

Kuwait cracks down on political dissent

Jean Shaoul
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A Kuwaiti court sentenced the main opposition leader and former legislator Mussallam al-Barak to five years in prison this week for insulting Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, the 83-year-old ruler of Kuwait.

The severity of the sentence, an attempt to silence political dissent, testifies to the extreme fragility of the political situation in oil-rich Gulf state and the determination of its ruling family to hang on to power and wealth at all costs.

Al-Barak was detained in October for “undermining the status of the Emir” after addressing a mass rally of thousands of protesters outside parliament in Kuwait City, angry at the emir’s plan to change the election law. He said, “We will not allow you, your highness, to take Kuwait into the abyss of autocracy.”

“We no longer fear your prisons and your riot batons,” he added.

The police broke up the demonstration with batons, tear gas and pellet guns. They arrested three former legislators, including al-Barak, and brought them to court, blindfolded and with their heads shaven. The emir moved swiftly to ban gatherings of 20 or more people without prior permission.

Al-Barak’s lawyer, Abdullah al-Ahmad, said that he will appeal the decision that “violated the legal procedures and for failing to provide the defence team with sufficient guarantees.”

Since October, more than 35 other people have been charged with insulting the emir, with at least six people, including three former opposition legislators, convicted on the same charge. Although in February, five opposition activists were acquitted of insulting the emir on Twitter, one of them, Rashid al-Enzi, was sentenced to two years in jail in January in a different case.

Last week, Kuwait was reported to be considering a media law that could issue fines of up to £1 million for insulting the ruling family on the Internet and social media.

The government put its special forces on alert and increased police patrols, fearing a protest march after the court ruling.

A recent meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) pledged to support its members against mass revolutionary movements that toppled Tunisia’s Ben Ali and Egypt’s Mubarak, with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates pushing Kuwait to crackdown on its Islamist and liberal opponents.

There is rising opposition to the Al-Sabah family’s corrupt and dictatorial rule. The sheikdom has little popular support and is dependent on US backing. Sandwiched between more powerful neighbours, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq, Kuwait is one of Washington’s allies in the oil- and gas-rich region. It is home to several major US military bases and acted as the launching pad for the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq.

Kuwait, along with the other Gulf monarchies, provides the crucial Sunni axis against Shi’ite Iran and its allies: Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Iraq’s powerful Shi’ite parties, which the US views as a regional threat. At the same time, the sheikhdom sent troops to Bahrain in 2011 along with the rest of the GCC to crush all protests before they could spread to other Gulf States.

Ostensibly more liberal than the rest of the Gulf states in that it allows political parties, does not enforce a strict Islamic dress code for women, and has a National Assembly, this parliament is entirely cosmetic and subordinate to the Al-Sabah family. The emir appoints the prime minister, a member of his family, and members of the cabinet, who are largely made up of the Al-Sabah family. He has the power to dissolve parliament, which he has done almost every year since taking the throne in 2006, whenever it has sought to challenge his ministers and their corruption.

When in February 2012, new elections resulted in a 70 percent majority for a loose opposition coalition of

various Islamist groups, tribal candidates and secular nationalists who threatened to call the interior minister to account for alleged corruption, the Kuwaiti ruler suspended it, apparently at Saudi Arabia's behest.

He then leaned on the constitutional court to dissolve the parliament, which it did in June last year, declaring that the elections had been invalid.

This prompted mass demonstrations calling for parliament's reinstatement, a constitutional monarchy, a prime minister appointed by parliament, and democracy. While similar calls in the United Arab Emirates resulted in the jailing of several activists for five months in 2011, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah promised fresh elections in December but changed the voting system in order to ensure a more pliable parliament.

The opposition parties and youth activists were infuriated, leading to mass demonstrations last October and November, the largest ever seen in Kuwait, where the ruling family became the focus.

The opposition boycotted the elections. With many Kuwaitis distrustful of both the government and the Islamist groups—some of whom backed the brutal suppression of the Bahraini demonstrations in 2011—just 40 percent of those eligible cast their vote in December last year, down from 60 percent the previous February.

The electorate is a small one. Only 1 million of Kuwait's 3.3 million residents are citizens. A considerable number of its Arab residents are *bidoons*, without papers or stateless, despite having lived there for generations, denied access to decent jobs and state benefits. Most are migrant workers from the Arab world and South Asia.

Despite its large oil revenues, Kuwait's economy has been badly affected by the global financial crisis. According to the International Monetary Fund, growth is expected to be just 1.8 percent in 2013, down from 6.6 percent in 2012. At least 20,000 Kuwaiti citizens are unemployed and the number is increasing every year, with young graduates particularly badly affected.

The Al-Sabah family, like its counterparts in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, is trying to weaken support for the opposition by blaming Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood for fomenting strife through its sister party in Kuwait and seeking to overthrow the regime.

Washington, keenly aware of the rotten foundations

upon which its allies sit, has along with Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch called on Kuwait to respect freedom of expression. It fears that by cracking down on all dissent, the venal mafia that rules the tiny oil state will fuel the opposition it seeks to quell.



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