

The Political Landscape of Kuwait in the 1930s: Governance, Society, and the 1938 Majlis Movement

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Abstract

This article examines the political landscape of Kuwait in the 1930s by analysing the interaction between governance structures, socio-economic transformation, and early reform movements. It argues that the emergence of reformist politics, culminating in the 1938 Majlis Movement, was driven by structural tensions arising from centralized rule, shifting economic conditions, and the rise of new social actors. Drawing on archival sources and secondary literature, the study shows how merchant elites and emerging intellectual groups translated economic grievances into organised political demands, particularly concerning financial accountability, administrative transparency, and broader participation in governance. The article further analyses the Majlis as a consultative institution that, despite lacking formal legislative authority, functioned as a platform for articulating collective reformist agendas. Its eventual suppression is examined as the result of both domestic resistance and external constraints. Internally, the Majlis challenged the authority of the ruling Al-Sabah family, especially in matters of fiscal and administrative control. Externally, British influence within a protectorate framework prioritised political stability and reinforced existing power structures, thereby limiting institutional reform. The study concludes that early reform in Kuwait was not absent but structurally constrained, offering broader insights into political change in semi-colonial contexts.

Keywords: Kuwait; 1930s; political reform; Majlis Movement; British protectorate.

INTRODUCTION

This study examines the political, social, and economic conditions in Kuwait during the 1930s as the structural context for the emergence of reform movements, culminating in the 1938 Majlis Movement. Rather than treating these conditions as isolated developments, it analyses their interrelationship and cumulative impact on Kuwait's political trajectory. In particular, it highlights how centralized rule under the Al-Sabah family, British influence within a protectorate framework, and rapid socio-economic transformations collectively generated political tensions while expanding spaces for public debate and contestation.

Existing scholarship on Kuwait's political development has largely emphasized institutional evolution, elite politics, and the role of the merchant class. Early works such as

Al-Sewaji (1999) and Al-Zaidi (2014) provide broad narratives of Kuwait's democratic development and political institutions but tend to adopt descriptive approaches with limited analytical integration. Similarly, studies by Al-Qenaei (1987) and Al-Shamlan (1986) offer valuable historical detail on Kuwait's social and economic life, yet they provide limited engagement with the dynamics of political transformation. More recent scholarship, including Al-Ibrahim (2021), has examined the 1938 Majlis Movement in greater depth, though often with a cautious treatment of sensitive political actors and without fully addressing the complexities of governance and external influence.

Other influential works have focused on specific dimensions of Kuwait's development. For instance, Crystal (1990) and Al-Najjar (1994) highlight the central role of the merchant elite and state–society relations, while Al-Rumaihi (1975) and Al-Jassim (1973) emphasize economic and social transformations in the interwar period. Broader regional analyses, such as Akkad (1974), situate Kuwait within wider Gulf political currents, but often lack a focused examination of internal political change. Despite these contributions, the role of intellectuals and educated groups in shaping political discourse and mobilization, particularly in relation to institutional reform, remains underexplored.

This article addresses this gap by situating reform within the wider political, social, and economic transformations of the 1930s while foregrounding the role of intellectual actors. These developments reshaped established patterns of authority and legitimacy within Kuwaiti society. As traditional mechanisms of consultation weakened and economic structures underwent transformation, existing political arrangements increasingly appeared inadequate in addressing emerging social realities. Within this context, Kuwaiti intellectuals, including teachers, writers, civil servants, journalists, and foreign-educated youth, emerged as important political actors, articulating reformist ideas concerning political representation, governance, and constitutional order.

This article argues that the conditions of the 1930s were not merely a passive backdrop to reform, but active forces that both enabled and shaped intellectual engagement in political activism. These conditions fostered reformist discourse, encouraged organizational initiatives, and created opportunities for collective political action. In doing so, they laid the structural and ideological foundations for the Majlis Movement of 1938. More broadly, the article demonstrates that early reform in Kuwait was structurally constrained by the interaction between domestic authority and imperial interests, contributing to wider debates on political reform in semi-colonial and British protectorate contexts.

KUWAIT'S POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Political authority in Kuwait, established in the early seventeenth century, was initially grounded in consultative practices between the ruler and the governed. The rule was transferred from father to son until the rule of Sheikh Sabah bin Jaber bin Abdullah bin Jaber (1859/1866), where it was transferred to the brother Abdullah bin Sabah in 1866 until 1892, then Muhammad bin Sabah in 1892 until 1896, then Sheikh Mubarak bin Sabah in 1896 until 1915, then to the son Jaber bin Mubarak in 1915 until 1917, and so on. Then the government in Kuwait began to look forward to a more accurate Shura system when a group of Kuwaiti citizens met and asked Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber (1921-1950) to establish a legalized Shura Council (Crystal 1990; Al-Qahtani 2025).

Then the Shura Council was established in 1921 with 12 people, but it did not last long as it was dissolved. Then the first legislative council began with direct elections for the first time in Kuwait in June 1938. Fourteen people won the elections and the head of the council was Abdullah Al-Salem (1950-1965). Then the establishment of government departments began, the first of which was the Courts Department, then the Education Department (1937),

the Police Department (1938), and the Finance Department (1939). Then the establishment of other departments until the last department, the Foreign Affairs Department, in August 1961. Then there was the Supreme Council of State (1956), representing the heads of departments and headed by Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem until Kuwait gained independence on 19 June 1961 (Al-Hajri 2025; Kelly 2009).

A significant transformation in Kuwait's political system occurred in the early 1960s, marking the transition toward a more institutionalised form of governance. Elections for the Constituent Assembly were held on 30 December 1961, resulting in the selection of 20 members. This development was followed by the formation of Kuwait's first government in January 1962 and the issuance of an interim constitution in the same year. The Constituent Assembly convened its first meeting on 20 January 1962, and one of its most significant achievements was the promulgation of the Kuwaiti Constitution on 11 November 1962. The constitution established a formal political framework, consisting of five chapters and 183 articles. Subsequently, the first elections for the National Assembly were held on 23 January 1963, followed by its official opening on 29 January 1963. These developments marked the beginning of Kuwait's constitutional and parliamentary era (Kelly 2009; Al-Hajri 2025).

The political system in Kuwait was originally established on the basis of mutual consent and acceptance. Sheikh Sabah I, the founder of the ruling family in Kuwait, was chosen through a tribal consensus due to personal qualities that distinguished him from his peers within the tribe. As such, he became the first ruler and founder of the ruling dynasty. His sons and grandsons followed in his footsteps, maintaining the consultative and consensual approach to governance. However, this tradition changed with Sheikh Mubarak, who seized power through a violent coup against his two brothers, whom he killed in their sleep. He then declared himself the ruler of Kuwait. Due to the manner in which Sheikh Mubarak came to power by force, he began to centralize authority. He imposed authoritarian policies on the people, including mandatory taxation, conscription, and involvement in foreign wars. As a result, the system in Kuwait shifted from a consultative model to an autocratic one, with Sheikh Mubarak holding exclusive control over governance (Al-Burais 2025; Crystal 1990).

This shift provoked dissatisfaction among the educated class at the time, as well as the most influential social group, namely the merchant class. The merchants actively opposed Sheikh Mubarak's domestic policies. A clear indication of this opposition was the emigration of three prominent merchants Shamlan, Bin Midhaf, and Bajahan Al-Mutairi from Kuwait to Bahrain in protest against Sheikh Mubarak's internal governance. Nevertheless, Mubarak retained a strong grip on power, which allowed him to suppress opposition and continue his rule (Al-Hajri 2025; Kelly 2009). Although such resistance failed to weaken Sheikh Mubarak's authority, it revealed underlying tensions within Kuwait's political structure and exposed the fragility of the new autocratic order.

The 1930s were a transformative era for Kuwait in political terms, as the coming together of social, economic, and political conditions at that time catalyzed early calls for reform. This study situates Kuwait's political landscape within the broader context of the country's first major political movements, which generated a push for modernization. Understanding the conditions of the 1930s is crucial because this era not only laid the groundwork for later political developments, such as the Majlis Movement of 1938, but also represented a critical juncture in the country's gradual evolution from a traditional, tribal-based polity to one more attuned to modern political frameworks.

By the 1930s, these tensions had intensified as Kuwait confronted a convergence of political centralization, economic transformation, and rising social awareness. Although the Al-Sabah family retained dominant authority, pressures mounted from merchants, intellectuals, and emerging social groups who sought greater participation in governance. An early attempt to institutionalize consultation occurred in 1921 with the establishment of a Shura Council

under Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. However, the council was short-lived, lacked substantive powers, and remained largely controlled from above, reinforcing perceptions of political exclusion rather than alleviating them (Crystal 1990; Al-Qahtani 2025).

The failure of the 1921 Shura Council underscored the limitations of Kuwait's existing political framework and contributed to growing reformist sentiment. Throughout the 1930s, socio-economic developments, particularly the decline of traditional industries and the early discovery of oil, further disrupted established power relations and heightened expectations for political inclusion. As economic influence became more concentrated and diversified, demands for political representation increasingly accompanied economic claims (Al-Burais 2025; Crystal 1990).

Within this context, the merchant class emerged as a more assertive political force, advocating institutional reforms that would reflect their economic significance. Having long dominated the economic sphere, they gradually moved beyond commercial interests to question established patterns of governance that concentrated authority in traditional ruling structures. As economic conditions and social expectations evolved, these merchant elites began to articulate demands for greater political participation, advocating reforms that could better accommodate the changing realities of the nation (Habib 1993). While their role has received substantial attention in existing scholarship, these developments simultaneously created conditions in which intellectual groups gained prominence. Intellectuals played a crucial role in interpreting political exclusion and economic change through ideological frameworks, emphasizing concepts such as accountability, constitutional governance, and representation.

The convergence of authoritarian governance, economic restructuring, and social mobilization during the 1930s produced an environment conducive to organized political activism. This period marked the emergence of organized political activism and the establishment of reformist movements that eventually would take center stage in Kuwait's political development. The socio-economic changes along with the increasing discontent with the ruling structures culminated in the first collective political challenges in the shape of the 1938 Majlis Movement (Clarence-Smith 1991). Although the Majlis Movement was ultimately suppressed, it reflected deep-seated dissatisfaction with traditional governance and marked a significant shift in political consciousness. This political background is essential for understanding how reformist ideas gained legitimacy and why Kuwaiti intellectuals assumed an increasingly visible and influential role in the reform movement of 1938.

GOVERNANCE AND POLITICAL ACTORS

The rule of Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber was characterized by autocracy during a time of generational change. A new, Western-educated generation had emerged that was no longer content with the father system that had long prevailed in Kuwait. This new generation was deeply influenced by Arab nationalism, opposed to Western presence, and strongly sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. Their opposition extended specifically to the Western presence in Kuwait and the broader Arab world. They were especially influenced by Iraqi propaganda and by King Ghazi of Iraq, who was in power at the time. This political climate contributed to the formation of the Municipal Council and the National Bloc in 1938, which represented Arab nationalists in their opposition to autocratic rule particularly against Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. This tension culminated in a confrontation in 1938, followed by a return to a more rigid autocratic rule, supported by the British. This support came especially as the world was on the verge of the Second World War, and Britain was unwilling to allow any opposition within its spheres of influence (Al-Burais 2025; Sluglett 1980).

The political structure of Kuwait during the 1930s was characterized by a highly centralized system of governance exercised through the Al-Sabah family, which had ruled the emirate since the 18th century. This system was centred on an Emir who exercised extensive personal authority over both domestic and external affairs. During most of the 1930s, the then serving Emir, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, had almost absolute power. In this system of individual authority, whereby the Emir held the final say in all political and economic matters, the stability of the Al-Sabah family's rule was ensured, but along with this came considerable political limitations, especially concerning public participation and the transparency of governance (Smith 2010). Political decisions were often unilaterally made by the Emir, while advisory councils did exist; they did not have any formal powers of challenging the royal decisions. Highly personalized in nature, this style of rule was not atypical for this region, but the results were a highly centralized political system, somewhat insulated from the concerns of the broader population (Kelly 2009).

Centralized as it was, Kuwait's governance did not imply that the Al-Sabah family ruled in a vacuum. The Emir's authority was tempered by the necessity of maintaining good relations with local elites of influence, such as the merchant class and tribal leaders. Although these actors were not formally enfranchised within the political system, they wielded real political power using economic resources and social networks. Kuwait's emergence as a trading entrepôt in the Gulf was closely linked to its strategic geographic position and favourable historical circumstances. Located at the northern end of the Arabian Gulf, Kuwait was well placed along key maritime routes connecting India, Persia, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula, facilitating the movement of goods such as textiles, spices, dates, and pearls (Sluglett 1980; Crystal 1990). Its commercial importance was further reinforced by regional instability elsewhere, particularly the decline of competing ports such as Basra, which redirected trade flows toward Kuwait.

At the same time, the Al-Sabah leadership maintained relative political stability and adopted policies that were conducive to trade, allowing merchants greater flexibility in commercial activities. Combined with the development of strong maritime capabilities, including shipbuilding, pearling, and long-distance trade, these factors enabled Kuwait to consolidate its position as a key trading hub in the Gulf (Sluglett 1985; IOR/R/15/1/322 1932). As a result, the merchant class accumulated considerable economic influence, enabling them to shape both commercial networks and, to some extent, political decisions. Although these elites did not control the formal apparatus of the state, they played an indispensable role in structuring the political context in which the Al-Sabah family operated (Crystal 1990).

Two additional societal groups with significant social and economic influence shaped the political landscape of Kuwait in the 1930s, namely the merchant class and tribal leaders. The merchants, whose wealth came mainly from trade, notably the pearl industry, formed the economic foundation of Kuwait. For many years, these elites had developed a system of mutual reliance with the Al-Sabah family: the economic elite supplied the ruling family with financial means in return for political loyalty and favorable economic policies. However, as the economic structure began to shift in Kuwait, especially with the discovery of oil in the late 1930s, the political influence of these merchants also evolved. They increasingly sought to have a greater role in the government, driven not just by their economic ambitions but also by the growing appeal of a more participatory political system (Crystal 1995).

Tribal leaders exercised considerable influence, particularly in rural areas where their control over local government was unchallenged. The foundation of their power lay in traditional modes of social control and tribal cohesion. They acted as intermediaries between the central authority of the Emir and the rural population. Whereas the Al-Sabah family controlled the urban centers, in particular Kuwait City, the tribal leaders exerted control locally in the hinterland and therefore ensured the stability of the Emirate (Crystal 1995). At least

theoretically, the loyalty of the tribes was crucial for maintaining social order, particularly in those times when internal unrest became frequent. However, the growing economic influence of the merchant class, alongside the resulting changes in political relations, threatened this traditional political order and thus created tensions among tribal interests and the urban elite (Kelly 2009).

The political situation in Kuwait during the 1930s was heavily shaped by British oversight, following the 1899 agreement that placed Kuwait within a British protectorate framework (Sluglett 1980; Kelly 2009). While the Al-Sabah family retained substantial authority over domestic governance, including administrative affairs, taxation, and internal political management, their autonomy in external matters was significantly constrained. In practice, British officials exercised considerable influence over foreign policy and security-related issues, requiring the ruling family to consult and seek approval in matters such as diplomatic relations, treaty negotiations, and military considerations (Sluglett 1980; Kelly 2009). This included the handling of Kuwait's relations with neighbouring states such as Iraq and Saudi Arabia, where British strategic interests often took precedence.

This arrangement produced a dual structure of authority in which the Al-Sabah family remained the central governing force within Kuwait, yet operated within clear limitations imposed by British imperial policy. Although the Emir retained formal authority, particularly in internal affairs, the scope of this authority did not extend fully to external domains, where British involvement was both institutionalised and decisive. As a result, Kuwait's political system during this period reflected a form of constrained autonomy, in which local governance coexisted with external supervision (Crystal 1990). Consequently, this relationship not only shaped the nature of political authority in Kuwait but also influenced the trajectory of reformist demands. The growing awareness among merchants and intellectuals of these limitations contributed to increasing calls for greater transparency, accountability, and participation in governance, particularly as new economic developments, such as the emergence of the oil sector, began to alter the balance of power within Kuwaiti society (Crystal 1990; IOR/R/15/5/217 1936).

Meanwhile, British influence, while stabilising the country in some respects, also contributed to local dissatisfaction. Many Kuwaitis, particularly the merchant elites, began to question the degree of British involvement in domestic affairs, especially as oil revenues started to rise in the late 1930s. Kuwait's economy became increasingly tied to oil, a development that enhanced economic autonomy while simultaneously intensifying demands for greater political independence from foreign powers. For nearly four decades, the British had maintained close ties with the ruling Al-Sabah family and were increasingly perceived both as a stabilising force and as an obstacle to further political reform. Their reluctance to support reform, coupled with a preference for preserving the status quo, fuelled growing resentment, particularly among those who viewed Kuwait's political system as in need of modernisation in response to changing economic realities (Crystal 1995).

The interaction of these governance structures, including centralized rule under the Al-Sabah family, the influence of merchant and tribal elites, and the external pressures of British oversight, had created a political environment ripe for change in the late 1930s. The discovery of oil in Kuwait fundamentally altered the economic landscape and, by extension, the political environment. Oil exploration in Kuwait began in the early 1930s through concessions granted to foreign companies, culminating in the discovery of commercially viable oil reserves in 1938 (Crystal 1990; IOR/R/15/5/217 1936). Although large-scale production did not commence until after the Second World War, the prospect of oil wealth began to reshape economic expectations even before extraction intensified.

These transformations marked a gradual shift away from the traditional economic base of trade and pearling, which had long sustained the merchant class. As the state began to

anticipate new sources of revenue independent of merchant financing, the existing balance of power between the ruling Al-Sabah family and the merchant elite was increasingly reconfigured (Al-Rumaihi 1975; Crystal 1990). In response, the merchant class, whose influence had previously been rooted in control over trade networks, began to view the emerging oil sector as both a challenge and an opportunity for maintaining economic and political relevance. As they sought to secure their position within this changing economic order, merchants increasingly demanded a greater role in the decision-making processes of the state. These demands contributed to the growing momentum for a more inclusive political system, particularly as broader segments of Kuwaiti society became aware of the transformative potential of oil wealth (Kelly 2009; Crystal 1990).

Tribal leaders, too, began to question the traditional political order as long-standing patterns of authority were disrupted by economic and political change. As the influence of the merchant class expanded and oil revenues emerged as a central pillar of Kuwait's economic life, tribal elites increasingly perceived themselves as being sidelined from political decision-making processes. Their traditional role as intermediaries between the ruling authority and wider society appeared to weaken in the face of new economic priorities and administrative structures centred in urban areas (Crystal 1995). This sense of marginalisation generated tensions within Kuwait's broader social fabric and contributed to a growing awareness that existing political arrangements were no longer adequate to manage the country's evolving economic and social realities.

These tensions across different social strata, including merchants seeking political representation, tribal leaders concerned about declining influence, and intellectuals advocating institutional reform, converged with rising aspirations for greater autonomy from British oversight. Together they formed the structural and ideological backdrop to the first serious and organised calls for political reform as embodied in the Majlis Movement of 1938. Although the movement was swiftly suppressed, its significance lay in its ability to expose the limits of traditional governance and to articulate new expectations regarding participation, accountability, and consultation.

The Majlis established in 1938 functioned as a consultative body composed primarily of merchant elites, supported by emerging intellectuals and segments of the urban middle class (IOR/R/15/5/219 1938; Crystal 1990). Although it did not possess formal legislative authority, it operated as an organised platform through which reformist actors articulated collective demands, particularly concerning financial transparency, administrative accountability, and greater participation in governance. Its activities included deliberation on state expenditure, discussions on the management of emerging oil revenues, and attempts to formalise consultative mechanisms within the existing political framework (IOR/R/15/5/219 1938). Despite these initiatives, the Majlis faced significant structural limitations. Its authority remained contingent upon the consent of the ruling Al-Sabah family, and its institutional position was inherently fragile. The movement was ultimately suppressed when its demands began to challenge the centralised control of the Emir, particularly in matters related to fiscal authority and decision-making power (FO 371/21923 1938). The ruling elite perceived the Majlis not merely as a consultative body but as a potential threat to established political authority.

The suppression of the Majlis was further reinforced by British involvement. As Kuwait operated within a British protectorate framework, British officials prioritised political stability and the preservation of existing power structures over reformist experimentation (FO 371/21923 1938; Sluglett 1980). Any institutional development that risked altering the balance of authority was viewed with caution. Consequently, the convergence of domestic resistance and external strategic considerations led to the rapid dissolution of the Majlis. In this context, the failure of the Majlis Movement was not solely the result of internal weaknesses but reflected

broader structural constraints within a semi-colonial political order, where both local authority and imperial interests acted to limit the scope of political reform (Crystal 1990).

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

The 1930s were the years of great social and economic transformation for Kuwait. The traditional industries of trade and pearling dominated the economy, but the early discovery of oil began to shift the economic landscape. These changes had a deep influence on the social dynamics of Kuwait, making it a more complex, layered society. Economic activities, social structures, and early reform movements were all closely interlinked, preparing the way for the eventual political upheavals of the late 1930s that included the 1938 Majlis Movement. This section explores the economic conditions, social structure, and early reform efforts that collectively contributed to this period of transformation.

In the 1930s, Kuwait's economy was heavily reliant on a few key sectors, including trade, pearling, and, increasingly, oil exploration, and its strategic location on the Persian Gulf made it a crucial center for regional commerce, particularly with India, East Africa, and other Gulf states. The merchant class played a central role in this trade, facilitating the exchange of goods such as textiles, spices, and foodstuffs. The wealth generated from trade was concentrated in the hands of a few prominent merchant families, who held significant political influence in addition to their economic power (IOR/R/15/1/322 1932). Trade networks were well established, and merchants had strong ties both with the Al-Sabah ruling family and with foreign powers such as the British. This network allowed merchants to leverage their economic wealth into political influence, which was particularly important in a governance system as centralized as Kuwait's (Kelly 2009).

Another important economic activity was pearling, which was very important in Kuwait's economy at that time. For many centuries, Kuwaiti pearl divers had benefited from the collection of pearls, a luxury commodity that enjoyed an insatiable demand in both Europe and Asia. As early as the 1930s, however, the world pearling industry was on a declining trend following the production of cultured pearls in Japan. The overall effect of the economic change in the pearling industry, which hitherto provided greater returns to the population on the coast, was to put additional pressure on the local economy and impact working classes such as divers and shipbuilders. Many of these people found their sense of economic vulnerability heightened by such changing economic fortunes and felt alienated from existing political structures (Sluglett 1985).

The discovery of oil in 1938 began to transform Kuwait's economy. Oil exploration in Kuwait started in the early 1930s following the granting of concessions to foreign oil companies, particularly the Kuwait Oil Company, a joint venture between British and American interests. After several years of geological surveys and exploratory drilling, commercially viable oil was discovered in Burgan in 1938, marking a turning point in Kuwait's economic history (Crystal 1990; IOR/R/15/5/217 1936). Though large-scale production had not yet begun during the late 1930s, the prospect of oil revenues was already evident. Oil was widely viewed as a potential economic salvation for the country, particularly at a time when the pearling industry was in decline and regional trade was stagnating. Early expectations of oil wealth began to alter power dynamics within Kuwaiti society. The merchant class, which had long dominated the economy through trade and pearling, increasingly faced the possibility of competition from new economic actors associated with the emerging oil sector. As economic power began to shift, political tensions intensified, particularly as traditional elites feared the erosion of their influence. Moreover, the anticipation of oil wealth raised broader expectations for political participation, as different segments of society began to envision a more diversified and modern economic order (Crystal 1990).

In the 1930s, the people of Kuwait still firmly adhered to tribal affiliations and familial bonds as the foundation of their basic social structure. Kuwaiti society was overall divided into two major parts: first, the urban elite; and second, the rural tribes. With the exception of a few rural trading outposts, the urban elite controlled the greater part of economic and political life in Kuwait City. The rural tribes dominated the more remote areas of the country. Both economic power and cultural traditions reinforced such divisions. The Al-Sabah family had a central position in the political system of Kuwait but had to balance their rule against the needs and expectations of the other social groups (Kelly 2009).

The merchant class, while part of the urban elite, occupied a distinctive position within Kuwaiti society, with their influence rooted in long-established commercial activities. Their economic power had historically developed through Kuwait's role as a regional trading entrepôt and its participation in the pearling industry, both of which generated substantial wealth for leading merchant families. Through their involvement in trade networks linking the Gulf, India, and East Africa, as well as their dominance in pearling, shipping, and finance, these merchants consolidated their position as the primary economic actors in Kuwait (Crystal 1995; Sluglett 1985). As a result, the merchant class emerged not only as economic powerhouses but also as influential political actors. However, as time passed, many merchant families began to perceive that their economic importance was not adequately reflected within the highly centralized political system dominated by the Al-Sabah family. This growing sense of imbalance between economic influence and political authority contributed to feelings of exclusion. In turn, these conditions fostered the emergence of a more politically conscious and active social group, closely linked to both the merchant elite and the expanding urban middle class (Crystal 1995).

In contrast, the rural tribal communities sought to preserve their traditional positions and social formation. These tribes were far less integrated into the economic life of the cities and maintained a more substantial reliance on pastoralism and agriculture. Though much less able to wield significant economic influence within Kuwait in comparison to merchants, tribal leaders did command a high level of social respect, particularly in Kuwait's rural and peripheral regions. Even though the urban elite dominated much of political and economic life in Kuwait City, tribal leaders provided a level of support to the Al-Sabah family that proved indispensable in maintaining social stability outside the urban centre. However, as this urban merchant class continued to build economic strength and influence, hostility began to develop between these two social divisions, substantially complicating the political terrain (Kelly 2009).

During the late 1930s, an urban middle class composed basically of civil servants, teachers, and professionals began to take active part in the socio-political life of the country. It was small in number but formed the core of political activism at this early period for reform and greater participation in government. The middle class was largely educated abroad and brought back ideas of constitutionalism, political participation, and social change. Its growing influence would be important in the development of the reformist movements of the late 1930s (Crystal 1990).

The economic and social transformations of the 1930s fostered a growing sense of political awareness and dissatisfaction with the status quo. An increasing number of people, particularly members of the merchant class and the nascent middle class, started to question the Al-Sabah family's model of governance. Alongside this political consolidation in the hands of the Emir, a number of reformist voices began to call for changes. These early calls for reform took the form of petitions and proposals for the establishment of political councils which would widen the avenues of participation by members of the public in the decision-making process. These petitions, though generally narrow and limited in influence, represented the first organized efforts to bring about change to the existing political system (IOR/R/15/5/219 1938).

One of the earliest and most significant political challenges arrived in 1938 with the establishment of the first Majlis, or consultative council, although it was decidedly limited. This creation was largely due to pressure by the merchant class, which was desirous of a greater say in political affairs, and from the urban middle class, which wished to extend the role of formal political institutions in governance. The Majlis was at first only a consultative body with no real powers, and its creation reflected the Emir's attempt to appease growing demands for reform without giving up too much control. This gesture, though limited, represented an important turning point in political development, as it showed that participation in a more representative form of governance was increasingly desired (Kelly 2009).

Economic and social changes that occurred in Kuwait during the 1930s developed into a perfect storm for political change. The decline of pearling, along with the rise of oil and the growing influence of the merchant class, created new economic realities that called for political reforms. These economic changes were connected to social ones, such as the rise of an urban middle class that was becoming politically conscious and the increasing prominence of the merchant class. Together, both the social and economic factors combined to provide the setting for the early reform movements, one of which was the Majlis Movement of 1938. A source of tension within the political environment was primarily the diversification of the economic base away from the traditional industries into oil exploration. The existing political system could not cope well with this new economic reality (Crystal 1990).

These early reform endeavours reflected not only responses to economic and social changes but also growing dissatisfaction with the existing political system. As Kuwait's economy began to modernise, particularly with the decline of pearling and the anticipated rise of oil revenues, the traditional balance of power between the ruling Al-Sabah family and the merchant class was increasingly disrupted (Crystal 1990; Al-Rumaihi 1975). Merchants and emerging intellectual groups became concerned that economic decisions, especially those related to state revenues and future oil income, were being made without adequate consultation or transparency (IOR/R/15/5/217 1936). In this context, demands for political reform were driven by specific grievances rather than abstract aspirations. Key concerns included the lack of institutional mechanisms for participation, limited accountability in governance, and the concentration of decision-making power in the hands of the ruling elite (Habib 1993).

As a result, the existing political system, which remained anchored in tribal traditions and personalised rule, increasingly appeared inadequate in addressing the complexities of a changing socio-economic environment. Consequently, the push for reform in the late 1930s represented not merely a reaction to economic pressures but a response to perceived structural imbalances between economic influence and political authority. The Majlis Movement, although ultimately unsuccessful, marked an important precursor to political change by articulating these concerns in a more organised and collective form (Kelly 2009; Crystal 1990).

EARLY REFORMIST EFFORTS

One of the earliest, most important waves of political awakening in Kuwait occurred during the 1930s, especially between 1936 and 1938, and was driven mainly by the merchant elite. Several key dynamics defined this period, including economic pressure on merchants, as the collapse of the pearling industry, coupled with a decline in regional trade, financially weakened Kuwait's merchant class and heightened their dissatisfaction. At the same time, the ruling Al-Sabah family began to rely more heavily on British stipends and customs revenues, decreasing dependence upon merchant financing. This changed the balance of power and created tension (Al-Yawm 1930). Faced with the ruling family's growing independence, particularly the authority of Sheikh Ahmad al-Jaber, many leading merchant families advocated for greater transparency in state finances, a more institutionalized form of government, and a voice in

decisions regarding taxation and expenditure. Their primary grievance was that political decisions, particularly those concerning economic matters, were being made without consultation.

Early attempts at political reform in Kuwait had been prompted by increasing dissatisfaction with the centralized rule of the Al-Sabah family, along with the changing socio-economic landscape. These early reformist efforts provided the foundation for later political movements, which would be most eloquently seen in the 1938 Majlis Movement. During this period, these reformist initiatives took on a number of forms, such as the rise of intellectuals, alliances among merchants, tribal elites, and the increasingly educated middle class, and the increase of socio-political pressures internally and externally. The following section will look at historical attempts at shared governance, alliance-building for reform, and the social and political factors that finally resulted in the call for increased political participation (Al-Hajri 1936).

The earliest efforts toward political reform in Kuwait had their origin in the popular dissatisfaction with the centralized rule of the Al-Sabah family. While the ruling family consolidated its power, it was alienating certain segments of the population because of feelings of underrepresentation. Various reports and newspapers from that time bear witness to an increased awareness by Kuwaiti intellectuals and public figures of a need for political reform (Al-Fadhli 1991). With the rise of trade and the beginning of the exploration for oil, the socio-economic landscape in Kuwait altered quite dramatically (Al-Mutairi 1937). These economic changes gave birth to an educated middle class that was commercially active and started to demand more political representation. This phenomenon is recorded through the economic publications of the period (Ministry of Trade and Commerce 1936).

Thus, a group of intellectuals, many of whom studied abroad, started introducing new political ideas to Kuwait (Abdullah 1937). These thinkers called for constitutional governance and democratic structures. In turn, their ideas appeared in various publications and correspondences of the time, showing increased political awareness and demands for reform (Issa 1934). The early reform movement rested for the most part on tribal elites and merchants. Traditionally influential in Kuwaiti society, these groups aimed at reforms that would help distribute power more widely to safeguard their political and economic interests. Their active pursuit of shared governance during this period is reflected in several documents (Tribal and Merchant Alliances for Political Reform 1937).

External pressures also shaped Kuwait's political landscape, especially by the British, who controlled Kuwait's foreign policy (Correspondence with the British Government on the Political Situation in Kuwait 1938). Moreover, internal socio-political pressures were growing for more participation in political life. Correspondence between British officials and Kuwaiti leaders throughout the period attests to these dynamics (FO 371/21923 1938).

The Majlis Movement of 1938 was another forthright expression of the growing demand for political reform, a National Assembly or Majlis that would grant more liberal political participation. Though the movement was unsuccessful at that time, it marked a considerable step toward an inclusive governance structure. Official documents and speeches from that time provide insights into the goals and challenges faced by the reformists (The Majlis Movement of 1938: Kuwait's Struggle for Political Change 1938).

The first serious effort to introduce a form of shared governance in Kuwait was made in 1921 by the Al-Sabah administration through the establishment of a consultative (Shura) council (Crystal 1990; Al-Qahtani 2025). This initiative can be interpreted as an early indication of the ruling authority's awareness of growing socio-political pressures, particularly from the merchant class and tribal elites who sought greater involvement in governance (Crystal 1995; Habib 1993). By creating a formal channel for consultation, the ruling family

attempted to accommodate emerging demands while maintaining overall control of the political system.

However, the Shura did not constitute a substantive shift toward participatory governance. It lacked an elected structure and did not possess legislative authority capable of challenging the Emir's power. Instead, its primary function was to provide a controlled space for the articulation of grievances, particularly from merchants and tribal leaders whose economic and social influence had expanded in the context of Kuwait's role as a regional trading entrepôt (Sluglett 1980; Crystal 1990).

In this sense, the establishment of the Shura reflected both an awareness of the need for political adaptation and the limitations of the ruling family's willingness to implement meaningful reform. While it promoted dialogue between the ruling authority and key social groups on matters such as economic policy, trade, and security, it ultimately preserved the existing hierarchical structure of power. As such, the 1921 Shura can be understood as a cautious and limited response to early pressures for political change rather than a genuine transition toward representative governance (The Majlis Movement of 1938: Kuwait's Struggle for Political Change 1938). This limitation of early consultative mechanisms helps explain why more organised and assertive reform movements emerged in the late 1930s.

During the decade and a half that followed the failure of the 1921 Shura, there was a gradual crystallization of political alliances among several different social groupings, including the merchant class, tribal elites, and an incipient group of intellectuals in Kuwait. The coalition played an important role in elaborating the early reformist ideas that took shape in the late 1930s. For their part, members of the merchant class, who had long dominated the economy, made common cause with tribal elites, who retained control over local government in the countryside, particularly as both sets of actors were frustrated by the absence of formal representation in the political process (FO 371/20862 1937).

Merchants, whose wealth was increasingly tied to regional trade and then to the prospect of oil, believed that their economic influence should be represented in the realm of politics. The tribal leaders simultaneously attempted to exert influence amidst an increasingly centralized urban administration that had, for years, excluded them from political decision-making in Kuwait City. Still, though the Al-Sabah family retained control over formal political processes, many in the tribal leadership felt that their position within society and loyalty to the ruling family entitled them to a more significant say in government (IOR/R/15/5/213 1935). In this context, the merchant class and tribal leaders initiated closer cooperation, grounded in shared grievances regarding political exclusion.

The rise of an intellectual class, often educated abroad, played an important role in shaping the reformist movement. Intellectuals, mostly civil servants, teachers, and other professionals, came with ideas of constitutionalism, political participation, and democratic governance. Such education and exposure to the political systems in the rest of the world helped to expand the political discourse in Kuwait through the linking of local dissatisfaction with broader, regional, and global movements for political change. These intellectuals soon began to demand more relevance in governance and to push for reforms that would allow all social classes, particularly those beyond the ruling family and their close allies, to participate in government (IOR/R/15/5/218 1937).

The interaction of these groups, including traders, tribal leaders, and intellectuals, enabled them to establish a network of reformist ideas and strategies. Although these groups were not yet in positions powerful enough to challenge the Al-Sabah family directly, such alliances provided a launching pad for the more integrated political mobilizations of the future. This developing political consciousness and organization paved the way for the 1938 Majlis Movement, when all these groups joined hands and urged more political representation (Crystal 1990).

Several internal and external factors combined to give impetus to the socio-political pressures that facilitated the rise of the reformist movements in Kuwait. Internally, there was growing discontent with the economic disparities occasioned by the centralized political system. As previously noted, the merchant class, having tasted great wealth from trade, began to feel marginalized as their political influence was restricted. The discovery of oil in the late 1930s heightened these economic tensions, with the promise of enormous wealth from oil exploration engendering expectations of increased political participation (IOR/R/15/5/217 1936).

A fundamental question emerged for many reformists as to whether the ruling family or the broader Kuwaiti population would be in control of the oil revenues. British influence in Kuwait also had a complex role externally in terms of shaping the political environment. As Kuwait operated within a British protectorate framework, its foreign policy remained under British control. The British presence was viewed as both a stabilizing force and one of irritation, particularly as the economic base of Kuwait began to shift with the rise of oil. The British were very unwilling to support any political reforms that might challenge the status quo, fearing that greater autonomy for Kuwait would disrupt their strategic interests in the region (IOR/R/15/5/217 1936). This further external pressure merely deepened the calls for reform locally as the people of Kuwait began to see a need for more self-determined political structures (Sluglett 1985).

Socio-political pressures, both internal and external, created a volatile environment in which calls for reform became increasingly difficult to ignore. In fact, political change was seen as an imperative for economic and social stability, particularly since the future of the country ostensibly became bound up with the development of oil resources. These pressures made it clear to many reformists that the previous model of governance revolving around the Al-Sabah family and being integrally linked with British interests could not be sustained in view of modern economic realities.

The early reformist efforts of the 1920s and 1930s, though small in scope and impact, provided the intellectual and political basis for the 1938 Majlis Movement. The lack of real political reform from the 1921 Shura and the collaborative effort from the merchant elites, tribal leaders, and intellectuals helped coalesce the ruling family's political opposition into a more unified front. The need for a more representative and participatory system was no longer restricted to the intellectual circles but had garnered widespread support among numerous social groups.

Even though it was initially established as a consultative organ without formal legislative authority, the formation of the Majlis in 1938 represented the first major attempt by reformist groups to institutionalise political participation. Its creation was a response to growing political pressures within Kuwaiti society, particularly from the merchant class, tribal elites, and emerging intellectuals who sought a more inclusive political structure (IOR/R/15/5/219 1938; Crystal 1990). However, the Majlis was short-lived, as its activities increasingly challenged the authority of the ruling Al-Sabah family. Tensions escalated when members of the Majlis began to assert greater influence over state affairs, particularly in matters related to financial oversight and administrative decision-making. In response, the ruling authority moved to curtail its activities by withdrawing support, limiting its functions, and ultimately dissolving the council (FO 371/21923 1938).

The suppression of the Majlis was further reinforced by British involvement. As Kuwait operated within a British protectorate framework, British officials prioritised political stability and were reluctant to support institutional reforms that might weaken the ruling authority or disrupt the existing political order (FO 371/21923 1938). Consequently, the Majlis Movement did not result in immediate political reforms. Instead, its suppression reflected the convergence of domestic resistance and external constraints, which limited the scope of political change in

Kuwait during this period. Nevertheless, the movement marked an important turning point in the development of Kuwait's political system. It set the stage for subsequent demands for reform, and many of the strategies employed during the 1938 movement would be revisited as Kuwait's political landscape continued to evolve in the following decades. (Kelly 2009; Crystal 1990).

CONCLUSION

The political, social, and economic configuration of Kuwait during the 1930s laid the foundation for the country's first large-scale political movement, the 1938 Majlis Movement. During this period, Kuwait operated under a system of centralized rule dominated by the Al-Sabah family, whose authority remained largely uncontested. However, this authority was mediated by influential local elites, particularly wealthy merchants and tribal leaders, whose positions within economic and social networks enabled them to shape the broader political environment. While ultimate power rested with the ruling family, these groups exercised considerable influence, reflecting a complex and negotiated political structure. At the same time, the British protectorate framework contributed to political stability but also introduced additional layers of constraint and dependency, complicating the trajectory of political development.

Economically, Kuwait remained heavily dependent on trade and pearling, with the merchant class controlling much of the urban economy. The decline of the pearling industry, driven by global economic shifts, generated uncertainty and intensified socio-economic pressures, particularly among the working population. The late 1930s witnessed the early discovery of oil, which introduced new economic opportunities while simultaneously disrupting existing power relations. These transformations, combined with reliance on a British protectorate framework, contributed to a growing perception that existing political arrangements were increasingly inadequate in addressing emerging challenges.

Socially, Kuwaiti society was structured around tribal affiliations and familial networks, with a clear distinction between urban merchant elites and tribal leadership in rural areas. Although these groups held significant influence within their respective spheres, their formal political participation remained limited. Over time, dissatisfaction among merchants, intellectuals, and segments of tribal leadership, particularly regarding the absence of meaningful political representation, contributed to the emergence of reformist sentiments. Within this evolving context, Kuwaiti intellectuals emerged as key actors in articulating and advancing reformist ideas. Influenced by external education and exposure to constitutionalist thought, they challenged the concentration of power and advocated for broader political participation. Their engagement helped translate socio-economic grievances into organized political discourse, while collaboration with other elite groups facilitated wider mobilization. These developments expanded the space for political organization and collective action, ultimately culminating in the Majlis Movement of 1938.

Overall, the developments of the 1930s should be understood not as isolated changes but as interconnected processes that generated structural tensions and opportunities for reform. The interaction between centralized authority, economic transformation, and evolving social awareness created the conditions for the emergence of reformist discourse and political activism. The 1938 Majlis Movement thus represented a critical moment in Kuwait's political evolution, reflecting both the limitations of existing structures and the growing demand for more participatory forms of governance. This study therefore demonstrates that political reform in Kuwait emerged not in the absence of change, but within a system structurally constrained by both domestic authority and imperial power.

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