

Position Paper

Kuwait: The dilemma of the Popular Movement and Political Renewal



Aiming to defuse the political crisis that has been raging in the country for about two weeks, the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Jaber Al Sabah accepted the resignation of the seventh government of Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed Al Sabah that came based on unprecedented popular movement and pressure in Kuwait wherein the "Kuwaiti street" entered directly into the political equation in the kiln of the intense political crisis during the past years that was always limited to, at least ostensibly, the government and symbols of opposition within the national assembly.

This resignation came before a popular rally of 70,000 people in Erada Square erupted to demand the departure of the government under the slogan, "Kuwait has given a word" amidst political suffocation witnessed by Kuwait that constitutes an imminent threat to its future as a state of institutions with leading democratic experience in the region. Perhaps this threat is what enticed some political leaders in the country to demand the implementation of martial law for six months through a necessity decree (1).

The Course of the Current Political Crisis

The pace of the events of the Kuwaiti political scene accelerated unprecedentedly and in a very short period of time. Since midday Tuesday, 15th November, the government proceeded to revoking the interrogation of Prime Minister Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed that was listed on the agenda after the session became private. One of the focuses of the this interrogation pertained to the issue of million deposits in which some members of the national assembly were suspected of accepting bribes for their political loyalty to the prime minister. This explains the government's closure of all constitutional outlets enabling the people to expose the "seizing" of MPs, that increased political congestion, thus granting the opposition an opportunity to incite the "street" against the government.

Since that evening, the political scene in Kuwait has developed and changed rapidly, as the transformation of the popular rally was mobilized by the parliamentary opposition bloc, twenty deputies in Erada Square, to denounce the government's course, exploding on Wednesday, 16th November, into the storming of the national assembly building and the Abdullah al-Salem hall by youth and a number of MPs and the tampering with the speaker's platform and hammer. This was disapproved by the different political and social spectra of Kuwaiti society, which went on to emphasize obedience to the guardian and respect for the constitution, the law, and the "nation's home". This day was described by the Emir of Kuwait as "Black Wednesday".

Conversely, the government was quick to invest the popular sympathy it gained opposing the storming of the assembly, and organized a popular rally in its favor raising the slogan, "May God protect you, Kuwait".

In a new qualitative development, popular protests erupted and turned into unfamiliar evening sit-ins in front of the Palace of Justice in solidarity with detainees who have begun to be interrogated by the prosecution concerning the incident, and in opposition to the government's course of action in dealing with its opponents and the raiders of the national assembly, in a safe manner under a legal umbrella.

"Million Deposits": The "Password"

The resignation of Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed's government nearly three months after the outburst of the million deposit case whose implications' winds hit the government and coerced it to resign. Afterwards, the unsound government treatment of the case of the million deposits was a chief, if not the only, cause of the eruption of the recent crisis in the unprecedented manner it occurred.

Even if the government's resignation eliminated the interrogation concerning this case, the curtain has not been closed on it permanently as it will remain present-absent in the Kuwaiti political scene during the upcoming period and will be the substantiation used by the opposition against the next prime minister.

Therefore, defusing this problematic political case will not lead to the exposure of all its circumstances. The first step is perhaps symbolized in this path as the Kuwaiti Central Bank announced that it sent the required records to the prosecution concerning reports about suspected money laundering⁽²⁾, which played a decisive role in concluding this issue and sparing the country more of its politically, economically, and socially costly and disastrous implications.

Conflict among the "Sons of the Family": The "Known Actor"

A closer look into the successive political crisis that Kuwait has witnessed in past years indicates that the matter is more than a mere dispute between government and opposition.

The pace and extent of recurrence of crises and political escalation between the two authorities have increased steadily and unprecedentedly since Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed became prime minister in February 2006.

This analysis is reinforced by the role currently played by the national assembly which does not accord with the nature of the parliamentary and political opposition in Kuwait and the mechanisms of its interaction with conditions in the country since independence.

This is manifest in the waste and abuse of interrogation as a control tool, thus eliminating its desired constitutional role and transforming it into a tool for a settling score and the intimidation of deputy ministers.

The new givens in the context of this parliamentary government debate are a departure of political escalation from the department of the Abdullah al-Salem hall in the national assembly, the turning to the political street, and the mobilization and incitement of the masses, which conveyed division among opposition and loyalty from the parliament to society with all the critically threatening implications this course portends for the stability of the country and national unity.

Accordingly, the recurrent parliamentary government confrontation appears to be a mere mirror reflecting the conflict between the sons of the ruling family wherein this conflict is the "known actor" behind every political crisis that erupts in the country.

This effect was possibly sustained by the fact that every political crisis Kuwait witnessed in the past five years have brought about unmistakable effects on the undisclosed-disclosed conflict between some of the Al Sabah sons aiming or competing for some position within or outside the "family". Hence, as confirmed by an MP observing the recent crisis, "what is happening in the country is a pole conflict, and the national assembly is the battlefield⁽³⁾."

Based on the above, resolving the conflict between some of the "sons of the family" will yield calm in the political scene in the Abdullah al-Salem hall.

Indications of Political Escalation between the Government and Opposition

- The first indication: the emergence of a new phenomenon in the Kuwaiti political scene, namely the interjection of the "political street" in a debate between the two authorities. It is feared that the turning to and inciting the street will be the approach adopted by the opposition in the future as its relationship with the government becomes more strained, which entails the end of the national assembly's stature and prestige.

- The second indication: qualitative change in the opposition's conduct and its shift from the concept of political criticism of the performance of the government and ministers to political pressure to replace the prime minister, who is of course one of the sons of the ruling family, and demand a prime minister from amongst the people – which carries implicit appeals for the realization of some sort of change in the Kuwaiti political regime or at least the estimation of changing the instruments of its political administration.
- The third indication: security action taken by the government when dealing with political issues including those that have critical future implications wherein the transformation of the "political" into "criminal" in the storming of the national assembly is meant to lead the search for a new solution for the opposition outside of the Abdullah al-Salem hall based on the popular movement of the remarkable communal momentum that will constitute an acute challenge to the regime in the future (4).
- The fourth indication: giving priority to both of the disputing parties, the government and the opposition, to undermine the other and dominate it regardless of the serious political price that Kuwait, both state and society, may incur as a result of arrogance and political stubbornness.
- The fifth indication: what Kuwait has faced recently is greater than the person of the prime minister or an emergency crisis. In fact, it is crisis of a regime that, more than ever before, has begun to work towards renewing itself, resolving conflicts between its sons, and developing the tools of its political administration.
- The sixth indication: nothing indicates the severity and sensitivity of the crisis more than the Emir's acceptance of the government's resignation less than two weeks after assuring during a meeting with editors of local newspapers that he would not dismiss Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed even if he resigns and that he would not accept any pressure in this regard(5).
- The seventh indication: the fact that escalation between the two authorities reflects conflict among the "sons of the family," meaning – if we consider the possibility that Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed may not return – that today's loyalty will turn into opposition to any succeeding prime minister especially if he proves to be competition to the resigned prime minister.

Scenarios of the Anticipated "Solution"

After the acceptance of the government's resignation, the fate of the national assembly – which has been disbanded three times in the past five years – remains pending in the hands of the Emir who possesses constitutional power authorizing him to disband the parliament and call for early legislative elections.

Despite escalating popular and parliamentary demands for the dissolution of the assembly and the acceptance of the government's resignation, the features of the solution scenario are not yet clear and remains improbable – for now – though some observers prefer that a solution is reached as soon as possible in order to preserve the prestige of the state and the rule and so that the political leadership is not compelled later to resort to this scenario under popular pressure, as was the case with the government when it resigned. They believe that the "disbandment of the assembly from authority is better than its disbandment from the arena"(6), implying Erada Square in which popular protests had previously called for the resignation of Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed Al Sabah and the ejection of his government.

Among the proposed solutions for the containment of successive political crises that the country is exposed to is the reintegration of the heir apparent with the prime ministry

and this reintegration will simultaneously prove to be the immunity of the prime minister from accountability and prosecution.

However, this proposal in practice has not been accepted as the current heir apparent had previously declined prime ministry alongside heir apparenacy according to reports during March 2009 when Sheikh Nasser al-Mohammed's government resigned to prevent the interrogation of one of its ministers, Sheikh Ahmed al-Abdullah al-Ahmed Al Sabah. This rejection was considered by many to have come in consistence with commitment to democratic exercise and for the preservation of constitutional advantages. Moreover, this proposal is confronted by absolute rejection from a number of MPs that consider it "a step back" because of the fact that the heir apparent is the future Emir as per an explanatory note in the constitution, as the integration of heir apparenacy and prime ministry is meant to lead to the creation of successive crises(7).

Conclusion

It is apparent that events in Kuwait have surpassed the government and the opposition to reaching political stability especially with the unprecedented popular movement which may either be invested towards more reform as a platform from which political renewal is launched and constitutional advantages are promoted or take a detour allowing the winds of the "Arab spring" to blow over Kuwait in its own very exclusive manner.

References:

- 1- This demand came from the Chairman of the National Assembly, Jassem al-Kharafi, during the council of ministers' atypical meeting chaired by the Emir of Kuwait Monday morning, 28th November. See Kuwaiti newspapers, [dated] 29 November 2011.
- 2- Kuwaiti News Agency (KUNA), 29 November 2011.
- 3- Member of Parliament, Hussein al-Huraiti, Al Rai, 26 November 2011.
- 4- Ahmad al-Deyain: "Mobile Reality and Uncalculated Consequences" Alam Alyawm, 27 November 2011.
- 5- See the statements of the Emir of Kuwait, Kuwaiti News Agency and local newspapers, 18 November 2011.
- 6- Sami Abdul Latif al-Nesf: "An Assembly Divided among Recipient and Intruder", Al-Anbaa. 30 November 2011.
1. 7-Member of Parliament Adel al-Saraawi recently conveyed this parliamentary orientation, Alaan Online Newspaper, 29 November 2011.