

**Beyond the Autonomous Rentier State:
Parliamentary Politics and National Identity in
Kuwait**

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Abstract

Oil-rich Middle Eastern states are frequently characterised by the supposed formativeness of 'rent'. Rent generated from hydrocarbon resources is often evoked to explain the enduring formation of 'autonomous', often authoritarian states, detached from a broader body politic. As this paper argues, monarchical and oil-rich Kuwait does much to problematise these causal logics of rent and its anti-democratic payoffs. Instead, I locate a particularly active parliament and citizenry, who, along with South Asian migrant workers, are reconfiguring the state-society relationship, leading to new kinds of popular, democratic politics.

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Frequently Used Arabic Terms¹

Term Used	English Gloss	Arabic Script
majlis	Council, Assembly, Parliament.	مجلس
majlis al-ummah	National Assembly (Kuwait's parliament). (Also spelt 'Majles al-Ommah').	مجلس الأمة
amīr	'Prince', monarch, equivalent to 'king'. (Also spelt 'emir').	أمير
al-Ṣabāḥ	The name of Kuwait's ruling family.	الصباح \ آل صباح
istijwāb	Interpellation, 'grilling,' or questioning of a minister by members of the Kuwaiti parliament.	استجواب
kafālah	Sponsorship system pertaining to migrant workers in Kuwait and other Gulf states.	كفالة
dishdasha / abāya	National dress of Kuwaiti men / women respectively.	دشدشة \ أباية

¹ I have adopted the Arabic transliteration system of the International Journal of Middle East Studies, except in the case of an author's name where s/he prefers an alternate English spelling.

INTRODUCTION

While commentators look desperately for nascent signs of Arab democracy in US-occupied Iraq (see especially David Frum 2010), Kuwait's political system, headed by a hereditary *amīr*, has been quietly bucking the trend of Arab political 'exceptionalism' over the past two decades.² Despite its virtual non-coverage in the Western media since its liberation from Iraq in 1991, Kuwait today hosts the noisiest, most influential and stable parliament of any Arab regime. Established in 1962, the National Assembly (*majlis al-ummah*) has held seven mostly free and fair elections since the ruling al-Ṣabāḥ family returned from exile after the 1990-91 Second Gulf War. Today it sets the ruling family's salary, sacks the *amīr*'s appointed ministers, overturns his decrees, and is the country's primary source of legislation. Since 2005, the parliament has allowed women to vote and run for office, and in 2009, Kuwait's first four women legislators – all holding doctorates from US universities – won considerable majorities in their electorates, and took their seats in the *majlis al-ummah*.

In this paper I take aim at a number of dominant assumptions about the role and position of oil in an oil-producing Middle Eastern state. Here, I consider how an elected parliament and expatriate sponsorship regime have emerged as two transformative sites in the production of power relations between 'state' and 'society' in the otherwise autocratic oil-exporting state of Kuwait. Following Hertog's (2010) intervention on the interplay between oil, patronage and the Saudi state, my paper's mode of enquiry and analysis stresses the need for qualitative, case-focussed (small-n), ethnographically-informed political science in the study of state-society relations in the oil-producing Middle East.

Hertog's (2010) seminal work is also salient for its central thesis: that a path-dependent, 'eventful' history of state-building has entangled the public institutions of the Saudi state

² See Appendix, Image 1: 'Map of Kuwait in region.'

within webs of patronage and kinship. These webs remain primarily agent-focused at the meso and micro levels of the state bureaucracy, which coalesce and conspire to restrict the autonomy of the state itself and its ability to realise certain policy outcomes.

This finding strikes at the heart of the assumptions which underpin the rentier state literature. This 'hegemonic theoretic paradigm' (Herb 1999), purporting to explain the enduring 'freedom deficit' in the Arab world (UNDP 2002), rests on a 'robust' statistical correlation between a lack of civil and political rights and a state's oil rent-dependence. Put succinctly, 'oil impedes democracy' (see especially Ross 2001, 2009). As a side note, this paper suggests that while Edward Said's (1978) devastating critique of British and French scholarship of the Middle East raised the profile of political economic explanations of Muslim and Arab politics, theorists of an oil-based causality reproduce in new ways the 'timeless logics' of Arab politics in their search for an elegant, but inherently reductionist, parsimony.³

It is in this sense that I pitch the Kuwaiti case as both confounding to dominant assumptions and a means for reconceptualising state-society relations in the Middle East. In many ways, Kuwait is an archetypal rentier state, being both a major oil exporter and an absolutist monarchy where executive authority lies with a hereditary *amīr*. As rentier theorists (e.g., Luciani and Beblawi 1987) have stressed frequently, oil states like Kuwait substitute the collection of revenue through income taxes with 'rent' from hydrocarbon extraction. The absence of this fiscal link between state and society (that is, the liberal-democratic social contract of 'no taxation without representation') is evoked to paint a picture of ruling regimes that can rule unchallenged, supposedly autonomously, from society at large.

³ Here, one can draw on Giovanni Sartori's (1970) critique of 'conceptual stretching' in comparative political science.

I challenge the causal logic of this argument. As I go on to discuss, Kuwait largely fails to conform to the rentier model, and the expectation that its state is all-powerful, towering above a largely passive and disempowered society is inconsistent with a well-established case study literature (see especially Crystal 1990 & 2005, Longva 1997 & 2005, Tetreault 2000). As a counterpoint, this paper charts the emergence of new, multi-vocal kinds of politics rooted to some extent in the mass importation of migrant workers which characterises most of the Arab Gulf states. Here, oil wealth takes on an unexpected property, seemingly distorting the state-society dichotomy. As I show at length, Kuwait's citizen-subjects do influence the state – they challenge it, appropriate it, participate in its governance, and affirm allegiance to it as active agents, not as acquiescent subalterns. As such, and again by drawing on Hertog's (2010) seminal contribution, this paper offers a revisionist position to the dominant political economic wisdom, suggesting instead the need to explore the socio-historical complexities underlying the divisions, overlaps, and struggles between state and society in the oil-producing Middle East.

Kuwait's hybrid system comprising a hereditary executive and an influential elected parliament is glaringly absent from both purely political economic and mainstream political scientific accounts of the Arab democracy 'deficit' (see, recently, King 2009, Diamond 2010). As this paper goes on to show, a hereditary regime which simultaneously maintains popular legitimacy to rule continuously while being irrevocably bound to the demands of an elected parliament, cannot be understood by reference to the anti-democratic properties of rent. While Kuwait lacks the distinction of being a 'free' society (see Freedom House 2010a), its state and unelected *amīr* are intimately bound to an active citizenry.

Rather than reify the separation between 'state' and 'society' and divorce the relations between them from their historical and social context, I try to critically assess their composition and dialectical linkages in the local Kuwait setting. I eschew the cost-cutting reductionism of most of the rentier state literature by probing deeper than isolating a sole

variable (such as 'oil rent' or 'Islam') to explain a complex, plural and hybrid electoral-hereditary political system. Here, I tentatively suggest the formation of new kinds of political subjectivities⁴ shaped in part by, and as a consequence of, the al-Ṣabāḥ rulers' oil-funded state-building endeavour from the early twentieth century.

As Longva (2005:134-5) argues, the rentier and democratisation literature present mostly "views from afar" which privilege bigger structures and power-holders at the expense of otherwise "sociologically significant," but quotidian, actors, and practices. Foucault (1980:72) also criticised studies of power which are "confine[d] ... to analysing the state apparatus alone," because the exercise of power, he argued, "goes much further, passes through much finer channels, and is much more ambiguous."

Foucault's (1977) seminal genealogy of power in the largely Anglo-Francophone, metropolitan world explores a return to the micro-sites of power. He emphasised the benefits of examining how power operates on the level of the individual in order to grasp how everyday behaviour and thinking becomes "invested, colonised, utilised, involuted, transformed, displaced, extended..." by more general institutions like the state (Foucault 1980:99). As this paper shows, the relations between Kuwaiti citizens, their elected representatives, and migrant workers are micro-sites of dynamic transformation of the Kuwaiti social body. As I go on to show, the dominant rentier literature fails to reveal that quotidian appropriations of the state converge with new national, ethnic, and class identities to enable new and complex forms of intersection between state and society.

In his seminal work, Foucault (1977) tried to show how, in Britain and France, subjectivity came to be produced through the interplay of a number of discourses, disciplinary mechanisms, technologies and routines. Discourses of judicial, criminological, medical and psychiatric truths were enabled through institutions: courts, schools, prisons, and hospitals.

⁴ Understood here, in the Foucauldian (1977) sense, as bounded forms of thinking, feeling, and desiring which characterises the social body.

This intimate association between power and knowledge produces the bounded forms of thinking Foucault calls 'subjectivities.'

While Foucault compellingly showed how power in metropolitan societies transitioned from sovereign forms (the destruction of the body) to disciplinary forms (the normalisation of human behaviour) producing different kinds of subjectivity, his account is hardly representative of the transformation of power in the colonial and post-colonial world. Power in the oil-producing, and largely post-colonial Middle East, then, could have a profoundly different history from Foucault's metropolitan account.⁵

In this paper, by drawing on Foucault's (1977) concept of 'discourse,' I locate the creation of new subjectivities through the interplay between truth regimes, political practices, and their enabling institutions as pivotal to understanding the relations between citizen and ruler. New forms of parliamentary politics grafted to the pre-modern tribal 'social contract' which once bound a socially-responsible ruler to his politically-active merchant subjects, conspire with new forms of social control embedded within the welfare state and the migrant sponsorship system to enable a hybrid subjectivity of deference to the Kuwaiti state, and a contingent, but surprisingly durable, allegiance to the ruling family. After oil discovery, Kuwaitis adopted new identities as politically-active citizens and as sponsors policing the migrant workforce. These subjectivities, enabled through parliamentary practices and an exploitative 'ethnocratic' regime (Longva 2005) of migrant sponsorship, are reshaping relations between state and society.

Thus, in order to understand the role of the state, and the pre-eminence of the ruling family, one must understand these new forms of subjectivity, and how Kuwaitis' apprehension of the roles of oil wealth, welfare, the state, parliament, and the ruling family in their lives have changed over time.

⁵ In the conclusion of this paper I make some tentative suggestions as to how we might think about the history of power in Kuwait by reference to the new modes of governing which emerged post-oil discovery.

The paper advances this case over three chapters. The first examines the analytical tools and approaches which dominate the rentier literature, questioning its post-Orientalist objectivity and empiricism. I evaluate its recent theoretical development and its role in replacing the discredited Orientalist assumptions about the political 'exceptionalism' of Muslims and Arabs. I consider rentier theorists' inability to capture historical change within, and diversity between, Arab polities through a reliance on quantitative methods; their denial of human agency in favour of an explicit rentier 'mentality' or a more implicit acceptance of the structural power of oil wealth; and their failure to deconstruct the composition of the two entities they assume to be divided – the 'state' and its 'society'.

I expand this last point into chapter two to show that the power of the Kuwaiti state was enabled as much by Kuwaitis as by their oil-rich monarchs. Further, the division between the Kuwaiti 'state' (as rulers) and 'society' (as citizens/subjects) from the eighteenth century onwards was never stable or unchanging. I draw on Migdal's (2001) contribution to show that the Kuwaiti state, while unquestionably powerful, is not an impermeable realm, but is constantly transformed and affected by the society it rules over. Indeed it is unlikely the state was ever totally immune from popular demands for political participation even at its most 'autocratic' periods (1976 and 1986) when the regime suspended the parliament.

I try to show how the state's autonomy was limited by Kuwaiti citizens' and parliamentarians' gradual adoption and manipulation of the language of the 'state' (built, as it was, by an increasingly 'autocratic' and oil-rich ruling family) and notions of the 'public good.' These contemporary notions, when grafted to older mythologies of Bedouin 'consultation and consensus', produce popular expectations of the limits to the ruling family's right to dominate the state. These truth regimes (Foucault 1977) are important in understanding how Kuwait's current elected parliament performs its duty to its

constituents, while helping to explain why it succeeds in stifling government reforms and curbing the power of cabinet ministers.

Yet even as truth regimes enable an influential elected parliament, a migrant sponsorship regime simultaneously reinforces the ruling family's grip on the state while making its citizens feel embedded within it. In chapter three I argue that rentier theorists fail to recognise the importation of a disenfranchised and frequently mistreated population of migrant workers as one of oil-wealth's most important socio-political effects on state-society relations. Responsible for constructing and maintaining the Kuwaiti state without engaging the labour of Kuwaitis themselves, they now constitute 65 percent of Kuwait's population. I argue that an understanding of 'state' and 'society' as equal correlates of 'rulers' and 'citizens' is flawed from the perspective of Kuwait's majority non-citizen inhabitants. For the majority of the country's inhabitants, Kuwaiti citizens collectively personify the state, filling important functions which the state cannot perform on its own. Not only are they mostly employed in the state bureaucracy, they also project its gaze through the sponsor-migrant relationship at the household level.

As such, I try to show how the importation of cheap labour – to perform necessary jobs which Kuwaitis themselves refused to perform – has affected the governor-governed relation over time, in ways the ruling al-Ṣabāḥ family may neither have planned nor predicted. The asymmetrical power relations between citizens and expatriates characteristic of the sponsorship (*kafālah*) system are reproduced in contemporary practices of ethnic and national identity and popular imaginings of the social contract.

Here, Crystal's (2005) characterisation of Kuwaiti citizens as a privatised 'police force' of sponsors is instructive in showing not only a key weakness of the state apparatus, but also the profound importance of power relations on the individual level in understanding broader power mechanisms like the state. Useful, too, is Longva's (2005) contention that Kuwait is best understood as a 'civic ethnocracy.' While her theoretical approach arguably

brings us the closest to grasping the nature of state-society relations in Kuwait, it does not sufficiently deconstruct 'ethnicity' as a function of class relations or shed light on how and why the classificatory binaries of self and Other, and associated gendered 'cultural' threats came to characterise the Kuwaiti body politic.

I conclude this paper with some thoughts on how this particular reading of the changing divisions and overlaps between state and society may point to new understandings of how the region's rentier states, citizens, and migrant under-classes interact, constitute, and re-constitute each other.

CHAPTER ONE

Cursed by oil: new paradigms, old Orientalist assumptions?

First identified in the 1970s, the oil-rich autocratic ‘rentier’ state has gained renewed attention from political scientists in the past decade.⁶ It emerged as a more ‘convincing’ political economic model to explain the prevalence of authoritarianism in the Arab world than older Orientalist explanations (exemplified, for instance, in Kedourie 1994). Instead of attributing the longevity of Arab autocracy to essentialised notions of Arab ‘culture’ or ‘Islam,’ rentier theorists attribute causality to the abundance of oil wealth. However, rentier theory commits many of the same empirical and conceptual errors as the dated Orientalist approaches it is thought to transcend. In this chapter, I briefly retrace rentier theory’s gradual displacement of ‘culturalist’ paradigms as the new ‘hegemonic theoretic paradigm’ of Middle Eastern politics (Herb 1999), before deconstructing the reasons for its failure to recognize and deal with the sorts of popular politics we see in Kuwait.

Two decades after the third global ‘wave of democracy’ passed over the Middle East (Huntington 1991), scholars remain perplexed by “[t]he continuing absence of even a single democratic regime in the Arab world” (Diamond 2010:93). Debates over what continues to impede Middle Eastern states’ ability to ‘catch up’ with democracy’s ‘inevitable’ ascension have been a staple of regional political science for the past two decades at least.⁷ The literature typically reports that while small signs of democratic reform emerged in Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and Yemen during the 1980s and 1990s in the form of parliamentary and presidential elections, such ‘reforms’ proved merely ‘cosmetic’ (Salamé 1994; Ayubi 1995), and states gripped by ‘election fetishism’ (Sadiki 2009:60) were better described as

⁶ Hertog (2010:264-5) points out that “there is no coherent ‘rentier state theory’. Nevertheless, there is a cluster of hypotheses on the impact of oil on politics and development in developing countries, postulating a variety of mostly negative effects.”

⁷ See, for instance, Brynen, Korany and Noble 1995; Kostiner 2000; Posusney and Angrist 2005; Pratt 2007; Ottaway and Choucair-Vizoso 2008; King 2009; Sadiki 2009; Diamond 2010.

'liberalised autocracies' or 'competitive authoritarian' regimes (for example, see Brumberg 2002).

Today there remains little argument about the 'exceptional' prevalence of authoritarianism in the Arab world: "the main dispute is over what produces this pattern of embedded authoritarianism, not whether it exists" (Goldsmith 2007:86). Until recently, scholars looked to certain cultural and religious traits supposedly unique to the region, such as an unproblematised notion of 'Islam.' Elie Kedourie (1994) asserted that "the idea of democracy is quite alien to the mind-set of Islam," and by extension the vast majority of Arabs, who "had been accustomed to ... autocracy and passive obedience" (Kedourie 1994:103). Such claims lent helped reinforce long-held Orientalist polemics which asserted that Muslim countries would "have the most terrorists and the fewest democracies in the world" so long as they remained beholden to 'Islam' (Pipes 1990:29).

The idea that a monolithic 'Islamic' or 'Arab' culture prevents the emergence of popular democratic politics has been forcefully critiqued by scholars since the 1970s, most famously by Edward Said (1978). Orientalist explanations failed to see the differentiated composition of religious and cultural identities and their refraction through local political, social, and economic circumstances. To the contrary, Eickelman (2002:15) for instance argued that Islam "has not always provided a basis for common sentiment and identity." Islamic doctrine distilled from the Holy Qur'an is actually of "secondary importance" in understanding Muslim politics, argue Eickelman and Piscatori (1996:ix). "[R]ather than being monolithic," they argue, Muslim politics "derives its force and significance from the specific contexts, times and localities in which it takes place" despite many Islamist groups' espousal of Muslim universalism and solidarity (Eickelman and Piscatori 1996:163).

In the wake of these and similar critiques, Orientalist explanations have gradually given way to theories privileging political economic factors such as the regional abundance of oil

wealth and the particular style of state formation this engenders.⁸ Since Mahdavy (1970) coined the concept of the 'rentier state' to explain the political economy of oil-rich Iran under the autocratic Pahlavi dynasty, political economists have believed that abundant oil wealth, unproductively acquired by the cheap extraction of a state-owned resource, better explains the strength of authoritarianism.

In many Arab states, oil and gas revenues ('rents') account for substantial government income streams (Ross 2001:329). These rents are often understood as enabling constellations of patronage, and so maintain authoritarian rule by insulating rulers from their populations. Rulers distribute their abundant wealth through some mixture of universal welfare and state employment, repression, and by not collecting income taxes. The absence of taxation is a particularly powerful motif in the rentier literature, as it is thought to free rulers from the imperative to provide representation and accountability, inverting the classic Western assumption that 'taxation leads to representation' (Beblawi 1987:53; Richards and Waterbury 2008:49-51). Citizens of rentier states, Beblawi (1987:53) argues, "are far less demanding in terms of political participation" than their oil-poor and tax-collecting counterparts, because there is no fiscal association between ruler and citizen.

Where authoritarian states have few natural resources, such as Syria, Egypt and Jordan, "large locational rents from payments for pipeline crossings, transit fees, and passage through the Suez Canal" (Ross 2001:329), or military and political aid, or remittances of workers from poorer states working in oil-rich ones serve as externally-sourced and unproductively-generated income (Beblawi 1987:59-62).⁹ All Arab states, oil-rich and poor, could therefore be understood as "a sort of oil economy with various undertones of rentier mentalities," argued Beblawi (1987:52).

⁸ 'Arab' and 'Islamic' culture is still (mis)conceived by some scholars as stable, monolithic and undifferentiated causal variables in determining political life in the Arab world. See for example, Stepan and Robertson 2003 & 2004; Lakoff 2004.

⁹ Luciani (2005:91) later revoked this last category as constituting rent, as worker's remittances do not accrue directly to the state, and thus cannot be considered part of a state's rentier income. This calls into question Beblawi's (1987) description of the whole region as an 'oil economy.'

These ideas heavily influenced a relatively small but dedicated group of Middle East specialists studying the oil-rich regimes of North Africa (see especially Anderson 1986; Vandewalle 1997) and the Arabian Peninsula (see especially Chaudhry 1997). At the turn of the century political economist Michael Ross spurred renewed interest in the anti-democratic properties of oil after publishing detailed regression models showing that a global correlation between oil wealth and authoritarian governance was ‘robust’ (Ross 2001:356). He sought to extend the growing economic wisdom about the ‘resource curse’ in developing states (see Auty 1993; Karl 1999; Sachs and Warner 2001), by showing that resource wealth not only ‘cursed’ a country’s economic growth, but also its prospects for democracy.¹⁰

Ross presented three key processes which “may interact in pernicious ways” to stifle democratisation in the world’s oil-rich states (Ross 2001:357). His first explanation was a *rentier effect* whereby low or no taxation leads to the political acquiescence of a population (Ross 2001:332); the second was a *repression effect* whereby a rentier state’s deployment of oil rents helps it to consolidate its security apparatuses at the expense of popular democratisation (Ross 2001:335); and the third was a *modernisation effect* whereby an oil economy fosters social stagnation and inhibits certain forms of economic development ‘necessary’ for democracy (Ross 2001:336-337). For Ross, these three effects were consistent with arguments advanced earlier by Mahdavy (1970) and Beblawi (1987), but had universal, rather than just regional relevance.¹¹

The idea that resource wealth promotes authoritarian rule quickly emerged as a “conventional wisdom among many political scientists, policymakers, and pundits alike”

¹⁰ He continued this line of enquiry to show that oil also increases the chances of civil war (Ross 2008a) and exacerbates gender inequality (Ross 2008b).

¹¹ Ross later adjusted his mathematical measurements and disposed of the ‘repression’ and ‘modernisation’ effects of his original thesis, while upholding his taxation-based ‘rentier effect’ hypothesis (Ross 2009:25). Ross’s (2001) earlier findings were otherwise endorsed in whole or in part by other economists (see for instance Wantchekon and Jensen 2004; Aslaksen and Torvik 2005; Tsui 2005).

(Dunning 2008:2). But perhaps more importantly, Middle East scholars began embracing the theory “as a powerful counterweight to culturalist explanations for the region’s lack of democracy” (Moore 2004:6).

However, the analytical and conceptual parsimony of the ‘oil versus democracy’ paradigm obscures complex sociologies, forums of associational activity, and path dependent historical processes that might be as, if not more, important than the presence of oil when explaining political change or any apparent lack thereof. As Herb (1999:3) argues, the observed correlation between oil and autocracy has inhibited rather than shed much light on more fruitful theoretical questions in the post-Orientalist era about Gulf regimes and their qualitative differences. Below, I discuss how three aspects of the rentier literature fail to predict the emergence of the hybrid parliamentary-hereditary political system we see in my case study of Kuwait in the remaining chapters.

The limits to quantification

The methodological basis of much of the rentier literature is evocative of the ‘culturalist’ positivism and parsimony of earlier Orientalist scholarship. The ‘robust’ relations between oil and autocracy are established through a quantitative methodology (regression analysis) which relies on pre-fabricated categories of ‘democratic’ and ‘autocratic’ regimes. Such an approach captures only a two-dimensional and ahistorical view of the region’s politics, and collapses important qualitative differences between oil states. As I go on to explain, while much of the arithmetic used by key rentier theorists (especially Ross 2001) is ‘impeccable’ (Ali 2009:118), it obscures the more complex sociologies, histories, and other less-obvious mechanisms through which citizens may press their claims on the state.

The use of quantitative methods grew significantly in the social sciences in the last century because numbers “appear to provide an objective basis for analysis” (Ali 2009:113). Regression analysis is a technique employed increasingly by economists and political

scientists, especially those highlighting the negative effects of hydrocarbon extraction (e.g., Ross 2001, Sachs and Warner 2001). According to Ali (2009:114) “regression is an elegant technique that allows for independent variables to be compared in relation with dependent variables in a classic scheme of hypothetical testing.” By employing this technique, Ross can show that the statistical correlation he finds between ‘oil wealth’ and ‘authoritarianism’ is not a mere case of coincidence, but of causation. He claims his regression model is “evidence that oil wealth strongly inhibits democratic transitions in authoritarian states, that this pattern is reasonably robust, and that regardless of any possible countervailing pro-democracy effects, oil’s net impact on democratic transitions is strongly negative” (Ross 2009:2).¹²

While Ross’s results are interesting and deserve further attention, David Freedman (1991:292), a distinguished statistician, warned his peers, “I do not think that regression can carry much of the burden in a causal argument.” Despite the regression technique’s ‘elegance’ and Ross’s ‘impeccable’ use of it (Ali 2009:114-118), it does not account for complex historical and exogenous variables.

Moreover, by separating regime types into ‘democratic’ and ‘autocratic’ variables, important qualitative differences between regimes and societies are collapsed and re-compartmentalised into a two-dimensional black-and-white ‘reality.’ Ross’s approach presupposes a clear, coherent, and uniform assumption of what a ‘democratic’ or ‘authoritarian’ regime is, rather than an understanding of local political practices and their changing function in specific cases. To establish which states are democratic, and which not, Ross (2001, 2009), Diamond (2010), Stepan and Robertson (2003, 2004), and many others, look to *Freedom House*, “widely recognized as the definitive source of information on the state of freedom around the globe” (Freedom House 2010b). The organisation’s annual *Map of Freedom* assigns each country one of three categories: ‘Free’, ‘Partly Free’, and ‘Not

¹² Ross explains the methodology underpinning his ‘oil impedes democracy’ claim in Ross (2001:337) and Ross (2009:9-11).

Free' (Goldsmith 2007:89).¹³ In 2010, no Arab country and no non-Western resource-rich state was labelled 'Free,' and Lebanon, Kuwait and Morocco were the only Arab states deemed 'Partly Free' (Freedom House 2010a).

Goldsmith argues that "[t]he average Freedom House score conceals considerable variation" between states, "is highly aggregated, and subject to many possible biases" (Goldsmith 2007:90-2). An example of this bias is found in *Freedom House's* criteria for an electoral democracy.¹⁴ Goldsmith (2007:93) compiled a table of multi-party leadership elections in Muslim countries from 1990 to 2006. Figures for Kuwait under the headings of 'multi-party elections held' and years of 'opposition victory' are left blank because formal political parties are illegal in Kuwait. But, as Goldsmith (2007:94) correctly notes, 'non-party' legislative elections have been held since 1962.

In fact, Kuwait's democratically-elected parliament asserts its legislative powers and restrains the absolute monarch quite effectively in the absence of legal political parties. Popular Kuwaiti attitudes assign parliamentarians, the labels of 'service' (pro-government) or 'principled' (opposition) deputies (Longva 2005:116). The informality of 'bloc-based' politics,¹⁵ though, means deputies within the same bloc may lack coherent views on certain government policies, making it difficult for Western media pundits to discern whether the parliament is dominated by opposition or government deputies. Yet opposition to the government's legislative agenda has frequently crystallised to force the *amīr* to call early elections in 1999, 2006, 2008, and 2009 (see electoral data in Herb 2009b).

By understanding states like Kuwait via macro-level statistical surveys, *Freedom House* and political economists like Ross (2001) collapse important qualitative differences between regimes. They completely exclude local-conceptions of 'democratic' practices and

¹³ See Freedom House (2006) for details on its freedom index methodology.

¹⁴ "To qualify as an electoral democracy in Freedom House's lexicon, a state must have a competitive, multi-party political system, universal adult suffrage, regular elections and open media" (Goldsmith 2007:87-88).

¹⁵ Kuwaiti parliamentarians fall broadly into five political 'blocs,' roughly conceived as the Society of Muslim Brothers, Salafi, Popular, Liberal and Shi'i groupings (Herb 2009b).

accountability, hybrid political systems which defy comparison, and non-electoral channels through which populations may re-affirm (or challenge) their rulers' political legitimacy. As Moore (2004:4) argues, "placing such diverse regimes as found in say Syria, Kuwait, and Yemen ... under the blanket authoritarian/non-democratic category raises doubts about how such ordering contributes to our understanding of these countries."

Structure versus agency

A second significant conceptual shortcoming in the rentier literature is the emphasis on economic structures and the invisibility of political choices and contests which play out beneath an oft-observed region-wide authoritarianism. Assertions about the primacy of structural forces, such as those below, invoke the discredited Orientalist tropes of passivity and idleness, which political economic approaches purportedly transcend. Yates' (1996:21-22) use of the rentier state concept in relation to post-colonial Gabonese politics is exemplary:

Insulated by the surrounding comforts that external rent provides, rentier elites have a proclivity to form a complacent disposition and to lack the necessity that is the mother of all invention. ... The rentier mentality is a psychological condition with profound consequences for productivity.

Here, we are given an image of an agent-less world where particular relationships to economic production deny the capacity for human volition. They suggest rulers lack the agency to resist oil's inevitable authoritarian effects, while citizens quietly trade their demands for political participation in exchange for welfare and government jobs, and/or acquiesce to oil-funded instruments of repression. Placed in the context of the Arab world, they invoke a sense of the region not being "subject to the ordinary processes of history" (Said 1978:230).

This determinism manifests clearly in the Iraqi democratisation literature which, as Luciani (2005:92-3) observes, "is full of references to the fact that the central government should not have full control of the oil rent." For instance, in Birdsall and Subramanian's (2004)

article, published in the prestigious journal *Foreign Affairs*, Iraq comes to be understood by reference to the predictability of the oil ‘curse’, while the American invasion serves to enable a Western “economic policy practitioners’ dream.” Iraq, they argue, is now “a relatively clean slate” on which external modes of economic governance can be trialled and imposed to break the otherwise inevitable ‘curse’ of autocracy which characterises non-Western oil-rich states left to their own devices. Frum (2010) follows a similar line of argument, and explicitly ties Iraq’s potential for overcoming its pre-determined fate to particular American foreign and energy policy. The relationship between knowledge and power, and specifically how our knowledge of the Middle East enables and precludes certain relationships with it (Said 1978) continues to elude adherents of this line of political economic thinking.

On an analytical level, though, by extrapolating one independent variable to explain a whole range of social outcomes, Ross collapses important *qualitative* differences between cases, and more often than not, gives us compressed, two-dimensional snapshots of social reality. The real test, though, lies in the predictive power these approaches claim. Using the framework Ross develops, we could not anticipate the kinds of quotidian, vernacular democratic practices that I go on to discuss in my Kuwaiti case.

Despite the popular resonance of this hydrocarbon determinism, Hertog (2007:541) argues that “[t]here is no automatic mechanism producing regulatory failure and rent seeking in rentier states.” Further, “elite decisions are of enormous import in shaping the state,” which does not develop in a linear fashion in response to the presence or absence of oil wealth (Hertog 2010:3). In the case of Kuwait, for instance, Al-Shayegi (2009:52-53) argues that the political choices of former *amīr* al-Sālim al-Ṣabāḥ¹⁶ were pivotal in creating the

¹⁶ Reign from 1950 to 1965.

“special relationship which connects the ruling family ... to the ordinary people” through a vocal and influential parliament.¹⁷

State versus society

Rentier theorists adhere to unproblematised notions of the ‘state’ and reify its separation and autonomy from ‘society.’ From its beginnings (Mahdavy 1975) to its peak (Ross 2001, onwards), the rentier literature has tended to reflect and reproduce the state-centralism which has gained momentum in political science since the 1980s (e.g., Skocpol *et al.* 1985). This is despite Mitchell’s (1991) forceful critique of state-centralism some twenty years ago.

The absence of a taxation system in oil-producing states which binds the state to its populace, is oft-invoked as the locus of rentier state ‘autonomy’ (e.g., Schwarz 2008:602-7). Yet Sandbakken (2006:147) argues that “[c]itizens do not give up making demands simply because they are not taxed.” She finds that in none of the oil states of Libya, Algeria or Nigeria “has taxation been a significant factor in explaining calls for democratization or the lack thereof” (Sandbakken 2006:147). Similarly, and as I discuss later, Tétreault and al-Mughni (1995:184) argue that the welfare policies of Kuwait’s oil-rich ruling family have not “generat[ed] consistent loyalty to the regime.”

The rentier literature’s belief in a state’s autonomy residing in its avoidance of collecting taxes reflects the state-centralism adopted by political scientists since Skocpol *et al.* (1985) tried to “bring the state back in.” Despite Mitchell’s (1991) robust critique of this movement, most of the rentier literature treats the state as an organisation which is “not just distinguishable from society but autonomous from it” (Mitchell [1999] 2006:170). As Ferguson and Gupta (2005:107) argue, the state-above-society motif continues to be “surprisingly resistant to critical scrutiny.” Accordingly, Migdal and Schlichte (2005:4) dominant understandings of the state conceive of state boundaries as producing:

¹⁷ Discussed at length in the next chapter.

social systems, rules and norms of daily behaviour, and the bounds of primary collective identity. ... In these insulated spaces, one complex actor, the state, has been able to differentiate itself from the tangle of other social organisations and their specific interests.

Timothy Mitchell ([1999] 2006:173) argues that “[s]tate-centred approaches ... presented the state as an autonomous entity whose actions were not reducible to or determined by forces in society.” While the movement to ‘bring the state back in’ re-established a clear boundary between state and society, “the line between the two is often uncertain” (ibid.:174). The accompanying conceptualisation of power is closely linked to the scholarly tradition of Max Weber, who argued that the state is the territorial entity which “claims for itself the *monopoly of legitimate physical force*” (Weber [1919] 2004:131, original emphasis).¹⁸

Migdal (2001:112) argues that Weber’s understanding fails to capture “the formulation and transformation of its [the state’s] goals.” He claims that “we need to move away from theories that rob social forces beside the state of their volition and agency, as well as from theories positing an integrated framework for societies, such as a ruling class, that accounts for the dominant patterns of behaviour and belief” (Migdal 2001:99).

Further, Migdal and Schlichte (2005:12) argue that “The assumption that only it [the state] does, or should, create rules and that only it does, or should, maintain the violent means to bend people to obey those rules minimised and trivialised the rich negotiation, interaction, and resistance that occur in every human society among multiple systems of rules.” To posit the state as an “incredibly coherent” organisation which exercises “an extraordinary hegemony of thought and action over all other social organisations intersecting [its]

¹⁸ Beblawi’s (1987:4) definition of the state is identical to Weber’s: “the apparatus or organization of government or power that exercises the monopoly of the legal use of violence. In this meaning, the state does not coincide with society ... and [it] certainly rules over it.”

territory,” leaves no room to theorise the manifold “arenas of competing multiple sets of rules” (Migdal and Schlichte 2005:12).

In his rich account of patronage and kinship networks within the Saudi bureaucracy, Hertog (2010) shows that the rentier literature crucially overlooks the more complex composition of the Saudi state. On the surface, the Saudi state appears completely capable of dominating all groups in society. However, Hertog (2010:11) found that when it comes to implementing government policy the state’s policies “are often subverted by society on the micro-level, where the state’s many individual clients are difficult to police.” Oil’s impact “has been far from uniform across the state, neither on the level of organizations nor on the level of individual bureaucratic behaviour” (Hertog 2010:10). While “oil money initially gave its elites vast autonomy to create and reshape institutions,” the state has become bogged-down in client networks of favour distribution (Hertog 2010:267). Therefore, “it makes little sense to analyse ‘state’ and ‘society’ as coherent (macro) aggregates, as rentier theorists often implicitly do” (Hertog 2010:11-12). He explains that contrary to the state-centralist view sustained by the rentier literature, the autonomy of the Saudi state

is compromised on the micro-level, not only in the sense that its control over low-level bureaucracy and the surrounding social networks is limited but also through numerous micro-level distributional commitments that tie down the state (Hertog 2010:263).

Eickelman (2002:335) argues that a focus on the fiscal nature of rentier states to explain political development “deflects attention from historical continuities in leadership, authority, and ideas of justice and equity.” Both rentier and non-rentier states, he reminds us, “are profoundly affected by changing expectations of legitimate rule” (Eickelman 2002:335). In the case of Saudi Arabia, Foley (2010:3) argues that the rentier model fails to recognise other important “traditional modes of authority, such as sword dances at the end of tribal camel festivals, *majlises* (councils in which politicians field requests from ordinary Saudis), direct payments to Saudis in need, and tribal levies guarding vast expanses of

desert.” These local-level socio-political practices which reinforce ruler legitimacy, undoubtedly combine with complex webs of patronage and kinship to restrict the regime’s autonomy at the same time (Hertog 2010).

As Hudson (1995) argued before Ross’s (2001) seminal and influential finding, despite political economy’s admirable role in displacing many of the Orientalists’ more ‘egregious’ misuses of Arab culture in political science, cultural factors remain pivotal to understanding Arab politics. For “[w]ithout factoring in the complexities of culture, values, beliefs, ideology, and legitimacy, we risk being left with arid economistic reductionism” (Hudson 1995:62).

New sociologies of power

While intending to provide a universal and empirical model of political economic causation, rentier theorists have unwittingly revived old Orientalist tropes of Arab passivity, ahistoricity, and lack of self-control. Mathematical models fail to examine the historical, social and political contexts of oil wealth use within individual regimes, in favour of a parsimonious, universal, and predictable relationship between leaders and their wealth.

Building on Hertog’s contribution, the following chapter advances a contrarian historical sociological account of the origins and development of the Kuwaiti state and its relationship to its society. I balance the received knowledge about the importance of oil wealth and state autonomy in Kuwait with an analysis of how local conceptions of legitimate rule and accountability are captured by the practices of Kuwait’s national parliament.

CHAPTER TWO

Kuwait's National Assembly: a historical sociology of state power

Kuwaiti citizens actively participate in affecting the governance of their state through a surprisingly influential elected legislature, the *majlis al-ummah* (National Assembly). As I seek to show, the regular elections and constitutional provisions which underlie its strength are not a 'cosmetic' facade, as Ayubi (1995:411) claimed, and oil wealth has not given the ruling family the considerable autonomy rentier theorists would presume.

Drawing on Migdal's (2001) argument that the state, while unquestionably powerful, is not an impermeable realm, but is constantly transformed and affected by the society it rules over, I argue that oil wealth cannot singularly account for citizen-ruler relations, and the Kuwaiti state does not fit the Weberian analytical mould, as detached and autonomous from society. I also seek to show how limitations to state autonomy can be explained by Kuwaiti citizens' and parliamentarians' adoption and manipulation of the language of the 'state' and the 'public good' alongside 'traditional' mythologies of 'tribal' 'consultation and consensus' which are pitted against the ruling family's dominance. These 'truth regimes' enable the *majlis al-ummah* to affect and challenge relations of power between state and society.

With an un-elected executive who appoints the country's cabinet which outlaws political parties, Kuwait at first seems like a typical oil-rich and 'authoritarian' Arab state. But unlike neighbouring rentier states, Kuwait's elected legislature (*majlis al-ummah*) plays an important role in enabling citizens to press their claims against the state. To dismiss it as a 'democratic facade' on the basis of the endurance of an unelected ruling family obscures the actual complexity of state-society relations in Kuwait. Those relations must be placed in historical perspective, and their composition, autonomy, and influence must not be assumed to be stable or unchanging.

The present chapter revisits the pivotal role of oil in consolidating political regimes, but presents a revisionist picture. It shows that oil wealth enabled the al-Ṣabāḥ family to extend its dominance over society in unprecedented ways by building new state institutions. However, popular, quotidian appropriations and manipulations of the language of the state have allowed the national parliament to press its claims against the al-Ṣabāḥ with considerable success. While the *majlis al-ummah* stops short of challenging the *amīr*'s overall supremacy as the executive authority, it influences how the ruling family governs in ways which resonate with widespread Kuwaiti notions of 'consultation and consensus,' the 'public good,' and 'democracy.' The operation of these 'truth regimes' allows us to understand how the *majlis al-ummah* performs its duty to its constituents, and fosters citizens' dual allegiance to the state and partial loyalty to the ruling regime.

Separating state from society: only a 'partial' rentier contract

The 'state', 'executive power', and 'government' in Kuwait today are virtually synonymous with the ruling al-Ṣabāḥ family (Longva 2005:115), but they refer to recent political realities which crystallised only after Kuwait's discovery of oil in 1938. Prior to the oil era, the contract between ruler and ruled was neither top-down ('autocratic'), nor embedded in any coherent and bounded nation-state polity.

The al-Ṣabāḥ family's political pre-eminence began in the eighteenth century when the Kuwaiti merchant and pearl-diving families appointed the al-Ṣabāḥ as managers of inter-family relations. Their appointment represented "a practical division of tasks between governance (*imara*) and commerce (*tijara*) among different families, rather than the ascension of one family to a position of dominance over others" (Salem 2008:212). The leader of the ruling family was essentially responsible for "mediating relations between clans" (Crystal 1990:21). For more than a century he lived off the financial generosity of the

merchant families, an arrangement which embedded his family as “the weaker party” (Salem 2008:212).

One al-Ṣabāḥ leader, Mubarak, began to transform this social contract into something more autocratic in the late nineteenth century (Tétreault 1991:570-2). After he established a client-patron relationship with Britain in 1899, the traditionally powerful merchant classes experienced the rise of a more autocratic al-Ṣabāḥ family willing to throw its weight around (Tétreault 2001:203). From Tétreault historical analysis, we can argue that this British protectorate arrangement, which made Britain responsible for Kuwait’s foreign relations, defence, and oil exploration (Tétreault 1991:572), helped lay the foundations of the nascent autocratic Kuwaiti state, by “enabl[ing] the ruling family to entrench itself structurally as the head of the legitimate government of Kuwait” even before oil discovery in the 1930s (Tétreault 1991:588; Tétreault 2001:203).

When oil was discovered in 1938 in the reign of *amīr* Aḥmad,¹⁹ the modern Kuwaiti nation-state began its emergence in earnest, and the relation of power between the al-Ṣabāḥ and the merchants tipped considerably in favour of the former (Crystal and al-Shayji 1995:108). As the community’s chief administrator, and at Britain’s insistence, the al-Ṣabāḥ began concentrating oil wealth in their hands. But the social contract was not immediately transformed into a trade-off between taxation and representation, as rentier theorists (e.g., Luciani 2005:92-4) believe. The *amīr* initially tried to extract more taxes from the merchants, infuriating them, while he raised his own relatives’ allowances (Crystal 1990:45). According to Crystal (1990:45), the merchants’ “historical sense of political entitlement, founded originally on their financial interdependence with the rulers, led them to believe they had a continuing right to a say in the distribution of state wealth,” and their acceptance of the al-Ṣabāḥ’s greater economic and political autonomy was not forthcoming.

¹⁹ Reign from 1921-50.

In the year of oil discovery, a movement of frustrated merchants mobilised to form a self-appointed council (*majlis*) of male merchants seeking to restrain the al-Ṣabāḥ's growing financial independence. Known popularly today as the 1938 '*majlis* movement', its goal was to "counteract growing state autocracy" by instituting a parliament and constitution which would challenge the growing authority of the *amīr* (Tétreault 2001:203).

Whereas in the past the al-Ṣabāḥ equitably distributed revenues collected from the merchants, in 1938 the merchant-run *majlis* halted their delivery to the al-Ṣabāḥ and "began collecting and distributing the revenues itself, paying the Shaikh [family leader] and ruling family their allowances" instead (Crystal 1990:49). The *majlis* then demanded that the al-Ṣabāḥ "turn the next oil check ... over to them." With Britain's backing, the *amīr* then ordered the *majlis*'s dissolution (Crystal 1990:49). Although the *majlis* members "did not accept the dissolution without a fight," six months after its establishment they were outmuscled and outmanoeuvred by the *amīr*'s body guards (Crystal 1990:49). Subsequently, "its adherents either were arrested or had fled the country" (Tétreault 2001:203).

What enabled the *amīr* to dissolve the *majlis* was a combination of new mechanisms of social control, which would come later to be consolidated in the form of a nation-state built on oil revenues. The *amīr*'s supporters and body guards were precursors to new institutions of social control: a nation-state with a police force and prison (Crystal 2005:160-2). These nascent institutions which later included a state bureaucracy which employed nearly all citizens, "catalysed the more thoroughgoing centralisation of political power in the hands of the ruling family" (Crystal 2005:160-2).

In the decades following oil discovery, the al-Ṣabāḥ, with the help of Britain, used their wealth to remake Kuwaiti society. With oil revenues, the ruling family sought to build for itself an omnipresent 'welfare' state,²⁰ built on cheap migrant labour, and British expertise

²⁰ Key aspects of Kuwait's welfare system include: "entirely free education (from primary school to university studies, including studies abroad), entirely free health care ... and practically free housing,"

in town planning.²¹ This is ostensibly how they ‘purchased’ political acquiescence from the merchants in lieu of extracting taxes from them. “Through their domestic deployment of oil revenues, they were able to pacify domestic elites and create a welfare state that provided a comfortable life for every Kuwaiti citizen” (Tétreault 1991:588).

But the system of welfare cheques was only drastically expanded in the 1960s. What appears to be more important is the resonance of the state-idea and state-entity itself (Mitchell 1999 [2006]). Where Kuwait’s old social order was “localised and transient, consisting of multiple, overlapping hierarchies ... neighbourhoods organised around mosques, family elders watching youngsters, merchants monitoring markets, ship captains monitoring divers” (Crystal 2005:166), it now took the shape of an omnipresent state structure with the ruling family at its apex which created and maintained new forms of social order. Crystal (2005:166-7) explains:

With the new public schools, hospitals, housing and jobs came the eyes of the state, now everywhere and nowhere. ... To get married (and receive housing), to have children (and receive money), to get an education, a job or a prescription filled, to walk down the street, you went through the state. Non-conformity could be monitored and sanctioned by a variety of state agencies: state employment ... education or health-care abroad, housing, loans. All these could be denied.

Interestingly, Kuwaitis came to apprehend these newly created ‘benefits’ of the welfare state as ‘dues’ owed to them by the rulers, rather than as ‘privileges’ (Longva 1997:47).

With the rise of the ‘authoritarian’ welfare state came the merchants’ simultaneous withdrawal from formal political life (Crystal 1990:1). The relationship between ruler and

as well as guaranteed public sector employment, retirement pensions, marriage grants, and subsidies for food, electricity and water (Longva 2000:183).

²¹ Saba Shiber, a former planning consultant to the Kuwaiti government, has documented in detail Kuwait’s “phenomenal urbanization” (Shiber 1964:1). “[T]he story of Kuwait ... is the story of a humble, organic desert Arab village that exploded into a haughty, over-extended desert Arab metropolis according to a geometric paper-plan, finding itself today a full-fledged State embroiled in scientific planning and world affairs” (ibid.:2). Clearly influenced by European town planning knowledge, he variously advocates a range of spatial reconfigurations of Kuwaiti society: the separation and regulation of lands for different uses (ibid.:144), the separation of pedestrian and motor vehicles (ibid.:145), and “major traffic surgery” (ibid.:410), among other ‘Western’ forms of urban development.

citizen, though, was less confrontational than a “kinship, or, at least, patron-client relationship” (Longva 2000:180), and the changes effected by state building were peacefully received: “Sailors, pearl-divers and nomadic shepherds have turned into state employees in offices and living in air-conditioned houses distributed by the government” (Longva 2005:128). Instead of concluding that welfare begot political acquiescence, we must ask why these new forms of social control were so successful in the absence of repression, and why *amīr* al-Sālim became convinced in the 1960s that welfare should be radically expanded to maintain his rule.

Interestingly, while oil-based state formation is oft-understood as engendering a weak civil society (see, for instance, Schwarz 2008:610), in Kuwait it also generated new challenges to the regime, which became harder for the regime to suppress. In the archetypal rentier version of history, “the merchants renounced their historical claim to participate in decision-making. In exchange, the rulers guaranteed them a large share of the oil revenues” (Crystal 1990:1). But Tétreault (2001:204) explains that the material benefits of the welfare state, particularly education abroad and greater access to television and print media, “provided Kuwaitis from a broad spectrum of social groups with the resources to challenge the ruler’s autocracy and to insist on guarantees of their civil and political rights.”

The merchants’ ‘acquiescence’ to the al-Ṣabāḥ’s continued dominance was therefore neither complete nor permanently stable, and constantly in danger of attack by the same forms of social control which supposedly secured it. The merchant classes would, over the coming decades, demand increasing shares of the oil wealth through extra benefits in state employment, free housing, and financial grants. The salient point here, then, is that while the al-Ṣabāḥ succeeded in dominating Kuwaiti society through power mechanisms embedded in a new state, Kuwaitis never ceased trying to limit the al-Ṣabāḥ’s hold over this new political institution or its wealth. As Tétreault (2000:220) argues, “although

taxation no longer was practiced, the expectation of representation continued undiminished.”

Despite their early defeat, the agents behind the 1938 ‘*majlis* movement’ continued to agitate against the new state, even as they gradually accepted the trappings of its comfortable urban life in exchange for their tacit acceptance of al-Ṣabāḥ rule. In 1961, just over two decades after their defeat, these anti-al-Ṣabāḥ forces re-emerged triumphantly when *amīr* al-Sālim ended Kuwait’s protectorate relationship with Britain, and a year later inaugurated a constitution limiting the ruling family’s power, obliging it to rule Kuwait co-operatively with an elected ‘national’ assembly (*majlis al-ummah*).²²

That constitution, Khalīfa and Jawhar (2009:41) remind us, was a product of mutual agreement between the *amīr* and popular representatives of a provisional *majlis at-ta’sīsīyy* (Constituent Assembly).²³ The constitution, still in effect today, “is a detailed and strong document that effectively curbs the power of the emir and the ruling family in a way that ... is unparalleled among other monarchies in the region” (Salem 2008:214). The constitution stipulates that the people are “the source of all powers” in the Kuwaiti state (Article 6; Constitution of the State of Kuwait 1962:2), and that “Natural resources and accompanying revenues are the property of the State” (Article 21; *ibid.*:5). Today oil wealth accrues directly to the treasury, rather than the ruling family, and the *majlis al-ummah* caps the latter’s annual salary at US\$173 million (Salem 2008:220).

Although the constitution restricts executive succession to the al-Ṣabāḥ and stipulates that the *amīr* chooses a cabinet of ministers (Articles 4 and 56; Constitution of the State of Kuwait 1962:2 and 11), the *majlis al-ummah* today remains the sole source of legislative power and no *amīri* decree is valid without its approval (Article 4; *ibid.*:2). Importantly, it has the power to ‘grill’ and sack ministers (Article 100 and 101; *ibid.*:21), a power usually

²² See Appendix, Image 2: ‘Majlis al-Ummah building.’

²³ The secondary historical literature is rather silent on the politics surrounding this Constituent Assembly. See below.

reserved only for cabinet ministers outside the ruling family, but which even al-Ṣabāḥ ministers can now no longer avoid (Nordenson 2010b).

The constitution guarantees the right to education (Article 13, 40; Constitution of the State of Kuwait 1962:3, 8), public health (Article 15; *ibid.*:3), private property (Articles 18, 19, 38, 44; *ibid.*:4, 7, 9), entreats public officials to observe the ‘public interest’ (Article 26; *ibid.*:5), ensures equality in language, religion and race (Article 29; *ibid.*:6), personal liberty (Article 30; *ibid.*:6), the presumption of innocence (Article 34; *ibid.*:7), and freedom of belief, opinion, and press publication (Article 35-37; *ibid.*:7).²⁴

Since the 1960s, then, the state was no longer solely the realm of the al-Ṣabāḥ in the minds of Kuwaitis. The ideas of the Kuwaiti ‘nation’ and the ‘public’ good had crystallised in popular mindsets, and citizens began to discursively ‘re-appropriate’ the state from the al-Ṣabāḥ. With the expansion of state employment in the 1960s, loyalty to the Kuwaiti *state* began to compete with (if not totally displace) loyalty to the *amīr*. Reminiscent of Hertog’s (2010) experience is Tétreault’s (2000) observation that dissenting practices are widespread within the Kuwaiti bureaucracy, suggesting that public sector employment is not a production line of obedient rentier citizens as often thought. She claims that “[s]ome state employees elevate what they see as constitutional and functional responsibility to *Kuwait* above loyalty to the ruling family, thereby bringing political opposition directly into the state” (Tétreault 2000:61, original emphasis). In one interview a bureaucrat “ended his discussion of the accomplishments of his agency by remarking that these achievements worked against the interests of ‘the government’. Then he pauses. ‘I say that even though some people might say that I am part of the government’” (*ibid.*:61).

²⁴ Except for a passing mention that the constitution was locally-conceived, that is to say, it wasn’t pre-fabricated by the British (Salem 2008:229), there is little indication of the precise origins and influences of the decidedly ‘Western-liberal’ attitudes emanating from founders of the constitution, the interim Constituent Assembly, which comprised elected members, and unelected al-Sabah ministers (Majles al-Ommah n.d.:29-30). An official publication on Kuwait’s ‘history of democratic practice’ claims: “We must understand that the Kuwaiti experience of democracy emanates from the conviction of the Muslim Kuwaiti people, their history, and their special environment” (Majles al-Ommah n.d.:3).

In the decades following the 1960s' expansion of state employment and welfare provisions, relations of power between the elected *majlis al-ummah* and the unelected *amīr* continued to fluctuate.²⁵ Khalīfa and Jawhar (2009:37) argue that two principles governed the al-Ṣabāḥ's rule for most of this period: "consultation," (*ash-shūrā*) and "non-tyranny" in decision-making (*'adam al-istibdād*). Despite this claim, the implementation of the constitution and strength of the *majlis* was often partial, and the al-Ṣabāḥ frequently impinged on the *majlis al-ummah*'s constitutional realm. "Kuwaiti politics continued to operate in the shadow of autocracy" for the next three decades (Tétreault 2000:59), and successive *amīrs* suspended the constitution and *majlis al-ummah* for short periods in 1976 and 1986. Both suspensions, Tétreault (2001:204-5) explains:

were initiated to counteract a political opposition whose demands for greater openness and accountability the regime found annoying. ... However, the power of Kuwaiti social forces is revealed by the fact that, both times, the regime was forced to reinstate the parliament and constitutional rights in response to broadly based pro-democracy social movements.

The reinstatement of the last suspension tells us much about not only the strength of Kuwaiti 'society' against the 'state', but also the entrenchment of popular identification with the state and the popularly-conceived limits to the al-Ṣabāḥ's hold over it.

Invasion, occupation, democratisation?

When Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in 1990, the *majlis al-ummah* had been suspended for four years. Two important consequences of the invasion coalesced with earlier popular attitudes towards governance which set the country on a discernibly democratic trend after liberation. As Salem (2008:215) explains, during the invasion, "most of the Sabah family fled the country, a severe blow to their credibility. At the same time, the population who suffered under the occupation developed a sense of unity, nationalism, and entitlement"

²⁵ *Amīr* Sālīm ceded to growing demands for greater distribution of oil wealth, "by expanding state employment and dramatically increasing expenditures on social services, notably in education and health care" (Crystal and al-Shayejī 1995:103-4).

that was stronger than ever. The re-establishment of the al-Ṣabāḥ family's legitimate rule after returning from exile in 1991 required their unequivocal demonstration to the Kuwaiti public of their renewed commitment to the principle of constitutionalism (ibid.). The regime was forced to re-instate the *majlis al-ummah*, starting with fresh elections in 1992 (Tétreault 2000:76-7).

Tétreault (2000:76) argues that

a broad spectrum of Kuwaitis agreed that the invasion marked a failure of the [autocratic] system itself, not simply of the persons occupying positions of responsibility at the time. It also demonstrated the risks of censorship and of relying on a closed group to make life-and-death decisions for the nation. Both pointed up the practical utility of democratic rights and procedures.

And these notions, as I have discussed, were already well-established in the 1962 constitution, borne out of much earlier political struggles against al-Ṣabāḥ autocracy.

The achievements of Kuwait's *majlis al-ummah* since its re-instatement in 1992 are remarkable. Since then it has held six free and fair elections, emerged as the country's sole legislative authority, capped the entire ruling family's salary (Salem 2008:220), and exercised its constitutional privilege to force the resignation of about seven ministers from the regime-appointed cabinet (data in Herb 2009b). In 2005 it granted Kuwaiti women the right to vote and seek office (Tétreault and al-Ghanim 2009). The following year, after peacefully deposing the nation's mentally-ill *amīr*-apparent (Ehteshami and Wright 2007:923), it forced the regime to re-structure its electoral districts in accordance with the demands of youth-led protests agitating for electoral reform (Nordenson 2010a).

However, many Kuwaiti academics are critical of their country's parliamentary 'democracy'. For some, the illegality of political parties represents the single biggest obstacle to real 'democratisation,' and the regime has consistently refused to legalise them (Salem 2008:222). According to one academic, "the constitution does not quite reach true democratic practice ... How can we speak of practicing and transitioning to sound

democratic rule in this country as a model experiment in the Gulf without broaching the issue of [the illegality of political] parties?" (Ibrahīm 2009:147). However, the need to develop political parties, and the limitations of a democracy without them, are discussed openly in the news media: "The individual political action [of elected deputies] in Kuwait has produced a significant decline in the political process for its reliance on individual decisions which are ill-advised/not fully-considered" (Al-Qabas Newspaper 2009:19).

Despite what Herb (2008) has observed as deputies' overall lack of 'party' discipline operating within informal blocs, this has not entirely impeded their collective ability to stifle the government. Despite Freedom House's failure to discern a single 'opposition' victory in any Kuwaiti election (due to the absence of a Western-style two-party preferred result) (Goldsmith 2007:93-4), opposition to the government has crystallised enough to force the *amīr* to call early elections in 1999, 2003, 2006, 2009 (data in Herb 2009b). The influence of these blocs is underscored by this headline in the independent Al-Qabas Newspaper (2009:19): "Political parties: a reality awaiting legitimacy," with the subheading "Why the fear and reluctance to recognise their existence?"

Other Kuwaiti academics also criticise the fact that executive authority continues to lie squarely with the *amīr*. Al-Ḥaydariyy (2009), Az-Zamī' (2009), and Al-Deyyin (2009) all agree that the Kuwaiti constitution is flawed by giving too much power to the monarch. For Al-Deyyin (2009:123), a Kuwaiti writer and political activist, "Kuwait's constitution guarantees a democratic political system ... [and] establishes clear foundations for the principle of the separation of powers, but at the same time enables [monarchical] control over executive and legislative powers." Further, "[t]he Kuwaiti constitutional system does not provide a clear mechanism to democratically confer executive power, leaving the appointment of the prime minister in the hands of the *amīr*" (ibid.:125). Although elections in Kuwait "constitute a mechanism of popular political representation at the parliamentary level,

[they] actually provide only a limited opportunity for such representation at the level of executive power” (ibid.:126).

According to ‘Alī Fahd Az-Zamī’, a former government minister outside the ruling family, one of the most significant shortcomings of Kuwaiti ‘democracy’ is “the ruling family’s continued control over political life and the appointment of its members to ministerial positions in the ‘sovereignty’ portfolios of prime minister, defence, interior, and foreign affairs” (Az-Zamī 2009:106).

Despite these valid criticisms, to recapitulate Ayubi’s (1995:411) claim that the *majlis al-ummah* provides only a ‘cosmetic’ bridge over the gap between state and society would be unhelpfully reductive. As I go onto show, the *majlis al-ummah* does successfully inhibit the ruling family’s autonomy, if not its overall political supremacy.

* * *

The *majlis al-ummah* is undeniably successful in effecting political change in other ways. According to the constitution (Articles 100 and 101, Constitution of the State of Kuwait 1962:21), all ministers including the prime minister can be subject to an interpellation or ‘grilling’ (*istijwāb*) and subsequently removed from office by a parliamentary vote (Salem 2008:214). The *majlis al-ummah* has exercised this power on a number of recent occasions, including with the health and information ministers both in 2005, and the oil minister in 2007 (Herb 2009 d, e, f).

Herb (2009a:379) argues that “[t]he threat of interpellation profoundly shapes how Kuwait is governed” because the ruling family avoids appointing ministers unlikely to maintain the *majlis al-ummah*’s confidence, and government ministers actively “avoid offending the major parliamentary blocs” (Herb 2009a:379). According to Nordenson (2009), a deputy’s threat to issue an *istijwāb* is often enough to force a minister’s resignation, given the attendant humiliation of losing a confidence vote. Some ministers resign even after barely

passing a confidence motion, as the finance minister did in 2004 (Herb 2009c). The end result, Herb argues (2009a:379), is that “by wielding the threat of interpellation, [the *majlis al-ummah*] has a substantial impact on policymaking in Kuwait.” This suggests the considerable impact of public opinion on the conduct of the ruling family, which the ‘oil barrel-Freedom House’ arithmetic of Ross (2001) fails to capture.

The parliament is often criticised for the theatricality of its debates, and their lack of substance, due to its mostly ‘negative’ powers to stymie the government, rather than ‘positive’ powers to form government (Herb 2009a:380). While the independent Al-Qabas Newspaper celebrates the fact that “Kuwait is the only democracy among the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council,” it reports that “many Kuwaitis complain about the political deadlock.” When asked by the paper whether he believed Kuwait’s parliamentary system had failed, *amīr Ṣabāḥ al-Ṣabāḥ*²⁶ responded:

The parliament has become more powerful than the government and has been able to impose its views. Its deputies want to please the ‘street’ with quick decisions which appeal to emotion rather than logic. The result being that we have been unable to reach agreement on primary national issues or endorse long-term development projects (Al-Qabas Newspaper 2010b:3).

For Nordenson (2010b), this obstructionist character boils down to an “unresolved power struggle between an un-elected government and an elected parliament.” Yet for Herb (2009a:384), “Kuwait’s parliament does what it is designed to do: it represents citizens, most of whom rely on government jobs,” and the *majlis*’s trademark hostility to government reforms such as privatisation and subsidy cutbacks reflects popular attitudes (Herb 2009a:383). Public debates over the *majlis al-ummah*’s continuous stifling of the government’s economic reform proposals are reminiscent of Hertog’s (2010) argument that the Saudi state’s early ‘buying-off’ of political opponents later resulted in a state grafted to the populace’s unrelenting demands for welfare. What appears to be state

²⁶ See Appendix, Image 3: ‘Current *amīr Ṣabāḥ al-Aḥmad al-Jābir al-Ṣabāḥ*, 2006-now.’

autonomy might be better construed as a regime's mounting entanglement with popular demands to renew and expand oil-funded inducements for its legitimacy.

That the ruling family consistently yields to the *majlis al-ummah*'s demands, subjecting its ministers to grilling, and adjusting its governance accordingly indicates the considerable influence parliamentary politics has on the ruling family. And according to Herb (2002:43), unconstitutional suspensions of parliament as in 1976 and 1986 are "less likely now than at any time in the past." The al-Ṣabāḥ do not simply 'purchase' Kuwaitis' political acquiescence with oil-funded welfare schemes – they must also earn it by fostering new, and increasingly resilient, social and ideological practices of the *majlis al-ummah* which resonate with contemporary public opinion, as I elaborate below.

A moral force for popular representation?

Despite what many viewed as the *amīr*'s negligence and incompetence surrounding the Iraqi occupation,²⁷ Kuwaitis still "refused to depose him when they had the opportunity and welcomed him home with open arms to a country that many ... had defended with their personal fortunes, their personal lives, and their personal honour" (Tétreault 2001:216).

We can discern from an embryonic ethnographic literature and a relatively critical and independent news media that the ruling family wields its executive prerogative with popular legitimacy, as long as the *majlis al-ummah* keeps it in line in ways that resonate with popular perceptions of government accountability. Its 'obstructionist' character, then, draws its strength not from a puerile instinct to 'misbehave', but rather, from popular perceptions of its role to watch over the ruling family.

²⁷ Many Kuwaitis attributed the ruling family's provocative oil drilling activities on the Iraqi border directly to Ṣaddām Ḥussayn's aggression (Tétreault 2000:74-5).

That Kuwaitis take political participation seriously is evident, according to Kuwaiti scholar al-Shayej (2009:54), in the dramatic rise in voter enrolments since the start of the constitutional era from 17,000 to just under 400,000 in 2009.²⁸ Unlike in many other Arab parliaments,²⁹ Kuwaiti deputies take their role in checking (or obstructing) the government seriously, and go to impressive lengths to keep their constituents informed of their parliamentary successes. Kuwaiti society has rapidly internet-ised, with the number of internet users growing by 500 percent between 2000 and 2008 (Nordenson 2010a:34), and many deputies maintain personal websites.

The website of Aseel Alawadi, one of Kuwait's first four women deputies, contains detailed updates on her activities, public speeches, parliamentary recommendations, and lawmaking (for example, "Alawadi makes amendments to privatisation law," Alawadi 2010b).³⁰ The website of Marzouq al-Ghanim, a deputy from the Nationalist Opposition bloc, proudly publishes news articles which highlight his attempts to keep the government accountable (for example, "Al-Ghanim: the government is at stake... a grilling of the prime minister is on its way," Al-Ghanim 2010b).³¹

Herb (2008) argues that "the high level of interest that Kuwaitis have in elections says a lot about just how important elections are in Kuwait, especially compared to many other Arab countries." Candidates' widespread use of YouTube, personal websites, and Facebook (Nordenson 2010a:73-5) parallels constituency politics in Australia and other Western 'democracies'. Nordenson (2010a:7) argues that the emergence of online activism especially around the 2006 'Orange Movement' when thousands of young Kuwaitis organised a mass political movement for electoral reform "affected the Kuwaiti reality,

²⁸ When women gained suffrage in 2005, the electorate more than doubled from just over 175,000 men to 385,000 men and women (Inter-Parliamentary Union 2005).

²⁹ Other Arab parliaments include Jordan's National Assembly (*majlis al-ummah*), Lebanon's Chamber of Deputies (*majlis an-nawāb*), Egypt's People's Council and Consultative Council (*majlisā ash-sha'b wa-sh-shūrā*), Yemen's Chamber of Deputies (*majlis an-nawāb*), and Oman's Consultative Assembly (*majlis ash-shūrā*).

³⁰ See Appendix, Image 4: 'Webpage of deputy Aseel Alawadi.'

³¹ See Appendix, Image 5: 'Webpage of deputy Marzouq al-Ghanim.'

enhancing the participatory aspect of Kuwait's democratic project." The *majlis al-ummah* itself has a regularly updated and fully-functional website, containing biographies of all 50 elected deputies, 15 members of cabinet, weekly updates of parliamentary debates and details of laws passed (see www.majlesalommah.net).³²

According to Longva (2005:115), the *majlis al-ummah*'s popularly conceived *raison d'être* "is not so much to legislate as to oppose the ruling family, which means ... to watch over the government and prevent it from abusing its power." She explains,

One illustration of [this] popular perception is the way pro-government deputies are disparagingly referred to as *nawab al-khidamat* (service deputies) as opposed to the *nawab al-mawaqif* (deputies with a stance, or principled deputies). The former ... leav[e] the government free to run the country, while the latter have a political programme that disagrees, at least partly, with that of the government and which they seek to implement. ... It is generally agreed that ... principled deputies are those who deserve respect, whether one likes their ideas or not (Longva 2005:116).

Thus, in our attempts to understand the role of parliamentary politics today, we cannot overlook the fact that "a National Assembly that co-operates with the government is looked upon as toothless. Political opposition in Kuwait has therefore a clear moral dimension" (Longva 2005:116). Longva explains further that "[c]ommon to all opposition deputies ... is the view that the government must be watched closely, not least because of its tendency to appropriate oil resources which rightfully belong to Kuwait's people. Over the years, some deputies have not hesitated to call the government – meaning the ruling family – 'thieves' and 'looters of public funds'" (ibid.).

We can see this view illustrated in a parliamentary brochure called *dustūrnā sūrnā* (Our constitution is our wall) which extols the importance of the public's awareness of their constitutional rights (Majles al-Ommah 2010). Article 17, which stipulates that it is every citizens' duty to protect public property, is accompanied by an image of a locked safe with

³² See Appendix, Image 6: 'Official webpage of *majlis al-ummah*.'

the words *'amwāl 'āmah* (public funds). Behind it, a group of stern-faced Kuwaiti citizens stand guard, presumably protecting the 'public's' property from the ruling family (Majles al-Ommah 2010:14).³³

Further, the booklet introduces the 36 most liberal of the 183 articles of the constitution, emphasising especially the responsibilities of the state to the people and the limits of the state in impinging on their freedoms. The ruling family features in none of the accompanying cartoon illustrations, while post-oil institutions of education, healthcare, employment, and private property are frequently depicted and celebrated. It celebrates the basic foundations of the modern Kuwaiti state – built as it was by the oil rich al-Ṣabāḥ – but re-positions the state as a servant of 'the public good', rather than as the realm of monarchical rule.

An official publication purporting to document Kuwait's history as one of democratic practice (Majles al-Ommah n.d.) emphasises the democratic origins of the Kuwaiti ruling family and the Bedouin trope of 'consultation and consensus'. The peaceful and "businesslike" manner (Salem 2008:213) in which the al-Ṣabāḥ emerged as local governors is celebrated as the birth of the "spirit of democratic practice," forged through the traditional Arab-Bedouin social contract (e.g., Majles al-Ommah n.d.:2). The more recently-conceived tropes of the 'public interest' (*al-maṣlaḥah al-'āmah*), 'transparency' (*ash-shafāfiyyah*), and 'democratic practice' (*al-mumārasah ad-dīmuqrāṭiyyah*) are reinforced alongside the 'traditional' trope of 'consultation and consensus' (*ash-shūrā wa al-ijmā'*). The publication also proudly lists one of the *majlis al-ummah's* "most important achievements" as passing a law protecting public monies after its reinstatement following liberation from Iraq in 1992 (Majles al-Ommah n.d.:44).

The 1938 '*majlis* movement' continues to provide a powerful contemporary myth and popular rallying point which reinforces the *majlis al-ummah's* importance in tempering the

³³ See Appendix, Image 7: 'Kuwaitis guard their public funds.'

ruling family's power. Crystal and al-Shayegi (1995:102) argue that the 1938 *majlis* "had an important legacy. ... [I]t came to be viewed as Kuwait's first pro-democracy movement, one that emphasised consultation and consensus as well as political participation. Its popularity gave the idea of formal representation a privileged place in Kuwaiti popular history." Moreover, its indigenous rather than colonial origins, born of an older merchant social structure "gave the body a legitimacy that the essentially colonial interwar parliamentary institutions of other [Arab] states [like Egypt, Syria and Iraq] lacked (Crystal and al-Shayegi 1995:102).

Although his relatives in the cabinet are freely criticised, the *amīr* and his successor legally remain immune from criticism. The Kuwaiti print media, though, is unequivocal about the popular resonance of the constitutional guarantee of 'free speech' whenever the ruling family impinges on these rights. Khālīd al-Faḍālah, a vocal critic of the regime, was imprisoned this year for insulting the *amīr*'s heir and prime minister Nāṣir al-Ṣabāḥ. Unusually for an Arab state, the Kuwaiti media responded with front page headlines such as "Freedoms and human rights recede in Kuwait" (Al-Qabas Newspaper 2010c), followed on the next page with "Freedoms and human rights in retreat" (Al-Qabas Newspaper 2010d). Keeping up the fight over Khālīd al-Faḍālah's treatment some months later, the same newspaper ran the story "Public freedoms are what make Kuwaitis Kuwaiti" (Al-Qabas Newspaper 2010e).

Beyond a dismissive view of Kuwait's parliament

This brief historical sociology of the Kuwaiti state and the *majlis al-ummah* has shown that while the nation-state has been powerful, it has not evolved autonomously from a wider social context of a politically active merchant society. In the pre-constitutional era, oil money fuelled state creation projects which urbanised the Kuwaiti population, re-ordering their life in ways they found acceptable. Their first pro-democracy movement was quashed with the help of a nascent police force, embedded in an increasingly powerful state

structure which offered new forms of employment, health care, education, and housing. In the constitutional era, money was funnelled into a much larger (and more expensive) welfare system and state employment sector, which the al-Ṣabāḥ regime now finds increasingly difficult to keep under control as the *majlis al-ummah* strengthens its position into the early twenty-first century.

Further, the scope of information about its activities available in the public domain is one indication of the importance of the *majlis al-ummah* to the Kuwaiti electorate. The freeness and fairness of electoral processes, the enfranchisement of women in 2005, the election of four female deputies in the March 2009 elections, and the 2006 re-districting of electorates, suggest we should take the legitimacy of Kuwaiti members of parliament ('deputies') seriously, and give proper attention to their voices and activities, and the socio-political contexts in which they derive their significance.

The history of the *majlis al-ummah*, then, does not lend itself to understanding state-society relations in Kuwait solely by reference to hydrocarbon rent. The Kuwaiti socio-political reality is far more complex, comprising citizens' simultaneous deference to, and robust criticism of, its hereditary rulers. The ruling family does not just 'allow' political freedoms in exchange for their overall dominance, any more than Kuwaitis 'accept' 'authoritarianism' in exchange for a tax-free salary. As I seek to show next, the everyday politics of citizen-migrant worker relations to emerge since the 1960s help to maintain the ruling family's popular mandate to govern, and further confuse existing models of the state-society divide.

CHAPTER THREE

National and ethnic identity: reaffirming hereditary ‘autocracy’?

By tracing the rise of the state and *majlis al-ummah*, we gained a modest insight into how the al-Ṣabāḥ and Kuwaiti citizens have each transformed the social body since oil discovery. In this chapter, I draw attention to how Kuwait’s active citizenry has appropriated the discourse of the state with claims buttressed and enabled by a highly pluralised, mostly disempowered society at large constituted by migrant workers.

Recent ethnographic work has shown that South Asian migration has deepened the state-society divide between the Sunni political elite and Shi’a citizen population in Bahrain (see Louër 2008). As I seek to show here, however, migratory flows into Kuwait have brought Kuwaiti citizens much closer to the al-Ṣabāḥ political elite than the oft-invoked notion of ‘state autonomy’ suggests. As already established, the state’s autonomy is quite limited in the context of parliamentary politics. However, the ostensibly clear boundary between ‘society’ (conceived as Kuwaiti citizens) and ‘state’ (conceived as the al-Ṣabāḥ) is distorted somewhat in the context of citizen-migrant relations.

The presence of foreigners weighs heavily on how citizens identify and interact with the Kuwaiti state and their rulers. To date, few political scientists and economists recognise the institutionalised areas of overlap between the ‘autocratic’ Gulf states and their citizenry, or consider the politics underlying the massive under classes comprised of cultural and ethnic ‘others’, or the gradual re-conceptualisation of hereditary rulers as the cultural ‘bulwarks’ of numerically-besieged ‘nations.’

I try to show how, in the relations between the Kuwaiti citizenry and foreign workers, the former appears not as an entity distinct from the Kuwaiti state, but as an inseparable part of it, while non-citizen migrants instead represent a disempowered and much larger ‘society.’ By introducing the work of Crystal (2005) and Longva (1997, 1999, 2005), I argue

that the one million Kuwaiti citizens *are* the state in the sense that they have direct responsibility for the two million non-citizens subject to an often harsh ‘privatised’ sponsorship regime.³⁴ While citizen-migrant relations are not the only area of considerable overlap between ‘state’ and ‘society,’ the production of this dichotomy represents a major under-studied ‘site’ (alongside the *majlis al-ummah*) through which citizen-ruler relations are mediated.³⁵

The migrant sponsorship (*kafālah*) system distorts our expectations of who exactly constitutes ‘state’ and ‘society’, and underlines an inherent weakness in Kuwaiti state apparatus. Such a weakness, as I elaborate, stresses the importance of power relations on the individual level in enabling much larger power mechanisms like the state, harking back to Foucault’s (1977) notion of ‘disciplinary’ power.

Citizen-sponsors versus expatriate-Others

Kuwait and its Gulf neighbours “have the highest proportion of migrant workers in the world” (Gulf Research Meeting 2010a), arriving mostly from the states of South and Southeast Asia, as well as from other Arab states, at the behest of a Kuwaiti company or citizen employer (Baldwin-Edwards 2005:7). In 2001, a massive 65 percent of Kuwait’s total resident population was comprised of foreigners (Baldwin-Edwards 2005:6), and in 2005 they comprised almost 82 percent of the total workforce (Shah 2006:17). Today, “practically every [Kuwaiti] household has at least one maid ... [E]veryone meets and deals with their maids, cooks, nannies or drivers on a daily basis,” which according to Longva

³⁴ Population statistics from Kuwait Government Online (2008).

³⁵ Recall in chapter two, Tétreault’s (2000:61) observation of the overlap between state and society within Kuwait’s bureaucracy, where some 90 percent of Kuwaitis are employed. There, activist citizen-bureaucrats bring opposition “directly into the state.” Other arenas, not discussed here, through which identity is forged and contested include between *Sunnah* and *Shī‘ī* Muslims, between *badu* (rural), *ḥaḍar* (urban), and *bidūn* (stateless) residents, and between male and female citizens. For detailed discussion of *badu-ḥaḍar* division see Longva (2006); for *bidūn* issue see Crystal (2005:174-78); for *Sunnah- Shī‘ī* divide see Crystal (2005:171-72) and Longva (2000:189-92); for social politics of gender in Kuwait see Longva (1993), al-Mughni (1993), and Tétreault and al-Mughni (2005).

(2005:126-7), has “a deep impact” on the way Kuwaitis define themselves as citizens of the Kuwaiti state and subjects of the al-Ṣabāḥ – a subjectivity tied closely to the rulers’ post-oil state-building project.

This unusual demography of a minority citizenry and an ethno-cultural-religious ‘Other’ who outnumber them, began to emerge in the decades following oil discovery. Longva (1997:25) explains that “[t]o carry out the modernization projects financed by their new oil revenues, the Kuwaitis needed a kind of expertise that the sailors, fishermen, and Bedouins of the Gulf region could not provide.” Accordingly, large numbers of Arab migrant workers from Egypt and Palestine moved into the country after independence in 1961 (Longva 1997:26). They were later outnumbered by South Asians from the 1970s onwards who were deemed more “compliant and hard-working” (Chalcraft 2010). Thus, alongside the transformation of the Kuwaiti sea-faring and Bedouin population into a settled nation-state of citizens, a second and much larger ‘society’ of non-citizen, transnational migrants emerged.

Western media and human rights organisations have recently highlighted the widespread exploitation and mistreatment of these expatriate populations (e.g., DeParle 2007; Fahim 2010; Human Rights Watch 2007, 2010). The citizen-sponsor’s power over his/her employees, especially in the case of household maids and nannies, is “extensive,” according to Longva (2005:126): “the power of the *kafil* [sponsor] is practically limitless ... [and] there is a disturbing pattern of exploitation and mistreatment.” In Kuwait and the other Arab Gulf states, citizens and expats are “separated de facto (e.g., [the] world[’s] lowest levels of economic activity among nationals vs. [the] world[’s] highest among non-nationals) as well as de jure (e.g., the obligation for every foreigner to have a local sponsor)” (Gulf Research Meeting 2010a). In some states “expatriates live in separate, ghetto-like settlements” (Gulf Research Meeting 2010b), and Kuwait’s *majlis al-ummah* has recently passed laws to establish ‘migrant townships’ separate from Kuwaiti neighbourhoods (Kuwait Times 2010).

The *kafālah* regime is one of the most-important legal-bureaucratic power mechanisms to emerge from the new Kuwaiti state.³⁶ It requires migrant workers to be sponsored by a public or private Kuwaiti institution or citizen to enter and remain in the country; a worker remains tied to their initial employer for one year (Longva 2005:126). The *kafil* (sponsor) “assume[s] full economic and legal responsibility for the employee during the contract period” (Longva 1999:20). While s/he “pledges to repatriate the employee at his own expense upon termination of the contract,” the legal relationship “renders workers entirely dependent on their employers’ goodwill in order to remain in the country” (Longva 1999:21). If the migrant wishes to break the contract, Kuwait’s Labor Law requires that s/he cover the costs of the return ticket; and “[e]xperience shows that most migrant workers are prepared to endure considerable hardships rather than shorten their contract period and return home empty-handed” (ibid.). Additionally, the Kuwaiti government allows employers of semi-skilled and low-skilled migrants to retain their passports, severely curtailing their freedom of movement (ibid.).

If a sponsor refuses to release a worker from the contract, “the worker’s only option is to run away,” often seeking refuge in their embassy, which may try to facilitate the worker’s return home (ibid.). As the *New York Times* reported this year, the Philippine and Indonesian embassies in Kuwait are crowded with abused expatriate workers who have fled their sponsors (Fahim 2010). The relationship between citizen and expatriate, then, is far less equal than the relationship between Kuwaitis and their rulers.

Here, it is worth considering Crystal’s (2005) characterisation of Kuwaiti citizens as a privatised ‘police force’ of sponsors who are legally responsible for, and wield considerable power over, the migrants they employ as cooks, nannies, cleaners, drivers, and labourers. While Kuwaiti citizens have impacted on the state through an elected legislature to varying degrees over time, this same ‘society’ is imbricated within the structure of the state, not

³⁶ This system characterises most of the eastern Arab states, not just Kuwait and its migrant-majority Gulf neighbours (Baldwin-Edwards 2005:30).

just as government bureaucrats as Herb (2009a) has argued, but by actively projecting the state's 'gaze' over the migrant population through the *kafālah* system (Crystal 2005).

Crystal (2005) explains that the formulation of the *kafālah* system primarily enabled the state to keep tabs on what eventually became the largest segment of Kuwait's population. "Among the most important decisions made in the 1960s was to privatise [expatriates'] control and surveillance" by delegating their daily control to individual households and employers (Crystal 2005:168). In order for the Kuwaiti state to successfully establish itself and manage a large influx of migrant workers, it needed to foster diffuse forms of power, surveillance, and control. Drawing on Foucault's (1977) analogy of the 'panopticon' prison,³⁷ Crystal (2005:167) argues that the Kuwaiti state has come to rely heavily on "widely dispersed, largely invisible power controlling the population."

The privatisation of expat policing "was an administrative necessity" (Crystal 2005:168), as the fledgling state could not rely on its own official uniformed police simply due to the migrants' sheer numbers (Crystal 2005:181). This considerable overlap between the Kuwaiti state and its citizens is interesting, Crystal (2005:168) argues, because "[m]ost governments guard jealously their monopoly on force," as per Weber's famous dictum (Weber 1919 [2004]). This overlap is analytically significant, I argue, because by blurring of the (Weberian) state-society divide, it highlights an inherent weakness in the Kuwaiti state. While Weber ([1919] 2004:131) theorised that "the right to physical force is ascribed to all other group bodies and individual persons only to the extent that the *state* itself permits it," he probably did not foresee the need for an entire citizenry to be absorbed into the state apparatus to control a majority non-citizen population. Salient divisions within the Kuwaiti

³⁷ See Foucault (1977:195-228).

state body manifest not only between citizens and their rulers, but between a collective 'citizens-as-state' and a far more diffuse, largely disempowered migrant under-class.³⁸

The rentier literature, then, fails to show how the importation of foreign labour not only gave rise to a new and pervasive relationship between sponsor (*kafil*) and expatriate (*wāfid*) which came to characterise the broader body politic, but also to new channels through which ruler-citizen relations are reproduced and reinforced on a new 'moral universe' of 'ethnic' identity.

The emerging strength of Kuwaiti nationalism is key to understanding the conceptualisation and practise of new Kuwaiti 'ethnic' subjectivities. Longva (2005:118) argues that the dominant literature on democratisation in the Arab Gulf states "fail[s] to appreciate the social, psychological, and political impact that a majority population of rightless migrant workers, imported for the sole purpose of serving the native minority, can have on the way this privileged minority conceptualise and practise political rights among themselves." Consequently, there is considerable public debate about "the need to preserve Kuwaiti identity" in the midst of so many foreigners (Longva 2005:122).

Longva's conceptualisation of Kuwait as a 'civic ethnocracy' allows us to see how this sponsor-worker relationship factors into the popular imaginings of the Kuwaiti ruling contract whereby citizens happily agitate against and affect the regime, without pushing to demolish the al-Ṣabāḥ's ultimate supremacy. She explains that "ethnocracy as a socio-political regime is the outcome of ethno-nationalism, that brand of nationalism that views the nation as a 'natural' and ethnically 'pure' community, as opposed to its liberal conceptualisation as a community based on equal rights and duties" (Longva 2005:119). In essence, ethnocracy is "government by an ethnic group," but "any other iconic item [in addition to 'ethnicity'], most notably language and religion, can be used as the defining

³⁸ Similarly, for Indian migrant workers in Bahrain, the state "is at once powerful and vague in its manifestation in their lives" according to one anthropologist (Gardner 2008:55).

criterion" (ibid.). She argues that "[a]ll expatriates, being non-Kuwaiti citizens, are excluded from the ruling ethnies, even if they are Arabs or Muslims or both; the few Christian Kuwaitis, on the other hand, are part of it" (ibid.).

Being Kuwaiti entails a certain high status in relation to migrants from fellow Arab states. Arab migrants, especially Palestinians, were once "admired, respected, and emulated by Kuwaitis" (Longva 1997:43), but today they have come to be largely excluded from the Kuwaiti 'ethnic' group. Although treated better than non-Arabs, they are rarely, for instance, invited into Kuwaiti homes (Longva 2005:124). That citizenship has become "the major diacritical feature" of the social body, enables Longva's term 'civic ethnocracy' (ibid.) to capture the complex interplay between an active and enfranchised minority and a socially-excluded majority.

The 'ethnocratic' regime

One practice which reinforces Kuwait's ethnocratic nature is the effect of the migrant population on how Kuwaitis dress. The Gulf-wide trademark attire of the *dishdasha* for men, and *abāya* for women has been invested with the important role of distinguishing the outnumbered citizens from the socially-inferior expatriate population.³⁹ While the use of these garments has declined precipitously throughout the most of the metropolitan Arab world, in Gulf states hosting high numbers of non-Arab expatriates, their use has been "remarkably persistent" (Longva 1997:116).

That virtually all Kuwaiti men "systematically" start wearing the *dishdasha* around age 18 or earlier, owes much to the realities of surveillance and control in a 'panopticonic' state

³⁹ The *dishdasha* consists of a white robe with a white headscarf fixed with black *ghutra* or head band. The *abāya* is typically a black robe worn by women with the addition of a black head and face covering. Today the *dishdasha* is universally worn by male deputies of the *majlis al-ummah* (See Appendix, Image 8: 'National male dress in the *majlis al-ummah* chamber'). Note that none of the female deputies elected in 2009 wear the *abaya*. Their dress is nonetheless 'modest', and two wear a headscarf. This may partly be explained by their social status as members of prominent merchant families and all having been educated in the US (Al-Shayehji 2009:62; Tétreault 2009).

(Crystal 2005). Longva retells how a particular Kuwaiti man who wore jeans and a t-shirt “looked like any Arab expatriate.” However, after being stopped by a police officer and showing his Kuwaiti ID card, the officer “apologised and said: ‘Next time, save yourself unnecessary trouble. Wear the *dishdasha*’” (Longva 1997:117).

According to Longva (1997:120) “[t]he *dishdasha* was the most eye-catching emblem of male Kuwaitiness. ... Dressed in a *dishdasha*, his identity was unmistakable,” and invokes respectful and deferential behaviour among expatriates.⁴⁰ The *dishdasha* achieved its status as a “highly efficient means of inter-ethnic communication” partly by accident,⁴¹ and “partly as a result of an ideological mobilisation under the aegis of the state” observable in police interactions with expatriates cited above (Longva 1997:125).

The renewed popularity of the *abāya* among Kuwaiti women is also a product of an emerging Kuwaiti ‘ethnicity’. However, while the *abāya* highlights Kuwaiti women’s privileged ethnic, economic, and social status among the foreign majority, it also reflects gendered perceptions of cultural and personal threat arising by the migrant presence. Longva (1993:449) explains that:

Between the mid-1950s and the mid-1970s Kuwaiti women begun to shed their cloaks [and] wear Western clothes... By the mid-1980s, many of these same women were never seen outside their homes without an *abaya*. Although the timing corresponded with the growing politico-religious unrest elsewhere in the Muslim world, I suggest the trend in Kuwait was triggered by ethnic circumstances within the country itself.

The pervasive presence of single male expatriates in a Muslim country became “a constant source of worry to the Kuwaiti authorities,” for the perceived risks to Kuwaiti Muslim women (Longva 1997:122). Government regulations, for instance, forbade migrant ‘bachelors’ from residing in areas predominantly occupied by Kuwaitis (ibid.). The *abāya*’s re-emergence “reflected the concern of Kuwaiti women with making a clear statement

⁴⁰ It enables, for instance, Kuwaitis to push in front of expatriates in supermarket queues (Longva 1997:117).

⁴¹ Prior to oil discovery it was the preferred dress anyway (Longva 1997:125).

about their national identity and status that they intended all foreigners, in particular the men, to understand wholly and unambiguously” in relation to sexual conduct (ibid.:122-3).

This popular perception of moral and cultural threat is most acute in the domestic sphere where “low-skilled Asian domestic servants are ubiquitous and identified by Kuwaitis as the prime source of moral threats” (Longva 2005:124). According to Longva (1999:2) “[t]he presence of alien migrant workers in the most intimate sphere of [Kuwaitis’] lives evokes feelings of vulnerability,” as South and Southeast Asian do not embody same moral and social traits of ‘proper’ Kuwaiti Muslim women. The household is “the locus for the reproduction of the most important part of the society’s moral system, namely family relations and relations between men and women,” and so according to Longva (2005:125), maids epitomise “the moral danger that emanates from the large expatriate presence and is said to threaten the cultural fabric of Kuwaiti society.”

We should not under-estimate the effects of this presence – consensual though that presence is – on the reconstitution of the host household’s identity. A comparative glance outside the region suggests that African-American house maids in the US, for instance, had a profound impact on White Americans’ racialised understandings of US national identity (see Collins 2001). What we might expect in Kuwait, then, is that the ubiquity of South and Southeast Asian maids and nannies post-oil discovery has produced generations of children with non-Kuwaiti mother-surrogates, distorting and reconfiguring ‘traditional’ roles of Kuwaiti women who take on new gendered tasks and identities.⁴²

Despite perceived moral threats by single expat men against Kuwaiti women, “a concern for [Kuwaitis’] own *cultural* survival ... [is what] has guided the Kuwaitis’ treatment of the question of labor migration throughout the years” (Longva 1997:44, emphasis added). In

⁴² At least one anthropologist has studied similar impacts for the ‘sending’ communities. Gamburd (2008:5) found that Sri Lankan women’s long-term absences from their households while working as maids in the Gulf “reorganize and disrupt widely accepted gendered attributions of parenting roles, with father and female relatives taking over household tasks.”

public discourse, Kuwaitis carried out the politics of exclusion by “maintaining, reinforcing, and, when necessary, inventing ... differences” between the two groups (ibid.). Longva (2005:126) argues that alongside a mythologised ‘siege mentality,’ there is “an equally vivid experience of empowerment derived from control over subordinate groups.” Rather than the provision of oil-funded welfare and the absence of taxation *per se*, it is this simultaneous perception of cultural and moral vulnerability and social empowerment which “critically underlie[s] the will to maintain and reproduce the ethnocratic structure” with a hereditary *amīr* at the apex, as further outlined below (ibid.).

Because the *kafālah* system “is the central institution [...] that defines identities, rights, and obligations” (Longva 1999:22) it should occupy a central place in the study of the relations between state and society, and the impacts of oil wealth on that relationship. By according it that central place, Longva argues that if the al-Ṣabāḥ had tried building a nation-state using Kuwaiti ‘sweat and toil,’ popular demands to preserve the pre-modern social contract whereby the al-Ṣabāḥ were the “weaker political party” (Salem 2008:212), “would undoubtedly have been louder and more persistent” (Longva 2005:129-130). That is to say, if Kuwaitis had to “[erect] their own houses, [build] their own highways and personally [staff] the desalination plants that ensure the daily supply of water ...” the al-Ṣabāḥ might not have been so successful in maintaining their position at the apex of the political system. Moreover, they may not have been able to foster the new mechanisms of social control which transformed Kuwaiti society from a loose mix of sea-trading and desert pastoralist families, to an urbanised well-educated society grafted to a modern nation-state.

By highlighting the construction of ‘ethnicity’ on the household level and how it (re)produces broader power structures within the Kuwaiti state, Longva unveils the critical defining feature of the Kuwaiti body politic to emerge out of oil discovery. Her conceptualisation, though, reveals even more gaps in our knowledge. While ethnicity has become a new ‘moral universe’ binding state-society relations, we have not sufficiently

deconstructed how 'ethnicity' or migration operates as a function of the creation of new class relations (Tétreault 2000:129-31) and of certain post-oil discovery 'truth regimes' and subjectivities.

Importantly, Longva does observe that most Kuwaitis do not apprehend their generous welfare entitlements and political rights as 'privileges', but as 'dues' (Longva 1997:47). As such, "[i]f the citizens had any perception of being privileged at all, it was because they compared themselves with the non-Kuwaiti majority to whom these same privileges were denied" (Longva 1997:47).

Nonetheless, the oil-based causality reproduced in the rentier literature obscures these important demographic outcomes of the al-Ṣabāḥ's oil wealth expenditure, and overlooks changes in the social meanings invested within those outcomes over time. As Longva (2005:134) explains, "once basic welfare goods and services are acquired and become a matter of routine, they tend to become taken for granted and lose their potential as a means of political co-optation." And it is this elegantly simple, but unhelpfully reductive, belief that regime durability resides in welfare and taxation, which pervades political economic contributions to the study of Middle Eastern politics in the post-Orientalist era.

Recovering 'subaltern' agency

These asymmetrical relations on the quotidian level of the social body affect certain interplays between citizens and the state in ways which are neither predetermined nor unchanging. Kuwaiti citizens have, over time, re-cast the role of migrants from 'necessary' and 'mundane' imports for state-building to convenient enabling pillars which structure racialised claims to participate in the governing of the state. Widespread abuse notwithstanding, a small number of parliamentarians and even members of the ruling

family continue to raise their plight.⁴³ Elsewhere in the region, intellectuals and politicians have called for citizens to show gratitude and respect for expatriates.⁴⁴ In the 1990s, Dubai-based newspaper *Khaleej Times* published this commentary written by an Omani intellectual:

[Expatriates] ... have left their homes to help us with our bid to catch up with the rest of the world. ... We are quite used to seeing a perspiring labourer under the scorching sun digging a trench or laying a cable. But we never pause for a moment to show our gratitude. ... We take for granted the prosperity we enjoy, attributing it to the oil wealth and forgetting the contribution of our partners (Kapiszewski 2001:188).

More recent ethnographic works are helping to reveal more about the internal stratification of Gulf migrant communities, and how each is constituted by, and reconstitutes, the social body of their host societies. Gardner (2008:56), for instance, found that the Indian migrant population in Bahrain is fragmented into a 'diasporic elite' comprising accountants, bankers and other 'white collar' professions, and a 'transnational proletariat' of menial labourers and the like. While Bahrain's *kafālah* regime (like Kuwait's) "binds and constrains" their agency in certain ways, the Indian 'elite' have access to wider family and transnational networks of support which they leverage to "insulate its members from the structural violence their impoverished countrymen endure" (Gardner 2008:55-6). Consequently, these mostly exploited, and only occasionally defended, 'subalterns' not only 'speak', shape and re-configure the body politic in the oil-rich Gulf states.

⁴³ In a parliamentary debate over whether to build migrant townships, Ma'sūmah al-Mubārak, one of the first four female deputies elected to the *majlis al-ummah* in 2009, "called for respecting the dignity of foreign workers and for studying the impact of forcing them to live together in those small labor towns" (Kuwait Times 2010). Also, a granddaughter of the current *amīr* runs an advocacy organisation for domestic workers in Kuwait (Fahim 2010).

⁴⁴ A former Saudi minister for labour and social affairs reportedly once said "Expatriates in our country are our brothers and they enjoy rights as we enjoy them. They are our partners in development. It is our duty to thank and respect them" (Kapiszewski 2001:187-8).

CONCLUSION

In Kuwait we see the emergence of a hybrid discourse of ‘governmentality’⁴⁵ characterised by a simultaneous deference to the Kuwaiti state, and a contingent, but surprisingly durable, allegiance to the ruling family. When Kuwaitis embraced new subjectivities, on the one hand as state-guardians policing migrant workers (Crystal 2005), and as beneficiaries of a new ‘ethnocratic’ regime (Longva 2005), and on the other as constituents in a vibrant parliamentary electorate, new forms of discipline came to characterise the Kuwaiti social body, marking a clear break with earlier forms of control. The historical development of the *majlis al-ummah* and *kafālah* system suggests citizens have appropriated these emergent forms of governmentality to press claims on the *amīr*. In other words, the state building process which followed oil discovery, in effect, created a new logic of government which has enabled citizens to make claims by invoking both the pre-modern trope of ‘consultation and consensus’ and the modern discourse of the state and ‘public interest.’

We can argue that this new discourse of ‘governmentality’ has been so successful in Kuwait that it has created subjects who feel confident of making claims in the same language, and in drawing on powerful mythologies of an earlier, more egalitarian, social contract. At the same time, the material subjugation of migrant labour provides an important enabling pillar for the forms of popular parliamentary participation we currently see unfolding in Kuwait.

By questioning the autonomy of the Kuwaiti rentier state, this paper has tried to show how the formativeness of oil and its effects on the state must be understood as playing out through local sociologies and histories. While scholars make much of the durability of authoritarianism in the region, the emergence of new subjectivities, institutions, and

⁴⁵ In the Foucauldian ([1991] 2006) sense, ‘governmentality’ refers to the rationality of government and how governments govern. That is, the emergence of new ideas which buttress and enable the formation of a modern state and its citizenry.

populations of migrant workers has transformed and reconfigured the social contract between Kuwait's rulers and their citizen-subjects.

While the 'Freedom House-oil barrel' arithmetic which pervades political economic studies of the region may be empirically sound (e.g., Ross 2009), it obscures complex sociologies, forums of associational activity, and path dependent historical processes that might be as, if not more, important to explanations of political change or any apparent lack thereof. That is to say, we need something other than hydrocarbon rent to explain how an active parliament imposes its demands on a hereditary ruler, and how new forms of authority over 'ethnic' Others are made possible. As I have tried to show, a nuanced explanation cannot be made by reference to a presumed distance between the state and its citizenry, but rather through the particular forms of their considerable overlap and porosity.

* * *

By integrating the Kuwaiti case literature within a framework that draws heavily on both Hertog's (2010) and Foucault's (1977) seminal works, this paper's mode of enquiry points to the benefits of more case-level (small-n) comparativism of oil states, which incorporate, rather than diminish, qualitative historical sociological differences between them.

Mass labour importation facilitated through the legal apparatus of the *kafālah* system is characteristic of other Gulf and east Arab states. Comparative examination of it could therefore tell us more about the general limitations to state resources throughout the region, and how those resources are increasingly shifted 'downwards' onto citizens, while shedding light on qualitative differences in their technical function and socio-political impacts. It remains unclear whether, and the extent to which, the arrival of migrants produced or resulted from an ever expanding network of diffuse power relations on the individual level, which in Kuwait entered into an ongoing history of popular political participation. Further, the (re)production of ethnic and cultural 'threats' in these societies

(only briefly discussed here in relation to Kuwait), is doubtlessly tied up with local and regional questions of gender and domesticity, all following a particular path dependency with origins which pre-date oil discovery.

Lastly, by factoring in the micro-politics of migrant exclusion alongside institutional mechanisms of citizens' political participation, this paper sought to recover the agency of citizens too easily lost in state-centric and economic determinist analytics. In doing so, the paper took seriously the mechanisms through which citizens apprehend, challenge, and reinforce their role within the state: as constituents of parliamentarians, as loyal but critical subjects of a hereditary ruler, as proud citizens of a nation-state, and as sponsors of a massive foreign workforce. Oil, then, is not a simple impediment to democracy, but it can condition new ways of 'speaking to,' and acting within, the social body.

Appendix of Images

Introduction

Image 1 Map of Kuwait in Region



Image source: CIA World Factbook,
www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/region/region_mde.html,
2010

Chapter Two

Image 2 Majlis al-Ummah Building



Image source:
Cajie,
www.flickr.com,
2006

Image 3 Current *amīr* Ṣabāḥ al-Aḥmad al-Jābir al-Ṣabāḥ (2006-now)



Image source: Kuwait-Ra'ed Qutena, www.flickr.com, 2009

Image 4 Webpage of deputy Aseel Alawadi



Image source: www.aseelalawadi.com, 2010

Image 5 Webpage of deputy Marzouq al-Ghanim



Image source:
www.marzouq-
alghanim.net/Default.as
px, 2010

Image 6 Official webpage of majlis al-ummah



Image source:
www.majlesalommah.n
et, 2010

Image 7 Kuwaitis guard their public funds



Image source:
Booklet *dustūr nā sūr nā* ('Our
Constitution is our
Wall') (Majles al-
Ommah 2010:14)

Chapter Three

Image 8 National male dress in the *majlis al-ummah* chamber



Image source:
Kuwait-Ra'ed
Qutena,
www.flickr.com,
2009

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