

## Another Election, Another Cabinet: Will Kuwait Correct Its Course?

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The perennial question on Kuwaiti politics is one of domestic stability. Specifically, resolving the cabinet-parliament deadlock is high on the agenda. The 6 June 2023 legislative elections continue from a vicious cycle of dissolution and renewal. It will take a tough cabinet and bold moves to force a breakthrough.

As a constitutional monarchy with an electoral system permitting the freedom of expression, **Kuwait is a democratic anomaly among the Gulf Cooperation Council** member states. Despite the vibrant political life, the pluralist system remains imperfect, having experienced more than ten parliamentary dissolutions since 1975. This year, on June 6, Kuwait held its third parliamentary elections in the last three years, after the Constitutional Court had annulled the results of the 2022 edition and reinstated the 2020 slate of members. Will the latest vote inspire optimism? What are the key challenges and anticipated reforms?

The frequency of polling led many to believe that the turnout for the 2023 elections would have, owing to voter fatigue, dipped. However, in collated electoral data by Luciano Zacchara and Ismail Zahirovic, voter turnout stood at approximately 59.3 per cent. The estimated four-point drop, when juxtaposed with the 2022 elections, does not constitute a significant deviation from past statistics since the 2010s.

Beyond numbers, however, **the recurring feature of the Kuwaiti political scene is the standoff between its legislative and executive branches**. The reign of Emir Nawaf al-Ahmad thus far has borne witness to – besides the typical parliamentary grilling of ministers – heated exchanges. When the previous state budget was passed in November 2021, punches were thrown in the parliament chamber. The turn of 2023 saw ministers, boycott the National Assembly session, claiming that they had no say in financial matters.

With Kuwait's history of bureaucratic infighting, the cabinet formation is central to the political discussion. The latest ministers chosen by Sheikh Ahmad Al-Nawaf in June constitutes his fourth government as Prime Minister.

**The 2023 elections: revolutionary or routine?** – Much about the June elections signalled repetition with a few exceptions. Messaging from the authorities remained consistent with the public call for “correcting the course”. Parliamentary candidates, with whom the author interacted as an invited international observer, campaigned on the ground although some lamented the short notice given prior. The electoral process designated schools as polling stations, with 1,157 judicial officials deployed in supervisory roles.

**The election results reflected a combative parliamentary composition, with the return of 38 members from the scrapped 2022 Assembly**, and a mere 24 per cent entailed new faces. Analysis by local news outlet *Al Qabas* found that the fourth constituency (among the five electoral districts), known for its tribal voter base, witnessed the introduction of the most newcomers (at 40 per cent). The same piece also described how youth faces constituted a “surprise in some constituencies”. In terms of representation, Islamist elements such as the Islamic Constitutional Movement (**the Kuwaiti branch of the Muslim Brotherhood**), **retained three seats from the 2022 Assembly**, while **Salafis** enjoyed greater success with **six seats**. **Shia** representation, however, **lost two seats**. Only **one female candidate entered parliament, down from two in the 2022** edition. Daniel Tavana wrote

in a Twitter thread that the latest electoral competition in Kuwait, typically run across “sect and [tribal] origin”, has produced little change. Overall, despite weakened diversity, the newly elected Assembly is in large part reformist, contrary to the often-used description of “opposition”, since defiance tends to be issue-specific and against government decisions.

**What is expected going forward is a change to electoral laws.** This possibility was raised in the Crown Prince’s speech in April, which indicated “political reforms to help turn the country to a new phase of [...] legal reference”. Local analyst Saleh al-Saeedi remarked to the author that the likelihood of an increase in the number of electoral districts (from five to ten) is higher than a hike in the number of votes per eligible citizen. He argued that these prospective changes will likely shake up the parliamentary configuration, particularly if the current one is far from palatable to the government.

**One Speaker to unite them all?** – The election of the Speaker of Parliament was another trending topic. The political campaign of Marzouq al-Ghanim, who served as Speaker in the assemblies of 2013, 2016, and 2020, was closely followed by many. His 2020 term concluded on a sour note as MPs rallied against him and then-Prime Minister Sabah al-Khaled. Having decided against running for office in 2022, al-Ghanim returned this year and his final rally speech attempted at winning sympathy.

Despite al-Ghanim’s best efforts at politicking, his controversial status meant that veteran legislator, **88-year-old Ahmed al-Saadoun, won the Speaker’s seat** for an impressive sixth time. In a system where individual personalities have immense impact, **al-Saadoun’s positive working relationship with both the Prime Minister and the Crown Prince** will be deemed **crucial in bridging legislative-executive gaps**. The same interplay of personalities will also raise tensions, seeing how al-Ghanim was twice denied the chance to speak during the Assembly’s opening session.

**Cabinet choices: the right message?** – Twenty-four hours before the Assembly’s inauguration, **a cabinet with six new faces was formed**. In line with parliamentary changes, female representation dropped to a single face in the new cabinet. Issa al-Kandari, an experience politician, was selected as the mandatory elected minister (both MP and minister, known as *wazir muhalal*), serving as both Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) and Minister of State for Cabinet and Assembly Affairs. His DPM role reflects government concession, whereas the portfolios are aimed at inter-branch reconciliation, particularly after the elected ministerial position was deemed undesirable when standing for future office. Similar to previous formulae, **technocratic appointments are emphasised** by retaining Manaf al-Hajeri as Minister of Finance owing to his wealth of experience, and Mohammad al-Aiban as Minister of Commerce and Industry whose push for

microbusinesses without a physical office was publicly welcomed. Likewise, the addition of Saad al-Barrak as Minister of Oil, Economic Affairs, and Investment, banks on his expertise from his days as CEO of Zain Telecom.

**What raised eyebrows was an unprecedented appointment of four DPMs.** Further, **the selection of five Sabah sheikhs as ministers harks back to pre-December 2021 setups**. Of these five ruling family members, three of them hail from the Jaber branch, and none of Salem lineage – a telling sign of the long-held Jaber versus Salem succession binary.<sup>1</sup> Among them, the **surprising choice of Ahmad al-Fahd as Minister of Defence**,<sup>2</sup> marking his return to politics **after twelve years of absence**, confirms previous political manoeuvring behind the scenes. Kuwaiti interlocutors, however, remain divided over this pick. With al-Fahd’s graft charges still looming large, some question the message that his appointment conveys when eradicating corruption is a top government priority. Others feel that his stature as a senior Sabah member adds stability to the Jaber sheikhs in cabinet. Regardless, the leadership must confront the inevitability of Emiri succession: passing the baton down to the grandsons of Ahmad al-Jaber.

**Burgeoning unity?** – The **first Assembly session offered promising signs of cohesion**, with 47 MPs convening prior to discuss a political roadmap. The Crown Prince’s address was also realist in tone: that the government should be given time to perform and constitutional tools should be used wisely. The reality is that personality clashes remain a tipping point for Kuwait to fall back into political paralysis. **One immediate priority is passing the 2023/24 budget**, for which the draft version already anticipates an expansion of the already-bloated public wage bill. The latest resignations of both the Finance Minister, due to internal disagreements, and the Head of the Audit Bureau, are worrying signs. Crucially, the race for the next Crown Prince, if accelerated, will accompany further political plots that do not bode well for the system. **The record, reflected by the three elections in the late Emir Sabah’s first three and a half years of reign, mirrors the current political deadlock.** While many understand that sweeping reforms are needed urgently, the question is when and how the breakthrough will come. ■

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1. The Emiri succession line has traditionally alternated between the Salem and Jaber branches of the Sabah ruling family. Since the abdication of the former Emir Saad al-Abdullah al-Salim, the direction has turned in favour of the Jaber line.

2. Ahmad al-Fahd’s previous cabinet tenures (2001-11) oversaw the portfolios of media, development affairs, and mostly energy. The backstory is his rift with Nasser al-Mohammed, the former Prime Minister (2006-11), who also falls under the Jaber line.