by suspending the constitution twice, from 1976 to 1981 and from 1986 to 1992. Under the constitution, the emir can dismiss the parliament but he must call for new elections within 60 days. New elections were not called after these suspensions, both of which were reactions against the parliament's unwillingness to turn a blind eye to the regime's financial and other malfeasance. Each time, the suspensions came when key cabinet ministers, some members of the ruling family, were threatened with interpellation, a procedure requiring them to respond to questions about their activities and, depending on their answers, to face a vote of confidence. Each suspension came to an end in part as a result of resistance from the Kuwaiti people demanding the restoration of "their" constitution.

During the two eras without parliaments, the emir tried to change the way the Majlis al-Umma was chosen as a means of getting one that would be more compliant. In 1980 he tried to amend the constitution, but protests forced a change in strategy. The emir turned to making structural changes intended to undermine the parliament by mobilizing new constituencies to weaken the power of the merchants and the Arab nationalists who formed the core of the opposition. Prior to the reinstatement of Parliament in 1981, he sought allies among Kuwaiti Islamists, and enlarged the electorate by conferring first-category citizenship on Bedouins from Najd in central Arabia, allowing them to vote and run for office. (Before this conferment, these Kuwaitis had enjoyed other citizenship rights, but had been denied political rights because they had not registered for citizenship at the designated time.) The changes reduced the weight of merchants and urban intellectuals in the parliament and contributed to growing antagonism between urban (*hadhar*) and "tribal" (*badu*) Kuwaitis.

The emir also redrew voting districts, redistributing neighborhoods across constituencies in a way that increased the political power of the tribes. Finally, he changed the size of these constituencies, turning the constitutionally established ten voting districts into 25 new ones. This move made direct

electoral interference — vote buying or mounting frivolous candidacies — cheaper and more likely to succeed. Not surprisingly, the 1981 election returned a conservative body in which Islamists and tribal representatives were highly influential. But Kuwaitis are not Lego pieces to be snapped into place. The 1985 election produced a parliament in which the regime's old divide-and-rule tactics failed to prevent the formation of coalitions across theoretically uncongenial population groups — hadhar and badu, Sunni and Shi'i, Islamist and liberal — bent on demanding answers from cabinet ministers about education, problems with the Central Bank, and concerns arising from the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). In response, the emir undertook a second illegal suspension in 1986, five years after the last one had ended.

Invasion and Aftermath

Before Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in August 1990, Kuwaitis had mobilized at a series of Monday night meetings held at one or another home of members of the prorogued parliament. Because civil liberties were also suspended, public spaces were unavailable for political speech and action. Diwaniyyas, traditional home-based meetings, remained the safest venues for talking politics, but the "Monday *diwaniyyas*" upped the ante, in part because the meetings were so large. They also transgressed what Kuwaiti historian Farah al-Nakib has identified as the metaphorical wall patiently constructed by the regime between hadhar and badu, as a way to separate their neighborhoods and thereby their interests. [4] Especially in the "outlying areas" where badu were concentrated, security forces went to break the meetings up. The "Monday diwaniyyas" were discontinued after a particularly violent encounter and, some weeks later, the emir called for new elections — to a "consultative" assembly. Most prominent members of the opposition refused even to run, fearing that their candidacies would be interpreted as an imprimatur. Democratization in Kuwait looked like a dead letter.

But it was revived by Saddam. After the invasion, the opposition used the Iraqi occupation as a new opportunity to press for democracy in Kuwait. They confronted the Al Sabah at two mass meetings held in Jidda, Saudi Arabia, where the ruling family had sought refuge, and extracted promises of change. After liberation, citizen demands combined with pressure from the coalition countries that had chased Saddam's forces back into Iraq first brought regime-imposed martial law to an end and then persuaded the rulers to hold new elections in October 1992. The restoration of the parliament restored the level of popular activism normal to Kuwait, but with a difference. The experience of the regime's reactions to peaceful protests against the continued suspension of the parliament, coupled with the harsh crackdown following liberation, pushed the new 1992 parliament, with its large portion of Islamist and secular opposition figures, to demand institutional changes.

The parliament established a new standing committee on human rights and several domestic human rights organizations were formed to investigate allegations of human rights violations. Political action concentrated on rolling back encroachments on civil liberties and on extending political rights to Kuwaitis then deprived of them, second-category citizens and women. Kuwait's ailing emir, Sheikh Jabir al-Ahmad fought to keep the gains he had made since the 1986 parliamentary closure, but in 1999, he dissolved the parliament again, this time according to the constitution. Perhaps with his legacy in mind, one of the decrees he issued during the absence of the parliament extended full political rights to Kuwaiti women. His initiative was voted down by the 1999 parliament, however, and political rights for women were not achieved until May 2005, mere months before Sheikh Jabir's death in January 2006.

Orange and Other Bright Spots

The impasse of 2012 is a continuation of this long struggle between emirs and parliaments but, since Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad became emir in January 2006, the confrontations have grown increasingly poisonous. The animosity is boosted by high and rising levels of popular as well as elite dissatisfaction with the performance of the government and ruling family. Ironically, Sheikh Sabah became emir on a wave of warm feelings, having taken charge after a politically difficult transition to a new head of state. But the good will dissipated quickly when he unveiled what observers felt was a mediocre cabinet, and revealed his intention to award a monopoly of power to members of his branch of the Al Sabah. Rather than following the storyline of alternation between the Al Ahmad and Al Salim branches by naming an Al Salim to the position of crown prince, he chose his half-brother, Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad, to assume that position and his nephew, Sheikh Nasir al-Muhammad al-Ahmad, to be prime minister.

By continuing the separation of the positions of crown prince and prime minister that had taken place when he became prime minister due to the illness of the-then crown prince, Sheikh Saad al-Salim, Sheikh Sabah missed the opportunity to shield his prime minister from demands for accountability. He himself had experienced little public criticism while serving as acting prime minister during the illness of Sheikh Saad. He had presented himself as an effective leader and, to a degree surprising to many long-time women's rights campaigners, something of a feminist as well. But his apparent immunity from scrutiny was just that — apparent. The separation of these two offices had made public criticism of the prime minister possible for the first time since the adoption of the 1962 constitution, which forbids such appraisals of the emir and crown prince. Sheikh Sabah had emerged relatively unscathed, but a deficient prime minister could hope for no mercy.

Sheikh Nasir was not seen as particularly competent; it did not take long for concerns to arise regarding his honesty as well. The emir and the parliament fought over the accountability of the prime minister for most of seven years. Sheikh Sabah protected Sheikh Nasir, refusing to accept any of his pro forma resignations every time a new government was formed, regardless of the desires of elected members of the parliament and eventually of many Kuwaiti citizens for Sheikh Nasir to leave. Meanwhile, the successful push for women's rights inspired young Kuwaitis to use the techniques they had applied in the women's rights movement to achieve other political aims. Less than six months after Sheikh Sabah's accession, the regime was confronted by the reincarnation of a long quiescent campaign to redraw election districts that had suddenly and unexpectedly attracted thousands of vociferous supporters to a broad-based movement spearheaded by young Kuwaitis wearing orange. Rallies and street demonstrations that grew in size over a period of weeks brought out security forces. A clash at the parliament building that attracted the enthusiastic support of more than half of the elected members of the 2003 National Assembly pushed matters to a confrontation.

The focus of the movement was a proposal to shrink Kuwait's 25 electoral districts into five large constituencies in the hope of curtailing the electoral corruption that had surged after 1981. Parliamentary supporters of the protesters threatened to question the prime minister, triggering calls for dissolution of the National Assembly and ensuring that at least one more election would be run under the old system. But the 2006 election did not get the emir's desired results. It returned 35 candidates, from across the political spectrum, who had been endorsed and assisted by the five-district movement in return for pledges to fight corruption if they were elected. Their first major accomplishment was to pass a five-district plan.

The pattern of dissolutions followed by "snap" elections continued, with tactics on both sides escalating at every iteration. Corruption persisted as did increasingly frequent attempts, some

successful, to interpellate cabinet ministers and eventually the prime minister. The toll exacted by these repeated unscheduled elections fell more on candidates and voters than on the regime, which probably saw utility in rising popular — and elite — disaffection with the state of politics in the country. By 2009 and Sheikh Sabah's third snap election, the legitimacy of elections as such was in doubt. Candidates disliked the hassle and expense of running so often just to serve for a year or two, and citizens found the frequent elections both disruptive and annoying. Because the two previous elections (2006, 2008) had accomplished so little, several respected incumbents refused to run in 2009 and many voters refused to go to the polls. According to state figures, turnout in 2009 was just below 60 percent, a significant drop from the norm of around 80 percent.

The brightest spot in the 2009 election was that the first women were elected to the National Assembly. One, Ma'souma al-Mubarak, was the top vote getter in her district. But the brightness was also blinding. Media concentration on the novelty of female parliamentarians helped to deflect popular attention from the continued struggle between Kuwait's executive and legislative branches. The opposition was not distracted for long, however. Outrage over ubiquitous and blatant corruption finally forced the Al Sabah to permit Sheikh Nasir to be questioned, but only in a closed session. The "grilling," which focused on allegations of bribery, took place in December 2009. Before the interpellation, the ruling family exacted promises from a majority of elected MPs to support the prime minister. All four women joined their acquiescing colleagues in a tacit exchange for the precedent of being able to question a prime minister at all.

But the emir was not mollified. His continued rage was reflected in an April 2010 interview with *Der Spiegel*, when Sheikh Sabah expanded his attacks on the parliament to include the constitution itself. As opposition members continued meeting to devise stratagems for increasing the rulers' accountability, security forces were sent in December 2010 to attack a professor of law and several members of Parliament at a diwaniyya of another member. One of those attending said that the officer who beat 'Ubayd al-Wasmi, the professor, came with a photograph of his target, and that the security forces had been instructed to replace their rubber truncheons with wooden sticks.

2011

This intimidation did not stop demands to remove the prime minister. Sheikh Nasir survived a vote of confidence in January 2011, when 22 MPs voted against him, but popular resistance stiffened as the Arab uprisings swept from Tunisia to the Gulf. The Al Sabah feared that Kuwaitis would join Tunisians and Egyptians in pressing for their overthrow, despite evidence stretching back to the Iraqi occupation attesting to Kuwaitis' allegiance to the ruling family. Ironically, the Arab revolts probably had their greatest influence in Kuwait on other dissident groups. In the early spring of 2011, stateless bidun marched to protest their lack of recognition and rights. They were quickly suppressed although gestures were made to extend citizenship to a fraction of the bidun population. Later in the year Kuwait was hit by a wave of strikes, mostly settled by generous wage concessions. But the political demonstrations continued along their pre-2011 trajectory throughout. Protesters sought to force the resignation of the prime minister and other ministers from the ruling family, such as the economy minister, Sheikh Ahmad al-Fahd, accused of corruption in awarding \$900 million in government contracts. Representatives from professional societies and thousands of other Kuwaitis who wanted corruption curbed were among the marchers, some of whom loudly declared their aspirations for a "constitutional monarchy," one that subscribes to the rule of law.

The demonstrators did take cues from other Arab protesters in some respects, such as by scheduling events on Fridays. Friday gatherings were held in Safat Square, no doubt triggering memories of the first Kuwaiti parliament that had opposed the high-handed governance of the emir's father. In May

2011, the plaza was closed to demonstrators, who were told they could congregate only on the narrow median in front of the National Assembly, now called Irada Square. This move essentially limited the right to assembly by criminalizing rallies taking place in any other venue, although the first Friday demonstration after that decision found gatherings in both places with no interference from police.

The wave of strikes began in September 2011, at about the same time that local banks were reported to be preparing to refer between 15 and 20 members of Parliament to the public prosecutor to be investigated for money laundering. As the investigation proceeded and more MPs were implicated, the suspicious deposits in their accounts began to look like bribes and the bribes seemed to be coming from the prime minister. Protests intensified and on November 17, thousands of mostly young Kuwaitis, including many from the tribes, and led by opposition members of Parliament, stormed the parliament building. Five security personnel were reported as wounded, along with an uncounted number of demonstrators. Although this “black Wednesday” was rapidly designated in the press as a death knell for the opposition, the parliament moved along with proceedings to interpellate the prime minister who, once more, resigned. Finally, in early December, after five years, three unscheduled elections, four cabinet “reshuffles” and a brief period of indecision, the emir accepted Sheikh Nasir’s resignation and appointed a new prime minister. When public protests and behind-the-scenes pressures continued, however, the emir dismissed the parliament and called for new elections yet again.

Invective and Interpellation

To hold a new election at the height of popular anger against the regime, and in the face of opposition triumphalism at finally winning the long-running battle against Sheikh Nasir, seems as incomprehensible as appointing a crown prince separate from the prime minister. The 2012 campaign issues included calls to end corruption and failed development policies, but many candidates also campaigned hard on amending the constitution to change the relations between government and parliament. Yet elections are blunt instruments, and this one was no different. There were almost as many proposals for amending the constitution as there were candidates, and what exactly the new parliament’s “mandate” might be was far from clear.

The campaign was marred by invective and violence. A river of hate speech issued from the campaign of a candidate who had spent two years attacking the tribes naturalized in the 1960s and 1970s on a TV station owned by a member of the ruling family. In addition to criticizing tribal members of Parliament and stateless bidun, Muhammad al-Juwayhil repeatedly insisted that only those hadhar families who had resided inside the wall that had encircled the old town of Kuwait City prior to the coming of oil were “true” Kuwaiti citizens. The large and powerful Al Mutayr were a prime target of his diatribes. Three days before the election, al-Juwayhil’s campaign tent was burned to the ground, reportedly after he had promised to “step on” the Mutayris. A TV station that had mobilized sectarian mobs to bring down the government in 2008 was stormed by tribe members who objected to its interview of another pro-government critic, Nabil Al Fadhl. Both men won seats, ensuring a constant supply of vituperation against tribal citizens and their representatives in the 2012 parliament.

Overall, the results reflected, in addition to the popularity of individual candidates and pious hopes that Islamists would be less vulnerable to corruption than their secular opponents, huge popular support for the opposition. Musallam al-Barrak, a Mutayri from the fourth district who had led the parliamentary opposition to privatization and the regime’s development plans in the 2009 parliament, received the largest number of votes of any candidate nationwide.

The overwhelming dominance of the body by tribal and Islamist representatives also affected its complexion and tactics. Tribal members were the spearheads of the opposition, and Musallam al-Barrak promised to continue his pressure on corrupt practices and investment policies he disliked. Islamists wanted laws that conformed to their version of Islam. They began work to amend the constitution to make shari'a the only source of Kuwaiti law, proposed the establishment of a Saudi-style "morality police" to regulate public behavior of women, and mobilized a large majority in May to approve the second reading of a bill that set death as the maximum penalty for blasphemy, which the emir declined to sign. Both groups are populist factions, although some Islamists diverge from the economic populism espoused by the others. There were few liberals and no women in the 2012 parliament to dilute or divert the anger incited by the events of the past year. Liberals held little appeal to voters while whisper campaigns imputing corruption to three of the women made it easy to choose other candidates to support.

The 2012 parliament continued to interpellate ministers and its efforts to question the new prime minister, Sheikh Jabir al-Mubarak Al Sabah, succeeded on the second try. Sheikh Jabir was the first Kuwaiti premier to be "grilled" in an open session. But regime critics had their own distracting issues. A youth-sponsored "Kuwait charter 2012" was endorsed by first-time MP Faysal al-Yahya, an independent young Islamist from the third district seen as the parliamentary voice of the rising generation in the short-lived parliament. The desire for a youth perspective in parliament is a measure of the antagonism between the many young Kuwaitis who feel shut out of the economy and dismissed by society, on the one hand, and their navel-gazing and nervous elders, on the other. During the campaign, urban citizens and candidates moved gingerly around memories of the huge gatherings of youth, many from the tribes, in the protest marches, especially the storming and occupation of the National Assembly on "black Wednesday" by a crowd estimated at more than 15,000.

Other candidates had run on platforms calling for reform of the criminal law. When the new parliament convened, three youth groups demanded that the opposition majority secure the release of dozens of youths held in connection with the storming of the TV station and the burning of Muhammad al-Juwayhil's campaign tent at the end of the campaign. Having learned firsthand the power of mass demonstrations, they accompanied this request with a threat to organize a sit-in inside the National Assembly to press for new rules on "preventive detention." Meanwhile, al-Juwayhil demanded a parliamentary investigation of those he alleges hold dual citizenship. In May, he was cited for coming drunk to Parliament and for spitting on another member, and was barred from the floor for two weeks. Sectarian tensions also threatened to overwhelm Kuwait, so much so that the government has increased surveillance of the press, closing a Shi'i newspaper for about two months and fining its editor for inciting sectarian strife. The editor had named writers and news agencies and cited comments in social media that he saw as defamatory of Kuwaiti Shi'a.

The general chaos reached a new height in June. Mere days after the emir had announced an unprecedented but constitutional one-month suspension of the parliament, the constitutional court ruled that the authorization of the 2012 parliamentary election had been procedurally flawed. The court declared the 2012 parliament to be illegal, reinstating the 2009 assembly. Some elected to both parliaments rejected the reinstatement and there were threats of resignation. The old speaker was recalled to preside over the reconstituted body, but he could not mobilize a quorum, while the coexistence of two dubiously legitimate parliaments further divided the opposition with regard to how to proceed. New elections were the logical solution, but some feared that the government would go back to 1981 and change the election law as a means of producing the kind of parliament it desired.

These fears were confirmed when the speaker suggested that the constitutional court be asked to review the five-districts law. The new cabinet, nominated and sworn in despite the lack of a

functioning parliament, agreed to this plan in early August. While Kuwaitis awaited the court's decision, opposition members threatened to boycott any election based on a government-produced new election law. But when the decision came down in late September, the court declared the electoral law to be constitutional, clearing the way for new elections based on the five districts.

On October 3, the emir officially dismissed the 2009 parliament, which had never met during the three months of its court-mandated reincarnation. Still, there were intense concerns that the electoral law would be changed before the election. Pro- and anti-government MPs split on the question of the number of candidates each voter should be able to choose. Pro-government forces favored reducing the number from four perhaps all the way to one. Anti-government MPs insisted that the old law should prevail for the next 2012 election and said that if it were changed, they would boycott the election.

The opposition planned a series of rallies to push for retention of the four-vote rule and, once again, demonstrators were met with security forces. A large gathering at the "legal" venue, Irada Square, resulted in a clash between demonstrators and security forces on October 15. Despite the run-in with security, opposition leaders refused to cancel future rallies, calling for another on October 21. On that day Irada Square filled up quickly and a crowd variously estimated at 50,000 to 150,000 unarmed persons headed for the Kuwait Towers, waving Kuwaiti flags and singing the national anthem. Suddenly, they were surrounded and hemmed in by special forces and the National Guard, armed with tear gas, rubber bullets and truncheons. An uncounted number were injured, and some leaders and demonstrators were arrested.

Ambiguous Lessons

In spite of promises to prosecute all violators equally, including a few members of the Al Sabah who were among the demonstrators, Kuwait's political crisis is far from resolved. But lines have been drawn. Some are red and some mere toe marks in the sand, but the stakes in this confrontation are high, and both sides have much to lose depending on where and how they step. If they move carefully, the election scheduled for December 1 could bring this latest episode in the long story of struggle for rule by law in Kuwait to closure. But skirmishes across the lines have already begun. The emir tossed the first gauntlet when he issued a decree amending the electoral constituency law to limit voters to the choice of just one candidate. The edict appeared in a special edition of the official gazette Kuwait al-Yawm, making it effective immediately. The regime rallied support for the emir's move and endorsed a statement signed by a list of Kuwaiti notables that condemned boycotting the election, accusing members of the "hard" opposition of lying to citizens.

Other Kuwaitis were not so quick to get in line. One held the government responsible for the reaction of those members of Parliament who had rejected the decree because it had been issued so late in the game. Another noted that the emir could take whatever action lies within his constitutional authority to protect the country, but that Kuwaiti governments had long been packed with incompetent people who were there to take orders rather than to govern. Accepting the decree without debate would encourage the government to change the law whenever it liked to suit itself.

Tensions remain high. Musallam al-Barrak was arrested for having insulted the emir at the October 15 march, and a special task force has been set up in the Interior Ministry to review tweets and speeches by activists for other slights to Sheikh Sabah or others in the ruling family. The Ministry briefly banned gatherings of over 20 persons but, after a thinly veiled protest from the United States, rescinded the measure. Still, demonstrations in protest of al-Barrak's arrest were met with riot police and tear gas. Among the others arrested recently is attorney and blogger Muhammad al-

Jasim, who was jailed in 2010-2011 and beaten by prison guards, also for having cast aspersions on members of the ruling family.

The opposition has set the date for the next march for November 11, and there is talk of a “grand march” on December 1, date of the second 2012 election. But as each side searches for lessons from the past, it would be wise to remember that history is never clear and rarely “progresses.” Often the best move is lateral.

The regime has learned that it is possible to quash dissent for years if it is willing to use force. But as Kuwait’s own experience shows, the application of force against the population is costly. Every reassembly of a next “new normal” attenuates the bonds of fealty and affection that connect Kuwaitis to their rulers. Today, disaffection from the regime and the ruling family is audible in conversations and visible in tweets and blogs. Citizens who were relatively non-political in decades past now criticize members of the ruling family by name. Even poking at the reputations of ruling family members long deceased was rare in the Kuwait of old. That the regime recognizes this fact is shown by its arrests of Kuwaitis on charges of insulting the ruling family. Yet if the Al Sabah were to take the path of their fellow royals in Bahrain with regard to force, such a move would impose high external costs. Why aggravate the Americans unnecessarily, and why not answer to Kuwait’s population instead of to the peers who might decide to send in armed forces against dissenters on your behalf?

The opposition also confronts ambiguous lessons. The Bahraini opposition boycotted the first election held under the 2002 constitution and, as a result, a large segment of Bahraini society was not represented in the first parliament. This lack of representation further isolated large numbers of citizens who already were hurt by economic and status discrimination. It also damaged the opposition, which showed itself as self-indulgent and strategically inept. It is not necessary to travel so far for a bad example, however. In 1990, Kuwaiti opposition leaders refused to run for election to the extra-legal consultative assembly. The outcome of the low-turnout 1990 election was an assembly that was easily manipulated by the regime. It institutionalized parliamentary corruption despite its relatively short life, trading benefits for constituents for political compliance and lavish material perks.

Although some observers might hope for a “real” revolution as a result of the Arab uprisings, Kuwaitis might be better advised to continue their less dramatic, non-violent pressure to push their reluctant rulers toward constitutional monarchy. Yet this strategy is more difficult to pull off today than in the past, thanks to the frequent resort to abuse by security forces and the mobilization of thousands of angry young men who are no more Legos to be snapped in place by their “betters” than their elders proved to be. If their dignity continues to be assailed on the streets and in police stations, they might well retaliate in kind.

A continuation of showdowns where the legitimate concerns of the opposition are ignored or belittled has already been shown to be risky. As Kuwaiti activists have noted, allowing a bad situation to deteriorate has its own perils. Should the regime hang back, it could be pushed into reacting rather than leading, ratcheting the conflict to more dangerous levels as each side responds to the last provocation from the other. This scenario would not be good for Kuwait.

The “glorious revolution” of 1688 is not the only model for fundamental political change, even if one sticks to the experience of Britain. Among many other memorable years of *mano a mano* confrontation there are 1170 or 1535, when dissidents were martyred, or 1641, when the king was beheaded and Oliver Cromwell began his ascent. Each of these years offers an object lesson in just how deadly carrying disagreements to extremes can be for rulers and dissenters alike.

P.S.

* From Merip, published November 1, 2012:

<http://www.merip.org/mero/mero110112>

Footnotes

[1] Hussein Agha and Robert Malley, "This Is Not a Revolution," New York Review of Books, November 8, 2012.

[2] J. G. A. Pocock, Three British Revolutions: 1641, 1688, 1776 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

[3] Fahed Yahya al-Sumait, "Contested Discourses on Arab Democratization in the United States and Kuwait," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Washington, 2011.

[4] Farah Al-Nakib, "Kuwait City: Urbanisation, the Built Environment, and the Urban Experience Before and After Oil (1716-1986)," unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, School of Oriental and African Studies-University of London, 2011.