

Maintaining a delicate balance

PROFILE OF HIS HIGHNESS SHEIKH SABAH AL-AHMED AL-JABER AL-SABAH

AMIR OF THE STATE OF KUWAIT

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Kuwait's Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmed Al-Jaber Al-Sabah has faced unprecedented domestic challenges over the last year, as the repercussions of the fast-changing political scenario in the Arab world resonate throughout the region.

In October the Amir dissolved the country's parliament, paving the way for elections on December 1, meeting a major demand of the Islamist-led opposition. In June the Constitutional Court annulled February's poll, which saw major gains for the opposition, and dissolved the new parliament.

Kuwait's 50-member Parliament has not met for much of the year because of an opposition boycott. The most empowered among the Gulf Arab states, it frequently directly challenges the ruling family over its policies and government spending. Opposition lawmakers have demanded top government officials, including the prime minister, appear for questioning. In addition, opposition by some MPs to privatisation measures advocated by the government is preventing new investment in the downstream and upstream oil industry and in the power sector. Sheikh Sabah has acknowledged that Kuwaitis will not be able to rely forever on income from their nation's vast – but finite – energy resources. He has spoken out on the need to transform Kuwait into a world-class financial and commercial centre in order to ensure prosperity for its citizens in the decades to come.

In recent months opposition groups have staged meetings outside designated rally areas, resulting in clashes between demonstrators and police.

"Today we are required to choose between the rule of law and the Constitution and stick to it, to the road of safety, or to pursue chaos and infringe on the powers of the responsible constitutional authorities. The practices of deviation, violence and chaos have sparked fear and anxiety," he said on state television.

"Like you, I have been struck with feelings of pain, sorrow and concern because of the regrettable developments," the Amir added.

The Amir warned the opposition that it would not achieve its goals through threats and challenges. "There is no substitute for dialogue to achieve the best results," he said.

Sheikh Sabah said he had received calls from Kuwait's Gulf neighbours offering to provide support

to safeguard the emirate's security and stability.

Since becoming Amir, Sheikh Sabah has taken an increasingly active role in mediating between the National Assembly and the government.

Between 2005 and 2007, women were given the right to vote, and have been appointed to ministerial positions, a law banning public gatherings was overturned, restrictions on new media outlets were curbed, and a key election brought about important electoral system reform. At the same time, there has been a crackdown on Islamist militants, and the school curriculum changed to promote religious tolerance.

Kuwait is one of America's most strategic Gulf military allies, and its importance to Washington will be all the greater after the US troop withdrawal from Iraq in December. It is now the hub for US ground forces in the Gulf region, where the US and its Arab allies seek to counter Iran's military build-up.

A man of experience

Yet few would argue with the fact that the Amir has the experience and ability to handle the demands he faces at home and the impact of instability around Kuwait.

In 2006, before he was unanimously elected Kuwait's Amir by the National Assembly, Sheikh Sabah had already been the country's de facto ruler for several years due to the long-standing health problems of his predecessor and cousin, Sheikh Saad al-Abdullah.

Over the course of his more than 40 years as Kuwait's Foreign Minister, much of Sheikh Sabah's energy and diplomatic skills were taken up handling the challenges constantly posed by Kuwait's important geostrategic position between its much larger neighbours, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Iran.

Kuwaiti-Iranian relations have been difficult since Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979, a situation further exacerbated by Kuwait's support of Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988. Since the end of the war more than two decades ago, however, Sheikh Sabah has worked hard to better the two countries' political relationship. Relations have improved since 2005, thanks to greater bilateral economic cooperation between the two countries.

Following the invasion of Kuwait by Saddam Hussein in 1990, Sheikh Sabah used his considerable diplomatic skills and international popularity to lobby for an international response. Since Saddam was

overthrown, Sheikh Sabah has worked hard to improve relations with its neighbour, which culminated in the visit by the Kuwaiti Prime Minister, Sheikh Nasser Mohammed al Sabah, to Baghdad in January 2011. This was followed a month later by a visit by Iraqi President Nouri Al Maliki to Kuwait.

Sheikh Sabah used the Arab League Summit in March 2012 in Baghdad to discuss outstanding issues such as the compensations to be afforded by Iraq as a result of the 1991 invasion of Kuwait, Kuwait's position regarding Iraq's exit from Chapter VII of the UN Charter, the demarcation of borders between the two neighbouring countries and the return of the remains of Kuwaitis who disappeared during the Iraqi invasion.

Then there is the question of Kuwait's substantial Shia majority, which makes up more than 25 per cent of the population. Unlike in Saudi Arabia or Bahrain, members of the Shia minority are found in government posts in Kuwait at every level: two ministers in the previous cabinet were Shia. Meanwhile, nine of the 50 members of parliament are Shia, as are various senior advisers to the Amir.

The recent unrest in the Arab world has brought the issue to the fore. As a result of the Shia uprising in Bahrain last year, Sheikh Sabah's

government faced a difficult decision that illustrated the problems involved in balancing the interests of the Sunni and Shia communities.

Saudi Arabia, fearing the unrest would spread, marshalled a military force from the Gulf's Sunni monarchies to help restore order.

Saudi Arabia duly sent 1,000 troops to help suppress the revolt in Bahrain – and the kingdom made clear that it wanted Kuwait's armed forces to contribute.

Sheikh Sabah faced a dilemma: he did not want to be accused of abandoning his brother Sunni monarchy. Meanwhile, many of Kuwait's Sunni citizens were equally fervent in their belief that a Shia revolt in the Gulf could not be allowed to succeed.

Public rallies were held on both sides of the vital question of whether or not to intervene in Bahrain. In the end, Sheikh Sabah decided he would help rescue Bahrain's rulers. But instead of sending troops, Kuwait infuriated Saudi Arabia by dispatching two warships as a token contribution.

Diplomats in Kuwait City have no doubt that Sheikh Sabah came to the right decision for the sake of his own country's domestic harmony. Had Kuwaiti soldiers taken part in the suppression of Shia demonstrators, the consequences at home could have been severe.

At the same time, Kuwait has supported the pro-democracy uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya. The Amir has added his voice to the growing chorus of Arab states calling on Syria's regime to take advantage of international efforts to find a peaceful solution to the violence there.

Resolving the Parliamentary stalemate

While Kuwait's parliament enjoys significant powers compared to its counterparts in other Gulf countries, observers have pointed out that it lacks the mechanisms for resolving disputes between the parliament and the government other than calling new elections.

Knowing that they may not be in office for long, MPs often fail to work on longer-term policy projects that they will likely not see through, and are more interested in raising their profile by criticising the government, or getting handouts for their constituents.

Over the last year, the opposition has been probing the boundaries of what is acceptable, aware that popular movements in some parts of the Arab region have successfully claimed a greater share of power.

Given the potential for a further stalemate, the country will require Sheikh Sabah to draw on his consummate skills and experience in order to continue to implement the economic and political reforms that have made Kuwait a model of democracy and stability in the region. **F**

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