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**Covid-19 in the Gulf
Special Coverage**

**Covid-19 in Kuwait: An Opportunity for the Government
Hamad H. Albloshi**

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Covid-19 in Kuwait: An Opportunity for the Government

Hamad H. Albloshi

Introduction

The first Covid-19 disease case was found in Kuwait on February 24th, 2020 when a Kuwaiti citizen was tested positive after coming back from Iran. Since then, the Kuwaiti government has taken many measures to contain its spread in the country. These steps have been gradual and important but were not able to contain the spread of the disease as hundreds of cases appeared in the country. The government's reaction to the crisis may have long-run implications, especially in the political arena, and might be an opportunity for the government to solve very critical problems in the country. This article tries to explore that.

The Appearance of Covid-19 in Kuwait and the Government's Reaction:

There was a perception in the country that the newly appointed prime minister, Sabah al-Khalid, lacked judgment and political skills to deal with the parliament because of the resignation of two of his ministers after a few weeks of their appointment due to parliamentary pressures. However, this perception has changed since the appearance of the first cases of Covid-19 disease in the region. The government, under the leadership of al-Khalid, took restrict measures when cases appeared in the Islamic Republic of Iran, while about 900 Kuwaitis were [there](#). Its immediate reaction was to bring them back. The first flights to Kuwait from Iran were on [February 23rd](#). Some of the arrivals were quarantined in specific places, such as hotels, others were directed to be quarantined in their homes based on their health conditions and the cities where they came from.

On February 24th, one day after the beginning of the process, the first cases were announced in the country among five of those who came back from Iran. Since then, the government has taken many gradual steps to contain the spread of the disease. The first step began on February 26th, when it announced a two-week holiday for all schools and [universities](#). This was extended for two more weeks on March 10th, and then it was extended until August. In addition, the government announced in the same day “the suspension of work in all ministries and state agencies” for two [weeks](#). This was extended several times. The latest was on [April 6th, 2020](#). All sports activities, shopping malls, restaurants, and movie theaters were closed as [well](#). Only supermarkets are allowed to be open during the day. Flights to Kuwait, unless bringing Kuwaitis back to the country, were also banned.

In another move, the government imposed a partial curfew of 11 hours on [March 22nd](#), but the hours were extended to become 13 hours per day on [April 6th, 2020](#). It took a harsher measure on the same day when it imposed a complete lockdown on two areas in the country, Mahboula and Jleeb al-Shuyoukh because of the spread of the disease among hundreds of foreign workers who live in those areas. It is worth mentioning that despite all measures taken by the government, the cases increased to reach 993 by April 10th.

Generally speaking, the public has been supportive of the government's measures since February, especially its ability to control the prices of goods in the market, and its effort to support Kuwaitis abroad and to bring them back. However, there have been reservations over some

issues such as allowing more than 7,000 Egyptians to come back to Kuwait from Egypt, while the situation in the latter was not clear over the spread of the [disease](#). There was a concern over the possibility that some of them might be carrying the virus. The government responded to the criticism and launched a campaign to test those who had arrived in Kuwait, not only from Egypt, but also from many other [countries](#). Another reservation is related to the government's plan to help the private sector. This sector has been severely affected by the crisis and asked the government to intervene. The government decided on March 30th to provide loans to this sector and to help small [businesses](#).

Problems Need Actions

The current crisis has shown that the country suffers from deep problems in many sectors. First, there is a demographic problem. The population in Kuwait is about 4.7 million. 1.4 million of them are Kuwaitis and 3.3 million are foreigners; 2.3 million of them are males, while 1 million are [females](#). Most of the male expats live in harsh conditions because they are not paid well, and reside in areas such as Farwaniyya, Mahboula, and Jleeb al-Shuyoukh, which are overpopulated. These areas are poorly designed and organized. Buildings do not have enough parking spots, open spaces are usually filled with garbage, and the sewage system is not effective. A report appeared in a daily newspaper, Alrai, in October 2019, months before the crisis, showing the housing condition in [Jleeb al-Shuyoukh](#). Therefore, any disease can easily be spread there and controlling it might be a challenge.

A portion of these expats are unemployed because they were brought to the country by fake companies that are run by Kuwaiti

citizens, and their legal residency is [expired](#). In order to deal with this issue, the ministry of interior allowed them to return to their countries without paying fines or even paying for their tickets. The existence of the expats in Kuwait has been associated with deep division in the country over the best way to deal with them. Racist remarks appeared on social media and made by some well-known people against them. For example, Hayat al-Fahad, an actress, wants to "[put them in desert](#)," as a way to deal with them. Despite that, campaigns were launched by civil society organizations to help foreign residents who lost their jobs as a result of the crisis.

Second, the current events show that the educational sector is not ready for any crisis. Public schools were not able to offer on-line courses, while the private sector has adjusted to the new environment and dealt with it. Therefore, while students in private schools are working on-line, students in public schools do not have this privilege and this might affect their learning process.

Third, even though the government has been able to secure food for society, the crisis has shown that this might not be the case if the problem continues in the world because Kuwait imports about 90 percent of its needs of [food](#). There are few farms in the country that can supply the market, but their ability is limited. Even though they have been able to supply supermarkets with different kinds of fruits and vegetables, the country faced a shortage of onion for example for a few days. Part of the problem is related to the way farms had been distributed in the country. Accusations are made that some farms have been distributed based on loyalty or connections, and instead of using them to supply the market, they are used for recreation for those who got [them](#).

The Political Implications of the Crisis

The abovementioned actions taken by the government might have their long-run implications on the ground because they can shift the discourse over the government's ability to run the country.

There has been a debate in Kuwait for years about transforming the political system into a parliamentary system that allows the citizens to choose the country's prime minister based on general elections. This debate emerged because the government was accused of failing to execute effective plans on the ground to fight corruption, to improve services, to deal with unemployment, and to have a strategy for the future of the country. On the other hand, the government and its supporters have accused the parliament of being responsible for all of that because of the role the opposition, even though a small in number, has played in preventing the executive power from doing its jobs by pressuring or blackmailing it.

Kuwait has a semi-democratic political system and it is categorized as "partly free" by Freedom [House](#). Elections are organized in the country to choose 50 members of the parliament. However, the government is not elected, and the prime minister is appointed by the emir in accordance with article 56 of the constitution regardless of the results of the elections. This means that the cabinet, when is formed, is not necessarily based on a specific agenda or a program.

Despite not being elected, the government is checked by the parliament, which has the right to impeach the prime minister and his ministers. It can also block legislations that are supported by the government. In other words, checks and balances in Kuwait's political life are relatively

strong compare to other countries in the region. Because of that, the parliament was often blamed for not helping the government to function properly.

However, the recent crisis has shown that the government can take effective measures on the ground regardless of the position of the parliament. In other words, the parliament has not been the only obstacle that prevented the government from functioning in recent years, the latter has been also responsible because of its lack of will. Thus, the notion that the parliament is an obstacle needs to be reexamined. At the same time, the demand that was raised by the opposition to transform the political system into a parliamentary system might be under question because the government has shown its effectiveness in running the country.

Conclusion

Even though the current events have shown that there are serious problems that need to be addressed in the aftermath of the crisis, the reaction of the authorities gives hope to the public that the country's problems might be solved if the government has the will to do so. Also, the events have shown that civil society in Kuwait is effective and can help the authorities in times of crises. For example, a campaign was launched by different civil society organizations managed to raise nine million [Kuwaiti Dinars](#) to support the government. Moreover, the latter can rely on Kuwaiti citizens, trained foreigners, as well as stateless residents to deal with shortages in workers in different sectors because many people have volunteered to help since February.

To sum up, the view of the public is positive towards the government as a result of its actions since the emergence of the crisis. This might be a rare

moment in the country, and the prime minister has to seize the opportunity to solve the abovementioned problems because he may not find the same chance in the future.

About the author:

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