



Kuwait — Va-PoReg Country Report

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01/23/1899 Start Autocratic Monarchy [semi-sovereign, external affairs under United Kingdom, Electoral Oligarchy]: The Sheikhdom of Kuwait gained independence from the Khalidi Emirate of Al Hasa under Sabah I bin Jaber of the Sabah Dynasty in the year 1752. The ruler had complete autonomy regarding Ottoman rule (Klaff 1991). On 01/23/1899, Sheikh Mubarak Al-Sabah signed a secret treaty with Great Britain by which Kuwait became de facto a protectorate. The protectorate status never became official although Sheikh Mubarak had several times tried to establish formal protection from the British against threats by the Ottoman Empire (Klaff 1991). While Kuwait had been a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire under special British protection since 1899 this did not affect its internal autonomy. The Sheikh was expressly granted complete administrative autonomy by the Ottoman Empire (Klaff 1991). Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. Therefore, this period is coded as an autocratic monarchy under a de facto British protectorate. On 11/03/1914, Britain declared the Sheikhdom as an autonomous government under the protection of the British (Loewenstein 2000). By this, Kuwait officially was not part of the Ottoman Empire anymore and in 1920 was officially put under British protection, this meant that while Kuwait enjoyed full autonomy in its domestic matters, while Britain held sway over its foreign affairs. Consequently, Kuwait's ruler was barred from engaging with foreign representatives and from making any territorial agreements or transactions without the approval of the British government (Loewenstein 2000, Pillai/Kumar 1962). The case fulfils all criteria to be coded as a protectorate although it is oftentimes declared as protected state. For this time, LIED codes political liberties as absent. V-Dem's PCLI indicates them as what we interpret as not really present. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were moderate. We view these as misclassifications regarding both legislative and judicial constraints. Regarding possible legislative constraints, this is obvious since there was no parliament in this regime period. On 06/19/1961 Kuwait gained full independence under al Sabah emirate on this date when the 1899 Treaty with Great Britain was terminated (Klaff 1991). On 11/11/1962, the Constitutional Assembly adopted the Constitution of Kuwait, under which the monarch (Emir) holds executive power and dominates most state institutions. Nonetheless, the elected parliament (National Assembly) has an influential role, often challenging the government. It is popularly elected on a nonpartisan basis as political parties are illegal.¹ In 1962 universal adult male suffrage was established for citizens who are 21 or older, with the exception of those who, at the time of elections, served in the armed forces.² Kuwait held its first general parliamentary elections on 01/23/1963.³ Per FH, for this regime period, the country score moves between from 8 and 7 until 1976, categorized as partly free, which we interpret as moving between rather free and rather not free. From 1977 until 1980, the country scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. From 1986 until the end of this period, the country scores between 11 and 14 as not free, which we also interpret as not free. According to LIED only multiparty legislative elections were held until 1975, from 1976 to 1980 multiparty executive and legislative elections were absent, from 1981 to 1985 only multiparty legislative elections were held, from 1986 onward multiparty executive and legislative elections were absent. We understand the elections to the parliament as of very differing integrities as V-Dems CEI fluctuates between very high scores

and zero throughout the first three decades of independence. In 1963 and 1964, as per Polity5's classification, the executive's authority was subject to minor institutional constraints. From 1965 to 1970, the executive experienced minimal limitations on decision-making, placing it in the first intermediate category. Between 1971 and 1975, the executive's authority was subject to minor institutional constraints. From 1976 to 1980, as per Polity5's classification, the executive wielded unrestricted authority without any formal limitations. Between 1981 and 1985, the executive encountered slight limitations on decision-making power imposed by other institutions. Since 1986, the executive operated with unlimited authority, facing no institutional checks on power. V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust for the relevant period, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were comprehensive from 1961-1975 and 1982-1985, and robust from 1976-1980 and 1986-1990. LIED continued to code political liberties as absent. V-Dem's PCLI increased into a range which we interpret as an ambiguous presence until 1976 and as not really present afterwards.

08/02/1990 End Autocratic Monarchy/Start Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Iraq, Personalist Autocracy]: From this date until 04/20/1991 Kuwait was for seven months occupied by Iraq. According to FH's classification for the assessed regime period, a score between 11 and 14 makes the country not free, which we also place in the not free category. Based on our observations, no multiparty executive or legislative elections were held during this period, which aligns with the observations of LIED. LIED identifies political liberties as absent, while V-Dem's PCLI is classified by us as indicating that political liberties were not really present. However, since in 1990 as well as in 1991 on 07/01 the regime was a ruling monarchy, both years appear in the dataset as a ruling monarchy. Note that regime duration after occupations is counted on anyway if the same regime is in place before and after the occupation.) For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE and LCE are both interpreted by us as indicating robust constraints on the executive.

04/20/1991 End Direct Rule Occupation Regime [by Iraq, Personalist Autocracy]/Start Autocratic Monarchy: The regime continued after the occupation without changes to the time prior to the occupation. As of 2005, women who satisfy the age and citizenship requirements are allowed to vote.⁴ Ever since 1993, V-Dem's CEI has given Kuwait a score that we understand as denoting the election to be of somewhat cleanliness. After the elections on 02/02/2012, more than 50 members of parliament formed a Majority Bloc (Al-Aghlabiyya), an anti-government opposition bloc in the National Assembly. As a response, the Emir dissolved the National Assembly and issued a decree amending the electoral law in October 2012, leaving the electoral districts intact but switching to a single non-transferable vote (SNTV) system whereby each voter would only have one vote instead of four. New elections were held on 12/01/2012, boycotted by the opposition.⁵ Kuwait remains an autocratic monarchy governed by the Sabah family. The emir selects the prime minister and appoints cabinet ministers, with the stipulation that at least one minister must be an elected member of parliament. Members of the ruling family have historically held the positions of prime minister and most senior ministerial roles. In 2020, Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah succeeded his half-brother as emir and subsequently appointed another half-brother, Sheikh Meshaal al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, as crown prince. The parliament unanimously approved the choice of heir, as required by majority vote. Later in 2021, the emir delegated numerous powers to Sheikh Meshaal.⁶ While the monarchy retains executive power and controls most state institutions, the elected parliament plays a significant role, often challenging the government. The 50-member National Assembly is elected by the public in a formally nonpartisan manner, given that political parties are prohibited. Up to 15 cabinet ministers appointed by the government may also serve as ex officio members, although they are barred from participating in confidence votes. The emir, along with the Constitutional Court, which lacks complete independence, holds the authority to dissolve the legislature. This enables the executive to dictate the timing of elections to align with its political agenda. Such instances have occurred multiple times since 2011, often following conflicts between lawmakers and senior ministers belonging to the ruling family.⁷ On 09/29/2022 general elections took place, following the dissolution of parliament by the Crown Prince. The voter turnout was approximately 50 percent. On 06/06/2023 snap elections were held. They occurred after the Constitutional Court annulled the results of the elections held in 2022, following a ruling by judges that the

preceding parliament had not been dissolved correctly. The crown prince then dissolved parliament again on 05/02/2023.⁸ The following elections took place on 04/04/2024 but again were followed by a dissolution by Sheikh Meshaal al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah⁹ who became emir after the death of Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah on 12/16/2023.¹⁰ This time the defcree suspends parliamentary activity for a period of up to four years. On 06/01/2024 the emir appointed Sheikh Sabah Khaled Al-Hamad Al-Sabah as Crown Prince. This appointment marked a historic shift, as Sheikh Sabah is the first member from the Al-Hamad branch of the Al-Sabah ruling family to hold the position, breaking the longstanding tradition of alternating power between the Al-Jaber and Al-Salem branches.¹¹ The Interior Ministry, rather than an independent institution, oversees the administration of elections, and the electoral system lacks transparency. Despite this, elections are considered competitive compared to regional standards. Concerns about corruption in campaigns persist. The constitutional framework does not permit democratic transitions of power within the executive level.¹² The authorities impose certain limitations on civil liberties, such as freedom of speech and assembly.¹³ Women, despite some legal protections from bias and abuse, remain underrepresented in the workforce and face unequal treatment in several areas of law and society.¹⁴ Per FH's evaluation for this regime period, the country scores from 9 to 10 as not free, which we categorize as rather not free. In 2024, the score had deteriorated to 11, which FH and we both interpret as not free. According to LIED multiparty executive and legislative elections were absent in 1991, from 1992 only multiparty elections were held. Furthermore, since 1991 LIED still codes political liberties as absent. V-Dem's PCLI indicates political liberties as not really present, except in 2002, from 2005 to 2007, in 2017 and since 2019 where the scores indicate an ambiguous state. Since 1992, based on Polity5's assessment, the executive faced slight limitations on power during this period. For the relevant regime period, V-Dem's JCE is interpreted by us as indicating that judicial constraints on the executive were robust, transitioning to comprehensive only in 2023, while V-Dem's LCE is classified by us as indicating that legislative constraints on the executive were comprehensive.

Autocratic Monarchy as of 07/01/2025 continued.

Additional Sources (Alnajjar 2000, Ismael 1982, Ismael 1993, Kechichian 2008, Ottaway/Choucair-Vizoso 2008, Herb 1999, Herb 2003, Herb 2004, Quamar/Kumaraswamy 2019)

Notes

¹ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kuwait/freedom-world/2023>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_suffrage#cite_note-centralasiainstitute.org-37

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1963_Kuwaiti_general_election

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Universal_suffrage#cite_note-centralasiainstitute.org-37

⁵ <https://www.idea.int/answer/ans130355983610025>

⁶ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kuwait/freedom-world/2023>

⁷ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kuwait/freedom-world/2023>

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2023_Kuwaiti_general_election

⁹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Assembly_\(Kuwait\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/National_Assembly_(Kuwait))

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuwait#Al_Sabah_dynasty

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kuwaiti_political_gridlock

¹² <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kuwait/freedom-world/2023>

¹³ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kuwait/freedom-world/2023>

¹⁴ <https://freedomhouse.org/country/kuwait/freedom-world/2023>

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