RESEARCH ARTICLE

THE FAILURE OF KARAMAT WATAN: STATE LEGITIMACY AND PROTEST FAILURE IN KUWAIT

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ABSTRACT: The *Karamat Watan* (March of Dignity) was the largest protest mobilisation in Kuwaiti history. From late December 2011 to 2014 this social movement pressured the government in the streets to reform the parliamentary system. The results of these protests were unprecedented, forcing a Kuwaiti prime minister to resign for the first time in in history and publicly challenging against the country's ruler. Yet the protest movement largely failed, largely due to a loss of public support. Why did the Karamat Watan protest movement lose support from the public in Kuwait? The literature on the Gulf and Kuwait in particular focus on payoffs as a way of explaining acquiesance, yet payoffs in 2011 and 2012 had almost no impact on protest mobilisation. Instead, it may be more normative issues that kept protesters away: the unrealistic and aggressive demands of protest organisers for regime change. This article focuses on the legitimacy, or lackthereof, of the government and regime to explain the failure of the "Arab Spring" protest movement in Kuwait, looking at how consent and normative concerns impacted the decision of protesters to leave the streets. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with citizens who participated in the protests, interviews with dozens of members of the opposition leadership, and group surveys at 13 tribal *diwaniyas* that highlight a cross-section of protesters' opinion. The research presented demonstrates that public support for the social movement may have in part failed largely because the movement was unsuccessful in framing that it could govern if it was successful. Public support was also limited by protest tactics including disrupting modes of transportation and livelihood. At the heart of protesters' concerns was the lack of a substantive opposition they could believe in and poor opinions on the quality of leadership in Karamat Watan. This article fills a gap in the literature by developing a clearer understanding of legitimation in a rentier state, Kuwait, and by providing dense empirical data to back it up. The utility of this approach is important considering that the failure for many social movements to frame grievances in a way that mobilizes the population, a common pattern in the region.

KEYWORDS: Kuwait, Social Movements, Framing, Legitimacy, Arab Gulf, Rentierism, Arab Spring

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1. Introduction

The *Karamat Watan* (March of Dignity) was the largest protest mobilisation in Kuwaiti history. From late 2012 to 2014, this social movement pressured the government to reform the parliamentary system and root out corruption. The protests, at the height of the Arab Spring, were unprecedented not only because of their scale, but also because of the direct challenges publicly directed at the Emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah, and the call for full parliamentary democracy. While a landmark, the protest movement can equally be considered a case study for its failure. By the middle of 2014, activists could not martial more than a few hundred protesters to their cause. As observers have noted, they lost public support and there has been a rapid increase of inclusive reformist sentiment since (Tavana, et al. 2018). Why did the Karamat Watan (KW) protest movement lose support from the Kuwaiti public?

The most often cited literatures focus on state responses, rentierism, state sanctioned repression or divide and rule identity politics to provide an answer (Yom and Gause 2012; Bank et al. 2014). Yet looked at from a historical perspective, increases in rent are actually part of a longer trend; hard repression only followed movement failure, and the movement was overwhelmingly homogenous, comprised of Sunni Islamists and tribespeople. These explanations are also only correlations rather than causations. Perhaps there is a simpler answer to the loss of public support, often not discussed by scholars because of rigid and normative conceptions of democracy. The answer may be that the vast majority of Kuwaiti nationals see their government and the ruling family as legitimate, more so than the protest movement which frames collective action poorly. There is a gap in the literature concerning Social Movement Theory (SMT), state legitimation efforts and framing (Abulof 2017). In the Gulf, the most common observations are of the legitimacy of the monarchy as an institution, problem-solver, and distributor of rents (Lucas 2014). Yet most often, research focuses purely on acquiesance, instead of consent (Mitchell and Gengler 2019).

To fill this gap, this article investigates the failure of the KW movement in Kuwait by looking at public support for the movement's collective action frames. It focuses on several critical subjects, which may explain the movement's failure: payoffs, different modes of repression, various public opinions about the movement and the opposition, identity conflicts within the movement, and the legitimacy of the regime. The data to answer these questions derive from 35 semi-structured interviews with citizens who participated in the protests, and focus group surveys at 13 *diwaniyas*[1] that highlight a cross-section of public opinion from 195 individuals from tribal and Islamist backgrounds actively involved in the protests. Using *diwaniyas* as data points for public opinion, especially within the tribal and Islamist communities is a useful methodical tool and adds nuance to important normative issues, especially as *diwaniyas* are often considered an exclusively Kuwaiti urban (*hadhari*) forum. Various scholars note that these forums are not reducible to one narrative or domesticity and "serve to coalesce, filter, and transmit Kuwaiti opinion on public issues" (Tetreault 2000; Chay 2015; Russell 1989). The fieldwork interviews and focus groups were conducted from December 2019 to September 2020. The author was also present as an observer at several of the Irhal protests – a precedent of KW – in 2012 and KW protests in 2013 and 2014.

The findings demonstrate that public support for the social movement failed largely because: a) it was seen to disrespect the Emir of Kuwait, in a way that questioned to the established political system with the

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[1] The *diwaniya* is a part of the house that Kuwaiti men use to receive male guests.

Al-Sabah regime at its head, which was preferable to the calls for regime change by the KW organisers, b) the movement failed to prove that it could govern if it was successful in getting the government to reform the legislative system, c) it disrupted modes of transportation and livelihood from protests, therefore undermining bases of support, and d) it did not acknowledge many of the positive aspects of Kuwaiti government rule, including public trust concerning material benefits. This article fills a gap in the literature by developing a clearer understanding of legitimation frames in a rentier state. The utility of this approach is important considering that the failure for many social movements to sustain public support, and governments' ability to maintain their rule, was about more than payoffs or repression; often thought to be the main coercive tools of authoritarian regimes.The study of SMT and normativity in politics, often left to the wayside by state-centric studies, needs to be an increasingly important focus for the study of politics and protest, as it undermines many of the structuralist theories that have overwhelmed the Gulf states.

2. Setting the Stage for Karamat Watan

The KW protests converged with previous grievances and seminal events to generate the largest protests in Kuwait's history. Three flashpoints brought about the emergence of a social movement, primarily members of the specific tribal backgrounds (Mutran, Mutair, Azmi, Ajmi, or Shammari) and supportive of Islamist, Salafist, and the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Islamic Constitutional Movement (Azouley 2020). In the leadup to KW, the main vehicle of protests was *Irhal Nastahiqq al-Afdal* (literally, "Leave, we deserve the best"), which emerged in 2009 in response to corruption allegations against Prime Minister Nasir Al-Muhammad Al-Sabah.[2] Nasir had been repeatedly accused of financial mismanagement and bribing legislators, yet had not been held criminally accountable by the parliament. The *Irhal* movement had a clear goal that became a clear objective of the KW protest: it wanted Nasir to resign as prime minister.

The second occurred on 8 December 2010, just before Arab Spring protests began in Tunisia and Egypt. Police interrupted a political seminar at the home of an opposition parliamentarian, Jumaan Al-Harbash. This resulted in an altercation known as "Black Wednesday," in which MPs, journalists from Al Jazeera, and well-known law professor Obaid Al-Wasmi were attacked by police on camera. The news shocked and angered many Kuwaitis, as it violated a long-standing norm in Kuwaiti politics, supported by a constitutional provision, of people hosting political events at their *diwaniyas* without state interference. Against this background, a vegetable vendor in Tunisia turned these two sparks into a flame, re-energising the opposition with new tactics and inspiration. Spurred on by these conditions, youth activists formed the core of a growing movement, including Irhal, "Al-Sur al-Khamis" (Fifth wall), "Kafi" (Enough), and "Nahj" (Way). In the first major sit-in on 8 March 2011 – organised by Kafi – at the Parliament, approximately 1,000 protesters demanded the departure of Nasir.

With Nasir's support in Parliament already precarious, a major controversy emerged in the summer of 2011. A Kuwaiti newspaper, *Al-Qabas*, revealed that a dozen members of the National Assembly had received suspicious bank deposits of approximately $350 million from the prime minister's office. On November 15, the government dodged a parliamentary investigation on the scandal. The next day, thousands of protesters demanded the dismissal of the Prime Minister, culminating in the storming of

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[2] See Irhal Nastahiqq al-Afdal, "Our role… What is your role?" November 9, 2009,
https://ourroleq8.blogspot.com/2009/11/blog-post.html.

Parliament by several hundred activists and a dozen MPs. In the shadow of a larger protest on 27 November, Nasir submitted his resignation.

The parliamentary opposition, now aligned with the protesters, cemented its gains when it won a majority of seats in the February 2012 elections. The election resulted in a 54% turnover, as opposition MPs won thirty-five of the fifty elected seats and had the majority for the first time since 1963, leading to the formation of the Majority Bloc (*Al-Aghlabiyya*). Relations between the cabinet and the opposition deteriorated quickly, with MPs demanding half of all cabinet seats, forcing two cabinet members to resign and sharply criticising the independence of the courts and calling for parliamentary vetting of judicial appointees.[3] By 14 June, the intensity of the Majority Bloc's criticism prompted the Emir to suspend the National Assembly for one month. Two days later, the Constitutional Court declared the elections of February 2012 null and void, leading to new elections scheduled for 1 December. The failure of the opposition in parliament to gain more popular control of government institutions outraged members of the youth movements and set the stage for KW.

3. Enter and Exit: Karamat Watan

In anticipation of another opposition-dominated parliament, the Emir issued a decree amending the electoral law in October 2012, controversially switching to a single non-transferable vote instead of the four-vote system (Coates Ulrichsen 2014). The new one-vote system impacted candidates as well as citizens' approach to elections as it limited the ability of groups "to form electoral coalitions and mobilize voters" (Tavana et al. 2018). Against this backdrop was a transformative shift in the structure of social movements in Kuwait. Irhal, Nahj, and Kafi merged into the new Civil Democratic Movement (CDM) in March 2012. CDM became the masthead of a movement that included many Islamist and tribal youths, bridging a wide swathe of Kuwaiti society due to the fact that it was youth led and cross-ideological.

The largest protests in Kuwaiti history were named "Karamat Watan" (KW) after a blog that emerged on 11 October 2012, in response to rumors about the change to the electoral system. The blog announced that it would organise a rally in protest of the decree, with a similar account launched on Twitter a few days later.[4] The KW era started with a speech by Musallam Al-Barrak on 15 October at a rally organised at Al-Erada. Al-Barrak, from the Mutran tribe, over time had became the uncontested leader of the parliamentary opposition, the so-called "Conscience of the Nation". From 1996 to 2012 he won six consecutive terms with the highest number of votes, making him the longest-serving Member of Parliament and most popular (Azouley 2020).

Al-Barrak gave the final speech; unlike the other speakers at the event, Al-Barrak was not cautious. Al-Barrak shattered the long-established taboo about criticising the Emir, saying "We will not allow you [*lan nasmah lak*], your highness, in the name of the nation and in the name of the people, to practice autocratic rule…We are not scared of your new batons or the jails you have built."[5] This phrase, *lan nasmah lak*, became famous and was repeatedly chanted at demonstrations. On 20 October, the Emir issued the decree

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[3] Executive power is vested in the Emir, who appoints a prime minister and approves his Council of Ministers (cabinet).

[4] To this day, those behind the accounts have not revealed their identities. Please see "Important information for the Karamet Watan protest" (blog), October 11, 2012, https://karametwatan.wordpress. ‫تعليمات-هامة-لمسيرة-كرامة-وطن-/.‬ 2012/10/11/2/com

[5] See the famous speech here, "Al-Barrak, 'Your Highness, we will not allow you'", YouTube clip, 40:24, posted by AlziadiQ8, October 15, 2012, https://youtu.be/n7nnFUOEmBY.

implementing the new electoral system and called for elections on 1 December, leading to a call for demonstrations on the KW Twitter account.[6]

The first demonstration was held on 21 October on the panoramic coastal Gulf Road, with an estimated 45,000 to 100,000 participating. The second KW protest on 4 November was broken up as riot police deployed against tens of thousands of protestors. The third protest, held on 16 November, attracted similar crowds to the first. Activists and members of the Majority bloc initiated a boycott of the December election. On the eve of the 31 December 2012 elections, a march attracted tens of thousands who marched in support of an election boycott. The boycott was highly effective, with only 39.6% of registered voters turning out for the December elections.[7] No one knew at the time, but this was the last major opposition protest.

Three more marches followed in January 2013, but rather than putting pressure on the government, the protests petered out. Kuwaiti public opinion had become more fearful of instability by 2014 as Syria, Yemen, and Libya fell into sectarian strife and armed violence, sanctions against Iran's nuclear program racheted up the chance of a regional war, and neighbouring Bahraini protesters felt the brunt of a concerted crackdown (Albloshi and Herb 2018). Only around 400 protesters participated in the fifth and sixth protests. The seventh protest, on 22 January 2013, drew under 1,000. With support waning, fractures were beginning to emerge with personal disputes between its leaders. In June 2013, the Constitutional Court ruled that the December 2012 elections were invalid, forcing new elections to be held on 27 July. Only 27 of the original 35 members of the Majority Bloc met and pledged to continue the boycott. The Majority Bloc had a difficult relationship with the youth activists from KW throughout the course of the protests. While the Bloc remained vocally antigovernment, they were criticised for not doing enough to drum up support of the protests and for interfering in the protests for their own personal interests or self-promotion.[8] Voter turnout rebounded to just over 50%, widely seen as a victory for the government. The movement had a last burst of activity in the summer of 2014, with the eighth and final KW protest, on 6 July 2014, which attracted only hundreds. The final Twitter post was made on the movement account the same day (Albloshi and Herb 2018).

4. Karamat Watan in Theoretical Perspective

The KW protests fit with Tarrow's concept of a social movement, as it led to "sustained challenges to powerholders in the name of a disadvantaged population" (McAdam et al. 1996). The KW was a non-violent political reform movement which aimed for limited, albeit significant changes to a political system, full parliamentary democracy, to improve conditions within the existing regime (Snow and Soule 2010). An important feature of KW was that it was organisationally flexible with decentralised leadership, consultative decision-making structures, and use of text messages and social media (Twitter) to organise (Martin 2018). The emergence of important youth groups, such as CDM, entirely outside the parliamentary process added to the organisational diversity of the KW movement. It also featured a core cadre of one hundred members, large by Kuwaiti social movement standards.

From 2011 to 2012, activists ended the political career of Nasir and dissolved a pro-government parliament. But despite the flurry of political activism, the regime's power remained intact due to one intervening variable; a critical lack of sustained public support, central to a social movement's success

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[6] See the tweet here posted on October 19, 2012: https://twitter.com/KarametWatan/status/259414257433735169.

[7] "39.6%: The final turnout for the elections", al-Qabas, December 7, 2012: 7.

[8] Interview in *diwaniya* in Jahra, Kuwait, January, 2020.

(Ghabra 2014). KW's protests initially brought out tens of thousands against the government of Nasir. But in contrast to the standing government, the elections in July 2013 illustrated that the monarchical regime enjoyed the support of many Kuwaitis and protests receded.[9] The difference between public attitudes towards the government and the monarchy is an important distinction, much of which explains the failure of KW.

Missing from discussions on politics in Kuwait is a more nuanced understanding of political legitimation in protest cycles.[10] The literature on Kuwait state-society relations generally focuses on the origin and strength of the legislature, politics of the ruling family and merchants, or geopolitical tensions to explain historical outcomes (Tavana and York 2020). Much less has been focused on the legitimacy of opposition reformers within the system and why they may fail; often citizens' perceptions in rentier states are ignored altogether (Abulof 2017). Schlumberger (2010) argues that there are four long-term sources of regime legitimacy in the Arab world: religion; tradition; ideology; and the provision of welfare benefits to their populations. In the Gulf, traditional or religious legitimacy has been used to explain why rulers command "natural" authority because of links to Islam or family lineage (Ayubi 1996). Ideology often takes a back seat to the former two sources, although it is an equally strong source, through which rulers have generated normative support for aspirations of creating the "ideal society". The provision of welfare benefits is often considered the most important source of legitimation in rentier states as it renders the theory's political dimensions comprehensible. Yet rentier theorists often imply that there can be value-free "material" legitimation processes (Holthaus 2019). Many scholars argue that there may be an acute mismatch between the regime and publics' stance on the social contract but these are largely unsubstantiated hypotheses offered at the end of publications (Beaugrand 2019). Ubulof (2017) argues that we should focus more on the social contracts requiring probes into public political thought. Mitchell and Gengler (2019) also note that it is important to understand nonmaterial perceptions – of fairness and equality – in determining the economic satisfaction of rentier citizens.

Using these guidelines, I investigate value-based legitimation practices of the government and opposition activists and how they may have impacted the failure of KW. One of the main issues KW struggled with was the *framing* of the collective action, meaning who should be blamed for Kuwait's various issues, how such problems can be solved through civil protest, and convincing the audiences of the rationale, necessity and utility of collective action to redress them.[11] The major issue was the degree of frame resonance with the population, meaning the ability of a collective action frame to resonate or appeal to a targeted audience. I focus on two sets of interacting factors account for variation: the credibility of the proffered frame based on its consistency, empirical credibility, and credibility of the

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[9] A regime is an ensemble of patterns within the state determining forms and strategies of access to the process of decision-making, the actors who are admitted, and the rules of the game, includes selection of government, forms of representation, and patterns of repression). See Karl, T.L. (1997), *The paradox of plenty: Oil booms and petro-states*, Berkeley: Univ of California Press.

[10] Typically, contemporary scholars equate political legitimacy with "a sense of obligation or willingness to obey authorities (value-based legitimacy) that translates into actual compliance with governmental regulations and laws (behavioral legitimacy)". See Levi M., Sacks A., Tyler T. (2009), "Conceptualizing legitimacy, measuring legitimating beliefs", *American Behavioral Scientist*, 53(3), 354-375, 354.

[11] Framing is the process of selecting certain aspects from the perceived reality and placing them prominently within messages, in order to promote a particular definition of the situation, a certain causal interpretation, a certain moral evaluation and a proposal for some remedies. See Snow D.A., Benford R.D. (1988), "Ideology, frame resonance, and participant mobilization", *International Social Movement Research*, 1(1), 197-217.

frame articulators (Chenoweth et al. 2011). I measured these by real-time participant observation in the protests, conducting in-depth interviews with participants, and opinion polling (Reinecke and Ansari 2020).

This study focuses on an analysis of informal focus groups with participants in the KW protests from 2011 to 2014, specifically focusing on tribal and Islamist leaning individuals in *diwaniyas*. Thirteen pre-organised *diwaniyas* was made up of 15 participants, for a total of 195 voting members (Table 1). Each focus group was approached based on affiliation and participation in the protests, meaning that the respondents were predominantly tribal (specifically from Mutair, Azmi, Ajmi, or Shammari tribes) or supportive of Islamist, Salafist, and the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated Islamic Constitutional Movement (ICM) movements. Respondents who are tribal and rural are considered "*badu*" (or bedouin) in Kuwaiti nomenclature and are often juxtaposed in identity, class, and socioeconomic status with the settled and urban townspeople of Kuwait, often called "*hadhari*". These distinctions are key to identity politics in the country (Longva 1997).

Table 1: Diwaniya Focus Groups

Focus Group	Ideological Affiliations	Sectarian Affiliations	Socio-Economic Status
1	Islamist	Sunni	Badu
2	Islamist	Sunni	Badu
3	Islamist	Sunni	Badu
4	Tribal	Sunni	Badu
5	Tribal	Sunni	Badu
6	Tribal	Sunni	Badu
7	Tribal	Sunni	Badu
8	Tribal	Sunni	Badu
9	Tribal	Sunni	Badu
10	Tribal	Sunni	Badu
11	Salafist	Sunni	Badu
12	Salafist	Sunni	Badu
13	ICM	Sunni	Hadhari

Informal voting, or reaching a consensus, is quite common in *diwaniyas*. While this doesn't necessarily mean that all members agree with the decision, and many do not, the spirit of consensus can be as important as individual decisions as it is often self-enforcing. This type of decision-making straddles the public and private divide and can inform decisions about the legitimacy of opposition, regime, and government.

Focusing on the tribal and Islamist demographic is important to study for several reasons. Until the 1990s, the Al-Sabah relied on tribesmen to bolster their power. But with the integration of the tribe by the regime, tribal (shaikhs) authority became more tenuous as demands increased and a young generation of tribal leaders, personified in Al-Barrak, took the shaikhs' place (Azouley 2020). This reality unfolded after 2011 when protest movements led by tribal activists forced Nasir to resign. Understanding how a previously "loyal" segment of society views the legitimacy of the regime, opposition leadership, and protest politics is vital in a society where new forms of cross-cutting oppositional politics are increasing.

The second reason is due to the use of *diwaniyas* by tribal individuals. While there is a general scholarly consensus on the *diwaniya*'s value as an alternative political institution "its greater role as a socio-cultural anchor – one that reflects immediate social realities – leaves much to be desired in existing literature" (Chay 2015). Studying *diwaniyas* of people from tribal areas moves away from prejudice about the *badu*, reflective of the general "*hadhar* claim that the *badu* are alien elements in Kuwaiti society... [trying] to lay their hands on welfare goods and services" (Longva 1997). *Hadhar* depictions of tribes often illustrate *badu* employing nefarious uses for *diwaniyas*, to consolidate power, transfer ill-gotten gains and favours (Redman 2014).

This study is by no means exhaustive and is purposely narrowed for parsimony. Three major groups are left outside of these discussions. The first and most important is women. Although female citizens gained the right to vote and to run for office in 2005 they are still largely marginalized from protest organising. The second is Shia political groups. While individual Shia participated in KW, organised Shia political groups did not (Albloshi and Herb 2018). *Hadhari* groups, such as National Democratic Circle or Taqadomi took part, but were in the minority, both in size and organisational authority.

5. Losing the People: Traditional and Ideological Legitimacy in Perspective

KW's inability to rally public support behind its goals beyond the threshold of the January protests can in part be measured by several normative factors derived from different understandings of legitimacy. The first set of factors focus on traditional or ideological legitimacy. It appears that public opinion was largely in support of the goals of the initial movement to remove Nasir and dissolve the Parliament. Popular support during protests from 2011 to late 2012 reflected a clear picture about the legitimacy of the early claims of opposition forces, which included the rhetoric against Nasir, storming Parliament to symbolise the people taking back the house, and the election boycott in defiance on the new one-vote law.

This is reflected in my survey of different tribal *diwaniyas*. When it came to dissent against the government the collective opinions of the various *diwaniyas* was clear. The vast majority of *diwaniyas* (ten out of thirteen with one abstaining) believed protests again Nasir were legitimate. Nine out of thirteen *diwaniyas* believed that the storming of Parliament was the correct course of action and all thirteen supported and took part in the election boycott campaign.

But when looking at traditional legitimacy of the Emir as the head of the regime and a political figure that stands above government politics, we see different results. Those surveyed overwhelmingly agreed that much of the loss of support of public opinion related to the movements' decisions to place blame directly on the Emir. This loss of support was reflected in their own collective opinions, with none of the *diwaniyas* supporting the *lan nasmah lak* speech. Most importantly no *diwaniya* thought the KW organisers had treated the Emir with the traditional respect due to the Sheikh.

The goal of rescinding the single vote resembled the goals of Nabiha Khamsa in 2005 and Irhal in 2011, but it was the approach that influenced the surveyed to back away.[12] Much of the loss of support relates to the Al-Barrak's *lan nasmah lak* speech on 15 October 2012, as most people saw him as the leader of KW. This was compounded by KW organisers directly addressing the Emir from its Twitter account on 30 December 2012, without using the usual polite language: "We as a people address the president of the country directly: Our aspirations will not be defeated and that we will continue our

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[12] For more on Nabiha Khamsa, please see Dazi-Heni, F. (2015), "The Arab Spring Impact on Kuwaiti 'Exceptionalism'", *Arabian Humanities*, 4, http://journals.openedition.org/cy/2868

demands for a real democratic, full parliamentary system." [13] The post did not address him as the Emir, but referred to him instead as the president of the country or head of state (*ra'is al-dawla*), which was perceived as a direct insult. This is evident even in the responses to the post. In theoretical terms, the attribution of blame and causality to the Emir in the KW frame did not resonate as credible for the majority of Kuwaitis I spoke to and surveyed, as they did not think the Emir was a fair target; he is considered above politics. This is in contrast to the attacks against Nasir, which all *diwaniyas* thought was considered justifiable.

There are ideological connotations that also highlight the place of the Emir within Kuwait's democratic institutions and norms of tolerance, no different than most democracies worldwide. The often romantic argument about the ruling Sabah and old Kuwait town resonates with the majority of the Kuwaiti population, which has a "deep historical memory" of social and political life between 1716 and 1938 (Azouley 2020). Tribal settlers freely chose the Al-Sabah clan as leader of their fledgling community and the ruling family's legitimacy comes from the way they govern themselves and are open to criticisms and complaints. The country's modern politics are structured around this informal tribal and social solidarity (*'asabiyya*) with lineage and intermediaries structuring power relations.

While the divisions and animosities between the *hadhari* and *badu* are very real, the result of socio-economic disparities and state building more than ethnicity or religion, the Al-Sabah have always acted as a valued partner and intense social political and economic interaction between the Al-Sabah and the desert has fostered continuity rather than dichotomy (Longva 1997; Al-Rasheed 1997; Al Nakib 2014). The ruling elite maintain an equilibrium between Kuwait's Najdi merchants (Al-Sagr, Al-Ghanem), many non-lineal friends (Qina'at, Persian Sunni merchants), and tribal groups (Ajam, Awazem, Shammari, and Mutran) (Gavrielides 1987). This is why the Al-Sabah never needed to use coercive force.

These ideals intertwined with statehood after 1961, where the constitutive norm of toleration and close personal ties placed public expectations upon the regime to allow for dissent and opposition. Changing the Prime Minister, Nasir, in response to popular pressure is representative of such compromise. These norms are not mere rhetoric, this is embodied in the Kuwaiti Constitution, which the Sabah regime has long accepted as being a constitutional check on absolutism (Yom 2014). When asked what legitimates the Emir's position two *diwaniyas* said that it was the Sheikh's consultative role, another two said it was to be a responsible leader, and nine said it was due to his role as arbiter of the constitution (Figure 1). None mentioned his tribal authority at the head of the Al-Sabah. When asked who rules Kuwait eleven *diwaniyas* said Kuwaiti citizens ruled Kuwait, while one each said that merchants or the Al-Sabah ruling family did (Figure 2). When asked further what governs the actions of the Emir, five agreed that it was the consent of the people, five said the Constitution, and two said the Parliament (Figure 3). Overwhelmingly all thirteen *diwaniyas* agreed that the Emir served the Kuwaiti people, not the Parliament, the ruling family as an institution, merchants, powerful individuals, or tribes. Clearly, more than a *façade*, the constitutional framework institutionalises a "political culture that provided a stable social basis" for benevolent rule (Yanai 2014).

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[13] See post on Karamet Watan Twitter account: https://twitter.com/KarametWatan/status/285313931805868032
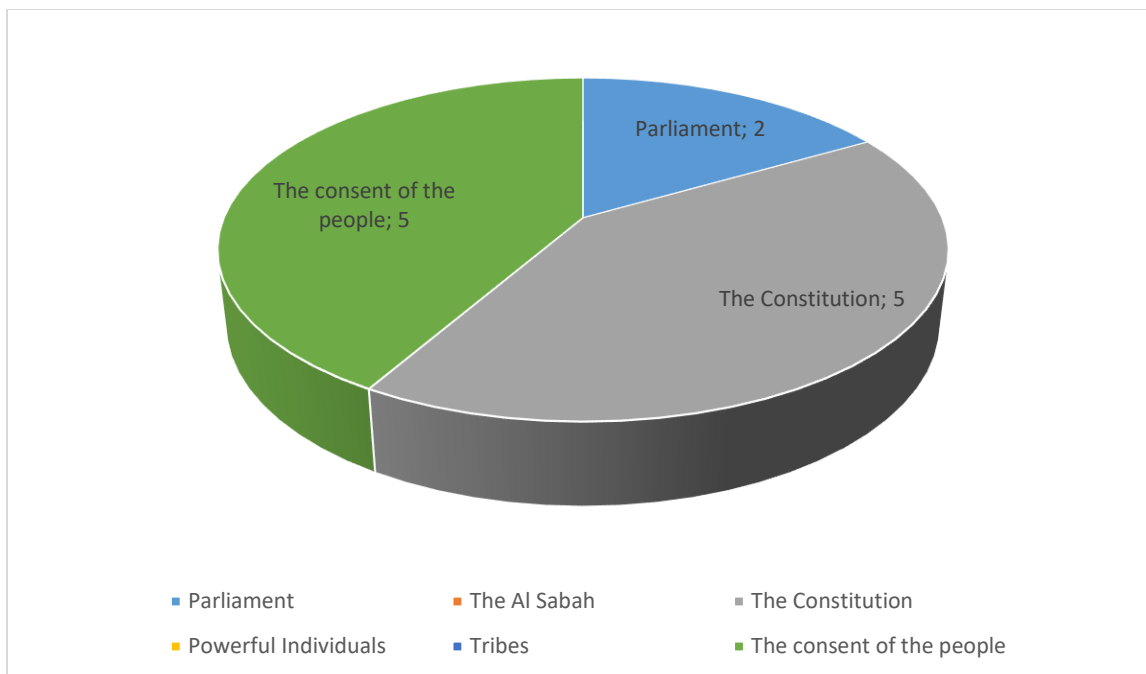
Figure 1: What legitimates the Emir's position?
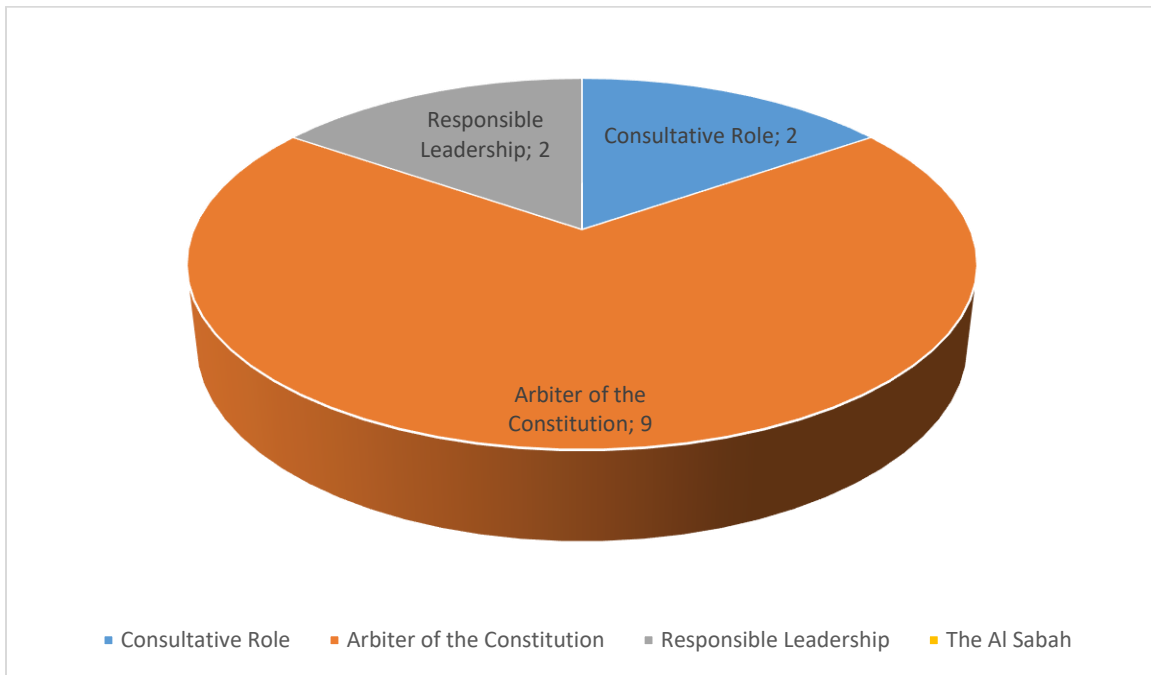
Figure 2: Who Rules Kuwait?
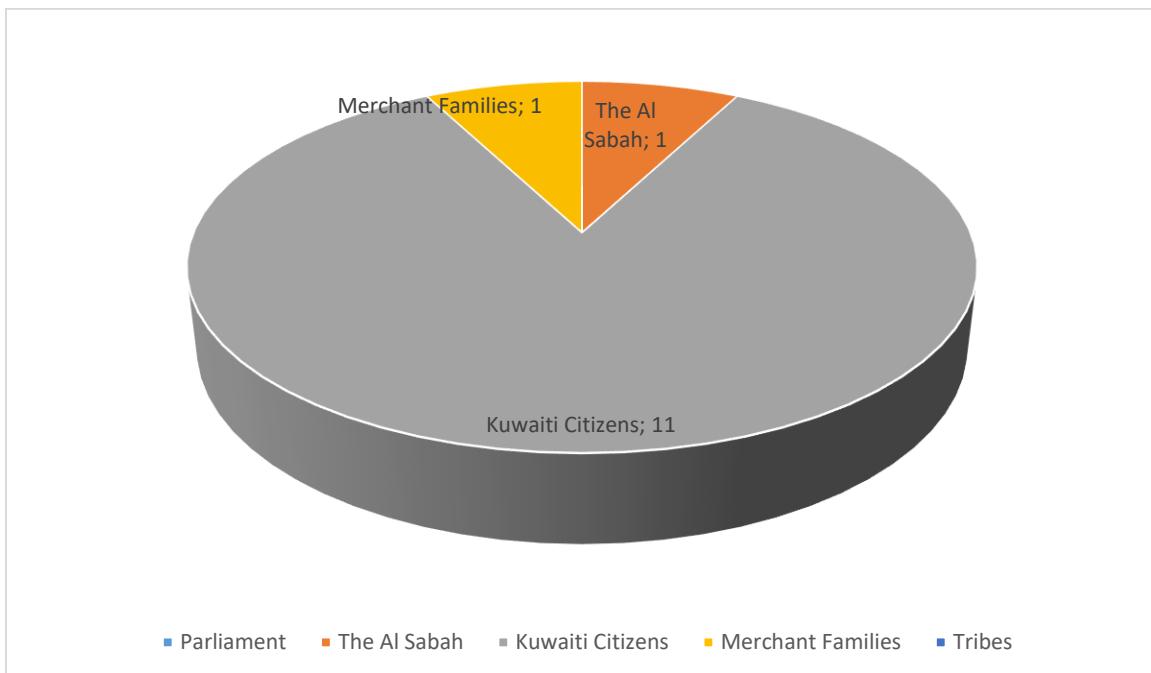
Figure 3: What governs the actions of the Emir?

The constitutive norm of toleration also embodies societal expectations about the monarchy's lenient treatment of society. All *diwaniyas* agreed that the Emir responds to domestic opposition primarily through consultation (seven) and legal mechanisms (four). Moreover, the burden of proof falls upon the Emir to justify curtailments of rights. In previous eras of political turmoil, such as 1989, the public outcry against repression pressured the regime to halt arrests, hold conciliatory dialogues, and after the Gulf War, restore the Constitution. Vitally, this understanding has been inscribed in social spaces as well. Educational textbooks and the National Museum all underscore the Sabah dynasty's claimed synonym with tolerance. For instance, the concept of *mu'aradha* (opposition) in official narratives is described as a productive virtue of Kuwaiti culture and Sabah benevolence (Chay 2016).

These public expectations, inferred from discussions and participant observation at hundreds of *diwaniyas* from 2012 to 2018, also swing the other way; insulting the Emir publicly is simply not acceptable to the majority of the Kuwaiti public.[14] This embrace of opposition and public respect are pillars of political life and is tied to "Kuwaiti-ness."[15]

KW was a nonviolent movement from the beginning and remained that way.[16] Yet the delicate and sensitive balance of being tolerant and respectful did not work in the favour of KW organisers. Several incidents seriously damaged support for KW. Perhaps the most important incident occurred on 4 November 2012, the date of the second KW protest. Protesters attempted to march down the Gulf Street from the Mishref and Sabah Al-Salem districts, blocking the 5th Ring Road. Police rushed to disperse about 2,000 protesters as they blocked one of the busiest throughfares in the country. The 5th Ring Road is an important landmark in Kuwait, as it represents the separation of the old urban city, and new districts that are primarily occupied by the tribal population since the 1960s. The outer ring roads act as a

[14] The Emir's status as "immune and inviolable" (Article 54 of the Constitution)

[15] Interview at *diwaniyya* in Fahaheel, February 10, 2020.

[16] See post from Karamet Watan Twitter Account https://twitter.com/KarametWatan/status/279880849216925696;

"concrete dividing line between the two social worlds" (Al Nakib 2014). Twelve *diwaniyas* noted how badly the blockade of the road was for the opposition. Not only did it block one of the major throughfares, people were injured and it led to an even larger security presence through the country. It fed into the fear of instability and the disruption of everyday life in the country. As one former protester noted, "the protest leaders didn't balance very well the need to keep the general population comfortable during the reform movement. Even the most ardent supporters did not want to be delayed while shopping. This is Kuwait: we are soft."[17] Nine *diwaniyas* supported this claim and agreed that the ring road blockade made them support KW less.

Interestingly, the police presence did not stop those surveyed from taking part in the protests. All thirteen *diwaniyas* continued to support the movement, regardless of security forces intervention. Only four *diwaniyas* were concerned that protesting would get them in trouble with the authorities. The authorities' reaction to KW in 2012 was harsh in comparison to their response to Irhal in previous years.[18] The government relied on more force to end the rallies, security forces contained dozens of protests and arrested hundreds of activists, and brought members of the opposition, especially the youth, to the courts. But it was only after the opposition's poor performance in the February 2013 election and low protest numbers that the regime could justify KW as a small faction that was a threat to public order. Many who had supported KW found themselves facing costly and exhausting trials, with some winding up serving sentences in prison. Some opposition members and their family members lost their jobs or were banned from certain government jobs. The government employed its most serious punishment, the revocation of citizenship, only after the movement had totally failed to reach its goals, in summer 2014.

## 5.1 The Mistake of Calling for Regime Change

KW's main goal; the transition to full parliamentary democracy, went well beyond the demands of earlier reform movements. The Majority Bloc demanded parliamentary supremacy in summer 2012, and the demand was republished on the KW Twitter account in January 2013. Al-Barrak declared on one occasion, "no member of the Sabah family should be the Prime Minister . . . they have destroyed the country."[19] The most fervent supporters of KW embraced this goal and the movement was thus caught between the maximalist demands of its core supporters and the wider public opinion. Yet the prognosis, or solution did not resonate with surveyed supporters. There may be support for a transition to parliamentary government, but none of those surveyed thought that there was a viable candidate to replace a ruling family member as Prime Minister and maintain the unity of the Kuwaiti people (Figure 4 and 5).

[17] Interview in diwaniya in Qortuba, Kuwait, December 3, 2019.

[18] This is not to imply that there were no consequences whatsoever. In the Irhal campaign, some protesters who stormed Parliament were sentenced to prison after an eight-year trial.

[19] "Musallam al-Barrak's remarks from his diwaniyya", YouTube, posted by Sarmad Network.

Figure 4: Should Kuwait have a non-Al Sabah Prime Minister?
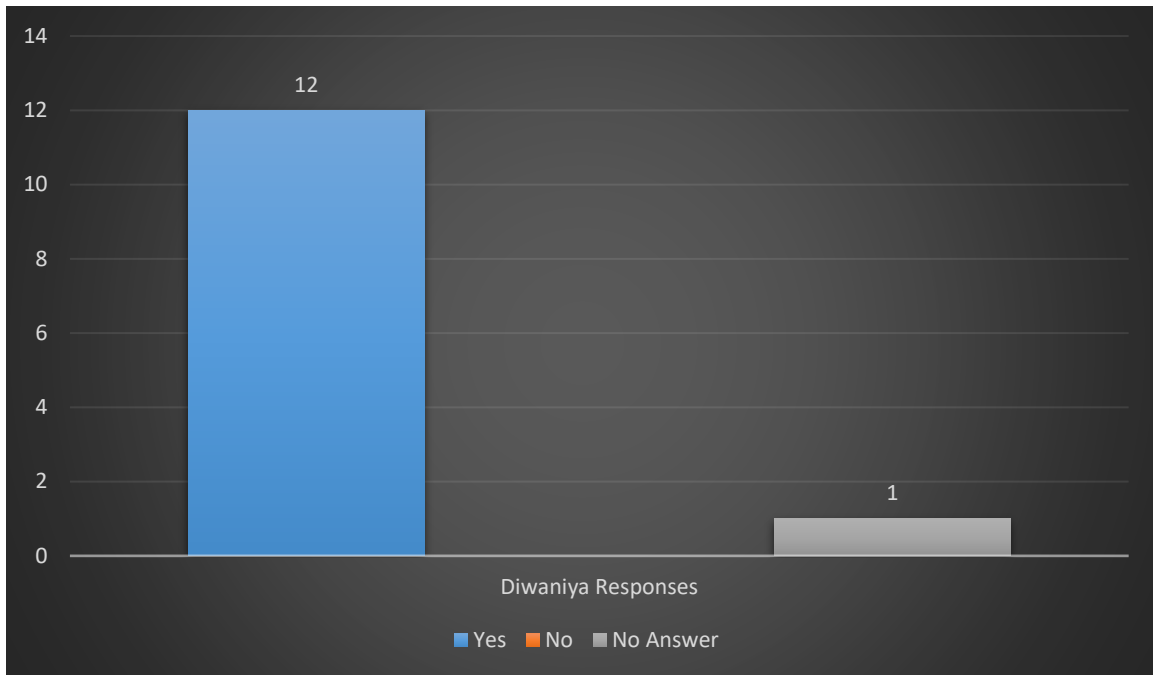
Figure 5: Is there a viable non-Al Sabah candidate for the Prime Minister role?
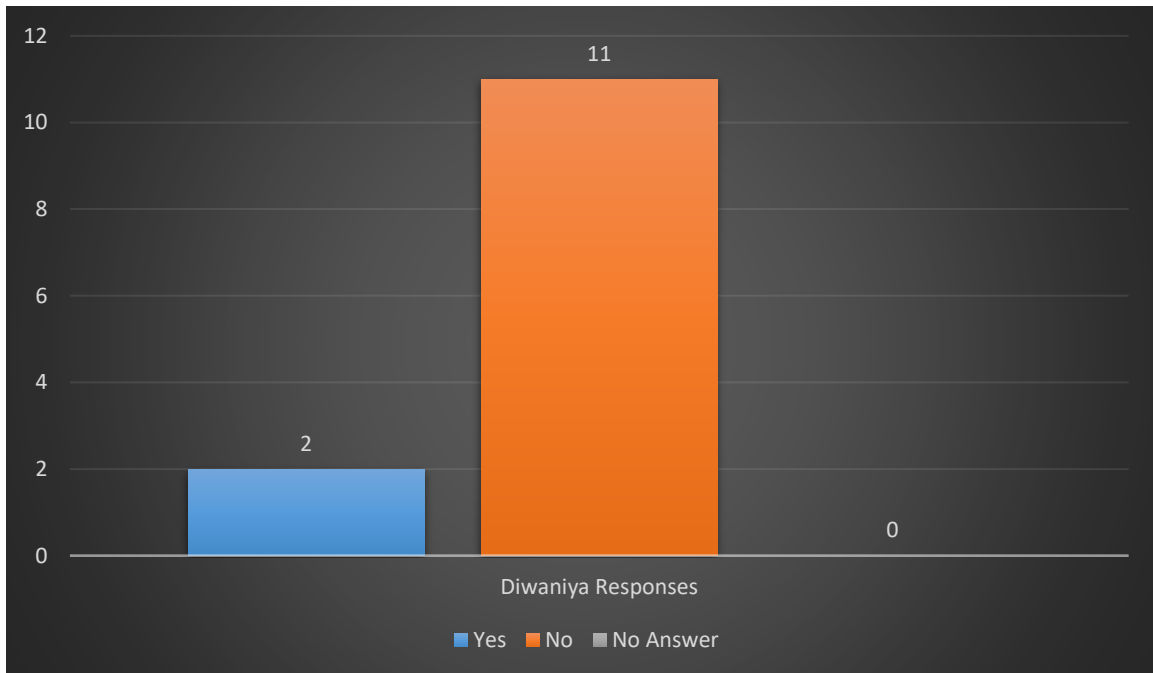
A key factor affecting frame resonance has to do with the empirical credibility of the collective action frame. The important point is not that the claimed connection has to be generally believable, but that it must be believable to a large segment of prospective or actual adherents. Al-Barrak's radicalism

increasingly distanced him and KW from more moderate elements, those that were surveyed, in the social movement rank and file.[20] Without realistic goals and clear leadership the surveyed diwaniyas said they withdrew their support.

5.2 The "Opposition"

Proposing regime change also raises additional issues: while many wanted to trim the powers of the ruling family, it was harder to imagine that any leader could knit together the various strands of the opposition to form a government and become prime minister. The key factor affecting the credibility of the collective action frame refers to the perceived credibility of frame articulators. The movement leaders failed to prove that it could govern if it was successful.

At issue here is a general loss of faith in political leadership in Kuwait among the reformers. Analyses of Kuwaiti politics are replete with references to "the opposition" but is there an opposition and what is it comprised of? Impressionistic accounts from social scientists and think tanks often refer to the opposition as a coherent, publicly known group of elites in the Parliament or prominent activists outside of formal politics. However, the reality of Kuwaiti politics, and the opinions of those surveyed, belies these distortions as not a single *diwaniya* thought that there was a real oppositionary movement in Kuwaiti politics. In fact, those surveyed rated the leadership skills of the opposition leaders very poorly (Figure 6).

Figure 6: How would you rate the leadership skill of Karamat organisers?
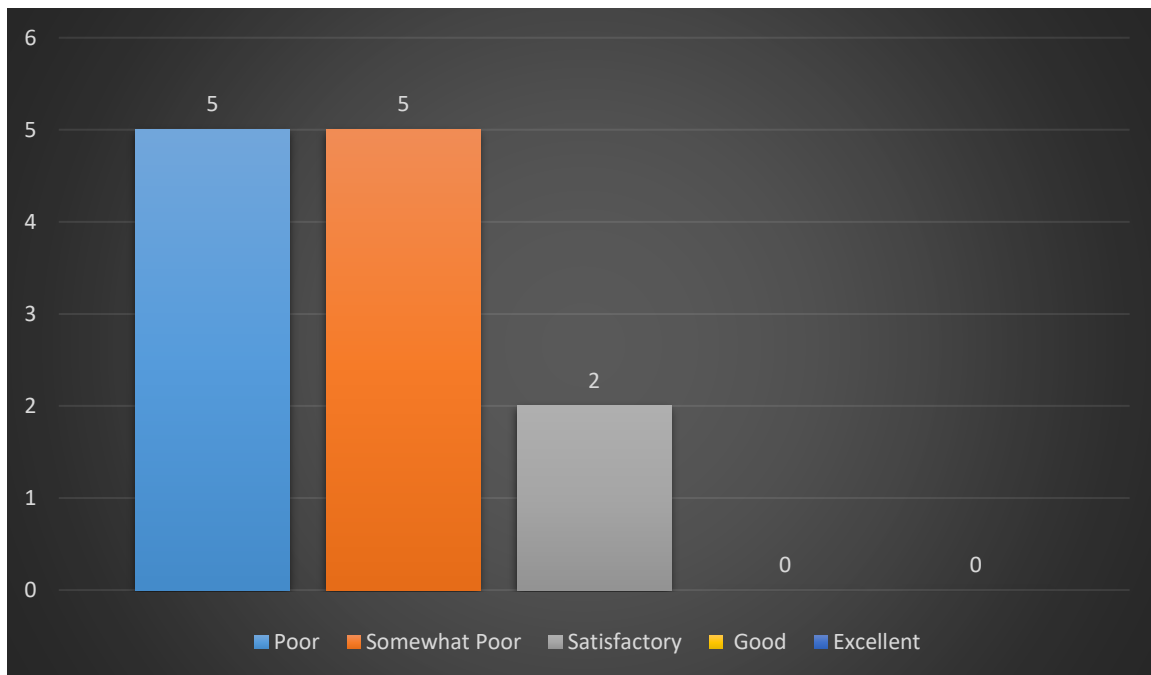

The relationship between members of the opposition leaders and ruling family is highly complex. Al-Barrack's father, Muhammad Al-Barrack, was a service MP and loyal adherent during Sheikh Jabir Al-

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[20] Interview with CDM activist, December 16, 2019.

Sabah's reign. Merchant political elites, such as Ali Al-Ghanem or Muhammad Al-Saqr or nationalists such as Ahmad Khatib or Ahmad Saadoun, have considerable influence on the Emir. Ahmad Saadoun, often touted as one of the key figures in the reform camp, has many large government contracts for real estate and government contract services. Another way to look at these connections is through intermarriage alliances (Al-Shehabi 2015). Al-Barrak is one of the most prominent tribal icons of Parliament, continuously re-elected from 1999 to 2012. He made his reputation as an anti-corruption MP, by opposing draft laws that he saw as encouraging corruption practices and by confronting fellow lawmakers or ministers and officials in parliament session. But Al-Barrak himself is related to the current ruling dynasty through his sister, who was married to the former Emir, Jabir Al-Sabah. When it comes to opposition strategies most leaders have short-term thinking and depend on contingent circumstances, not ideological positions or even familial relations.[21] Those surveyed highlighted the complexity of the opposition (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Who does the Opposition Serve?
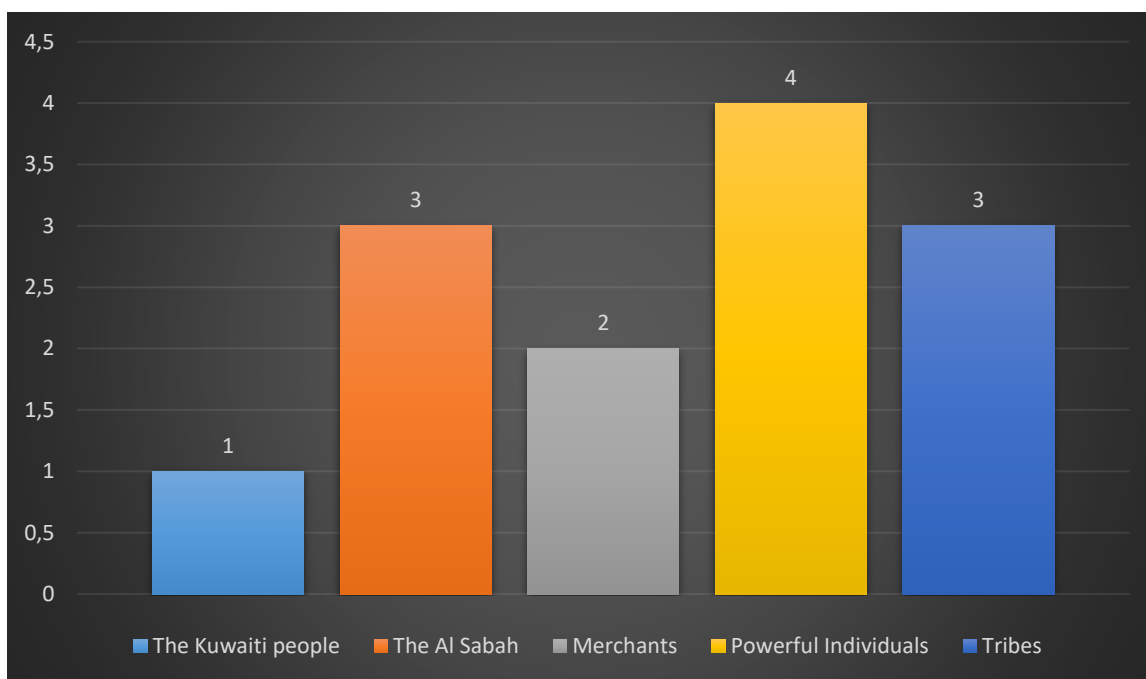
Most problematically, those surveyed did not think that opposition leaders spoke honestly about their intentions and viewed their oppositionary stance against the government as a ploy for personal gain. One key example from the protest related to Sheikh Ahmad Fahad Al-Sabah, the former Oil Minister often seen as vying for the crown prince office one day. Sheikh Aḥmad's tacit support for opposition leaders and Al-Barrak deeply concerned and put off supporters. On 11 April 11 2014, Al-Barrak and others in the Majority Bloc, officially presented their National Reform Project on Al-Waṭan TV, a pro-Ahmad news channel, proposing 36 amendments to the Constitution to establish a fully elected government with Sheikh Ahmed touted as the royal to implement their vision (Azouley and Beaugrand 2015). Another

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[21] Interview with former parliament member from 2012 opposition bloc, September 19, 2020.

example was on 21 April 2014, when Al-Barrak launched a virulent attack against Nasir without naming him, on the satellite channel al-Yawm. Sheikh Ahmad made similar claims not long after almost word for word, deepening suspicion.

The same suspicions also fell on youth movements. In 2012, CDM tried to create a new political dynamic, focusing popular mobilisation outside the traditional opposition process. But many surveyed considered the youth movements secretly manipulated by Islamists and tribal sheikhs (Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Who controls the youth movements?**
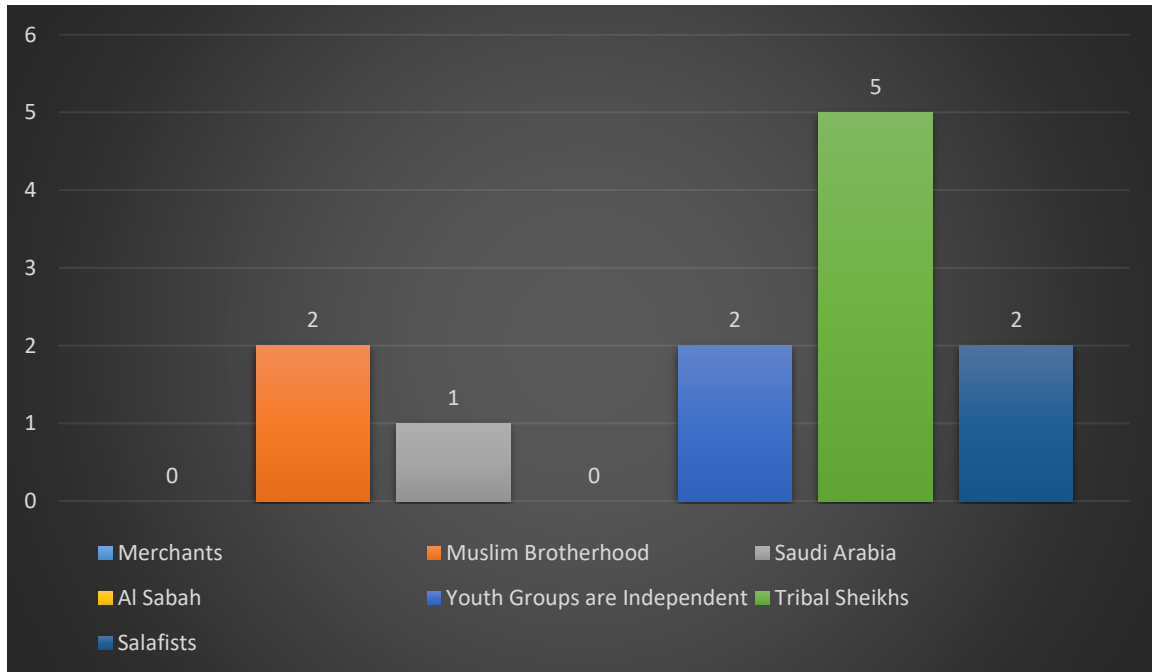
Another major loss of support for the movement was the youth leaders themselves as articulators of the KW frame. Not a single *diwaniya* said that the KW youth leaders would be effective members of Parliament (Figure 9). The youth leaders often made unrealistic and undeliverable demands for reform, according to them. *Diwaniya* members also said that idealism and limited political experience also encouraged uncompromising attitudes and unrealistic expectations. These tendencies have proved to be a double-edged sword (Alsayed 2014). CDM had 100 members at its height, and while there was alot of talk about running candidates in future elections, they disappeared soon after the failure of the movement.

Figure 9: Could youth leaders be effective parliamentary leaders?
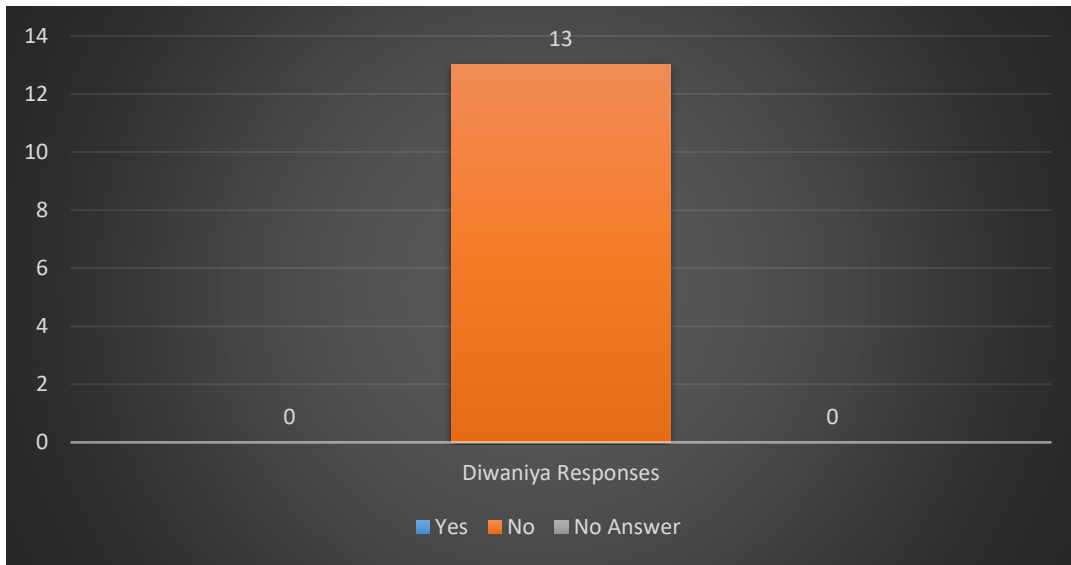
These views on the opposition build on a growing fatigue of Kuwaitis who, faced with hundreds of political scandals and stalemates over the decades, tend to be more and more disenchanted with the political system and felt that the Kuwaiti democratic experience is a failure at the same time as they are proud of their exceptional position in the region as its only democracy. In general, surveyed protesters thought the National Assembly was of low quality (Figure 10).

Figure 10: How would you describe the quality of the parliamentary system?
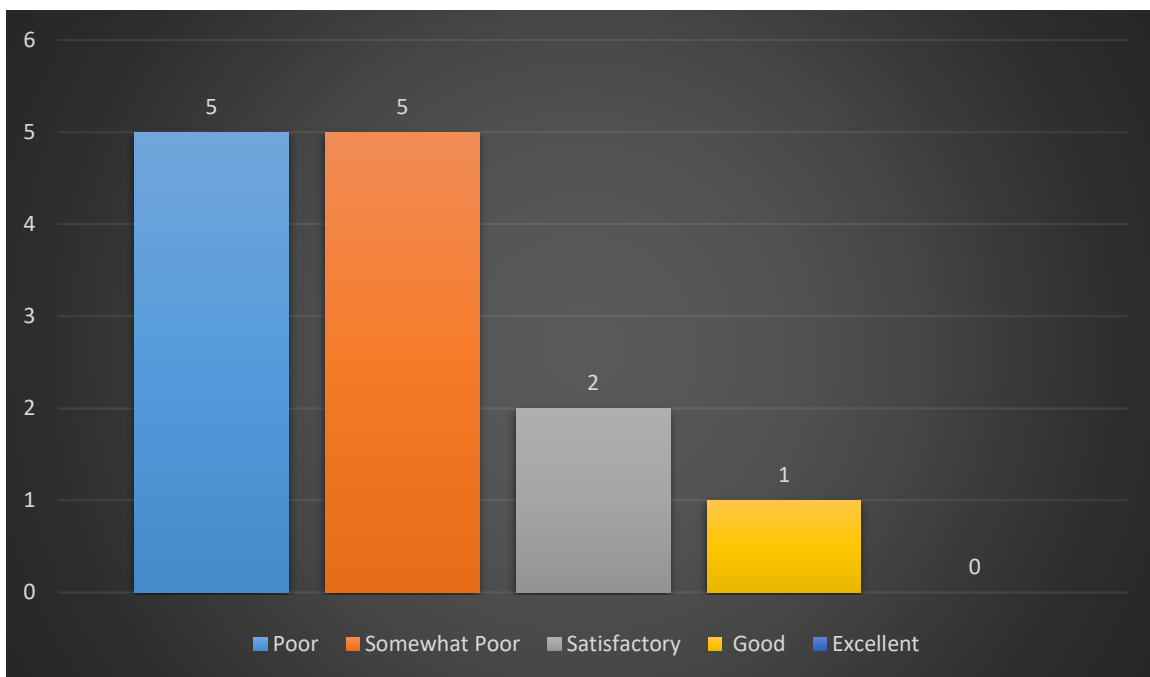
While this fatigue translates into a growing disaffection towards the government, it also affects the "opposition", which is often accused of adding tensions that impede the building of consensus and hence contribute to the current political stalemate. The Constitution endows the Assembly with considerable supervisory power by allowing a majority of elected deputies to interpellate individual ministers or the Prime Minister himself. Since 1963, the threat of interpellation has allowed the National Assembly a degree of influence over government policy. Yet, the common perception is that the threat or usage of interpellation has been abused, initiated more often to settle personal rivalries and draw attention to marginal issues instead of passing legislation (Tavana and York 2020).

At the same time, deputies vote with the regime in the vast majority of cases and laws pass by wide margins: since the Parliament's inception in 1963, 30% of laws were enacted unanimously, and three-quarters achieved 90% cooperation from elected MPs. Over the history of the entire parliament, only 28 laws (1%) were passed despite minister opposition (Tavana and York 2020). This deepens suspicions of the independence of MPs.

The structure, or weaknesses of the opposition, thus underlies the episodic political activism of Kuwaiti society (Ghabra 2014). When citizens see the opposition fail to solve a particular problem or fulfill its obligation to check the government and its performance, social movements emerge (Ghabra 2014). Many surveyed noted that underlying all these issues is political culture – both among the government and among the governed. Looking at the attitudes of Kuwaiti citizens, Ghanimah Al-Otaibi (2006) has argued that "the real problem is not a lack of legal or policy frameworks but rather, one of public apathy". This culture of apathy in the country is commonplace, and is highlighted in the opinions of the *diwaniyas* (Figure 11).

Figure 11: How would you describe the future of Kuwait?
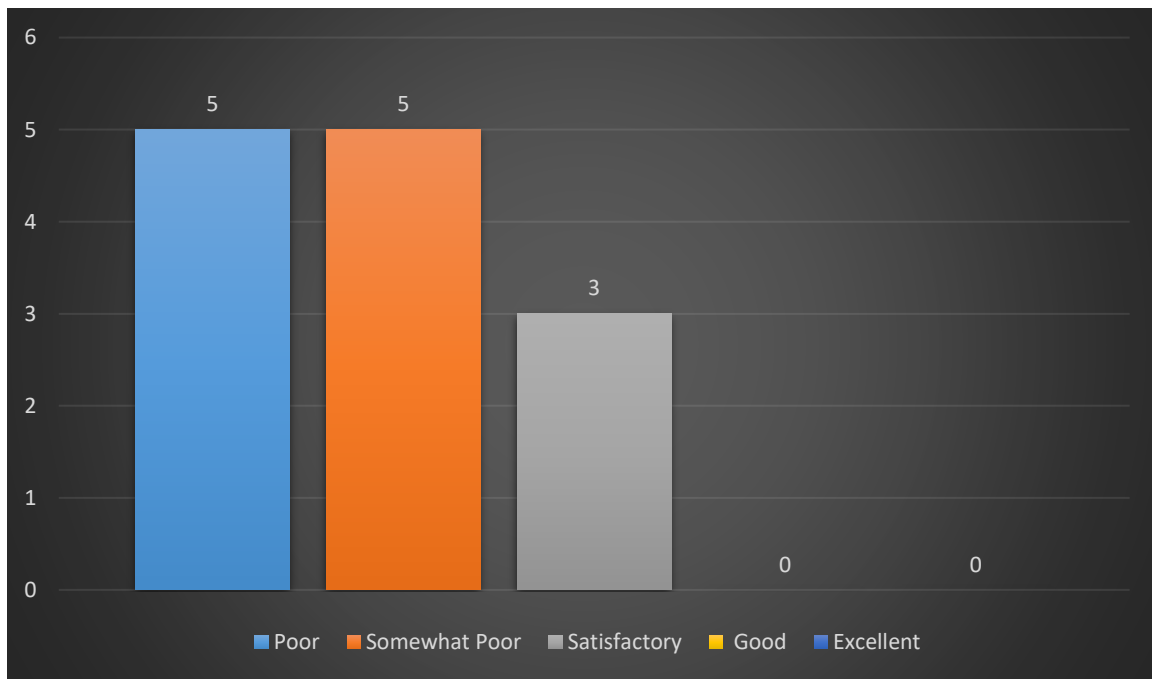
5.3 Material Welfare and Legitimacy

When oil wealth began enriching Kuwait in the 1950s, the monarchy pursued popular inclusion: it redistributed its hydrocarbon rent to not only benefit the old merchant elite, but also enrich and protect other Kuwaitis in the old town and newly enfranchised Bedouin tribes (Crystal 1990). The government practice of offering large financial packages to citizens in order to contain domestic discontent became a tried and true strategy of the regime. Within a day of the start of the Egyptian protests on 25 January 2011, Emir Sabah Ahmad Al-Sabah announced a $5 billion KD ($18 billion USD) increase to subsidies on fuel and energy along with $1000 KD ($3,600 USD) in cash to every citizen along with free foodstuffs from 1 February 2011 and 31 March 2012 (Calderwood 2011). One can see the correlation between consumer spending in Kuwait after 2010 (See Figure 12).

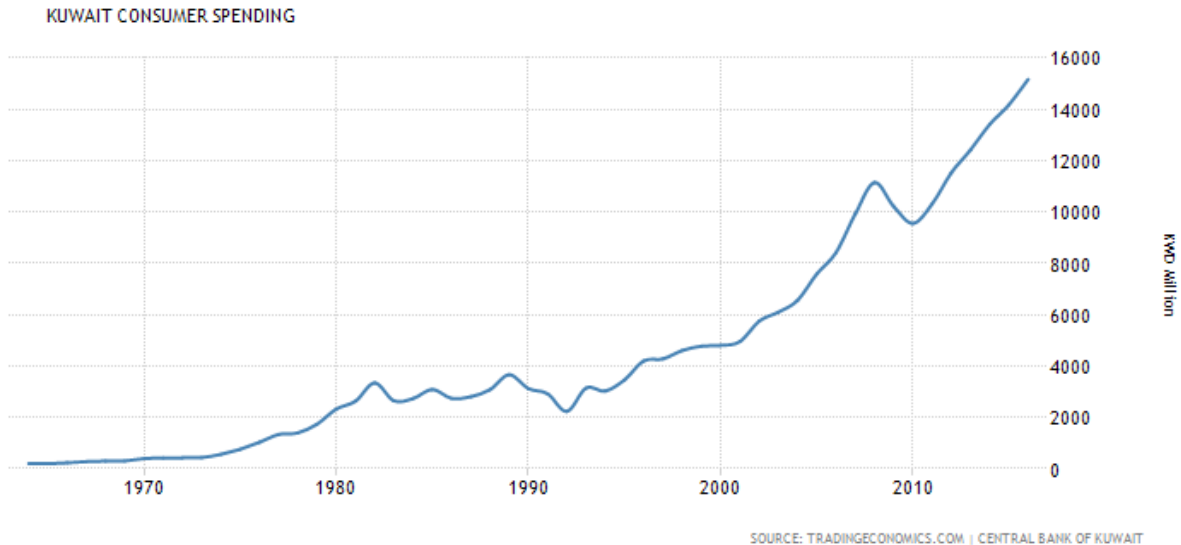**Figure 12: Kuwait Consumer Spending 2008-2016**

Source: Kuwait Consumer Spending 2008-2016 Data, Central Bank of Kuwait,
https://tradingeconomics.com/kuwait/consumer-spending

As strikes increased in 2011, so did the increase in payoffs as the government attempted to quell dissent. In September 2011, oil-sector workers were given pay rises ranging from 35% to 65%, depending on their position. In March 2012, Kuwait's Civil Service Commission announced that there would be a 25% increase in the basic rate of public-sector pay (Kinninmont 2012). In addition, the government launched a more targeted series of initiatives to reconnect with the generation of emboldened youth. A small enterprises fund for Kuwaitis under 35 years of age was created and a newly minted Ministry of Youth was founded. The government also rapidly expanded its social media footprint, attempting to legitimate improved services and governance (Martin 2019).

But Kuwait's wealth alone was not enough to forestall demands for more political rights; the expanded social spending program since 2011 did not quiet popular protests. Twelve *diwaniyas*, only one dissenting, stated that new subsidies given to Kuwaiti citizens in 2011, before KW began, did not impact their decision to protest. Furthermore, the introduction of new subsidies after 2012 did not stop them from protesting after KW from is full swing. These payments are just a small snapshot of increases to rent distribution, which is part of a historical trend (Figure 13). Total government subsidies jumped from $817

million KD in 2005 to $3.372 billion KD in 2010. Wages and salaries jumped from $2.125 billion KD in 2005 to $4.047 billion KD in 2010. Repeated cancellation of Kuwaiti nationals' debts, in 1979, 1982, 1990-1991, and in 2013, sometimes without crises, is continued sign of government responsiveness to citizens' material needs and wants.

**Figure 13: Kuwait Consumer Spending 1960-2017**

Source: Kuwait Consumer Spending 2008-2016 Data, Central Bank of Kuwait, https://tradingeconomics.com/kuwait/consumer-spending

Citizens in general, accept subsidy and salary increases as a normal part of life. In interviews, it became clear it was a requirement of the government, not simply a gift or trend. "It's not some momentary political blip," said one interviewee, "Simply put the government is flush with oil money and now spends more than in the past. It's their job!" [22] The current welfare state is something that most Kuwaitis rely on, and opposition figures are not seen as credible auditors or managers of the generous benefit packages (Figure 14). Only the current government, according to the majority surveyed, are seen as the guardians of Kuwait's of the welfare state (Figure 15).

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[22] Interview in a diwaniya in Jahra, March 1, 2020.

Figure 14: Do you trust opposition leaders to protect your financial future?
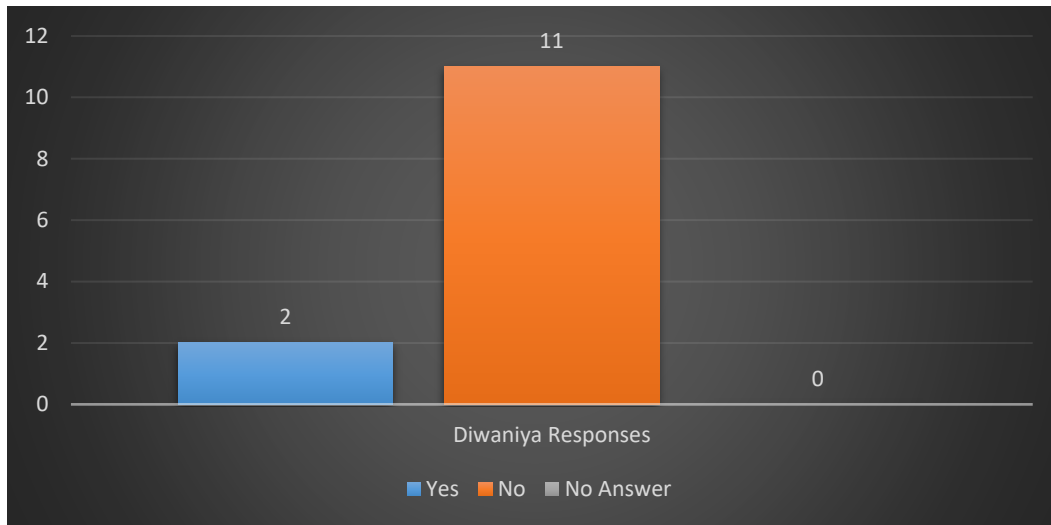
Figure 15: Do you trust the government to protect your financial future?
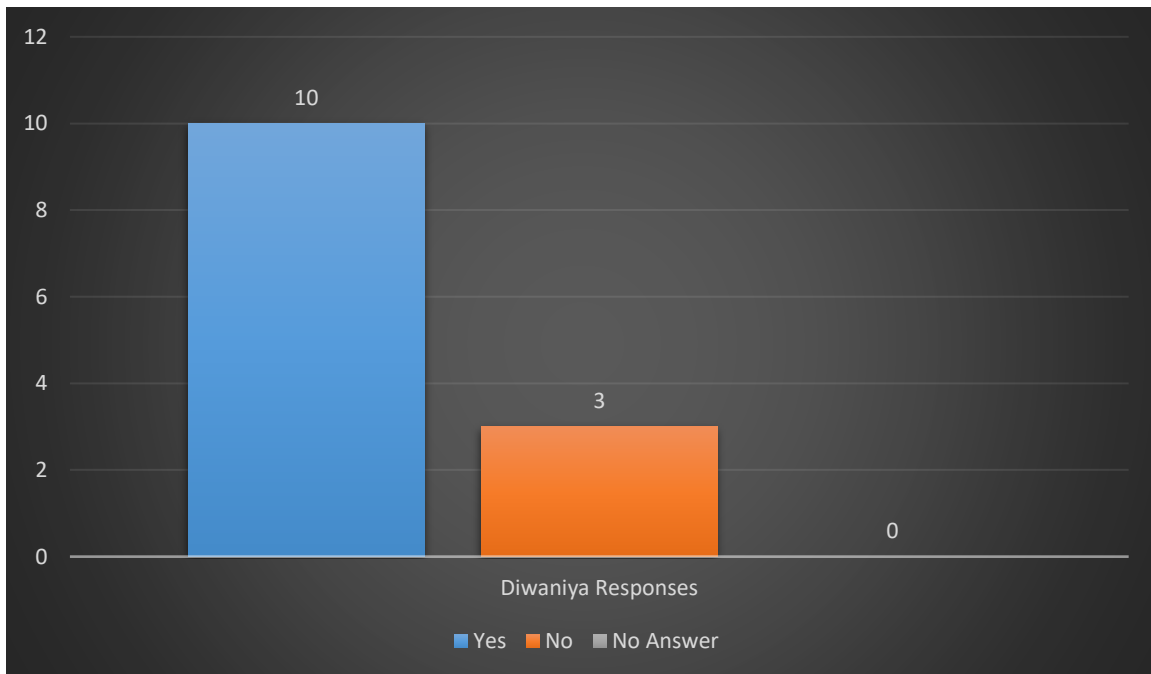
Overall, the opinions provided in the *diwaniyas* see a dual, and somewhat contradictory series of opinions on the opposition. While many *diwaniyas* have clear interests in reform and changing the system, an obvious reason to go out on the streets, the capacity and viability of the current opposition movement was found wanting. In some ways this mirrors events in Bahrain, where the more moderate members of the protest movement, especially the rank and file, shied away from unrealistic goals and opportunistic and self-serving leaders (Gengler 2015).

6. Conclusion

This article investigated the failure of the KW movement to maintain public support for its aims. The reasons for the loss of support were varied, but illustrated the importance of normative conceptions of legitimacy. Like Bahrain, the initial objective of the movement was legislative reform yet fragmented when demands for regime change were voiced. Traditional and ideological forms of legitimacy negatively impacted the support for the KW as insulting the Emir directly lessened support for the reform movement.

The KW's inability to articulate a frame that was supported by the larger public was the main reason for the downfall of the movement. Disruptions of transportation and perceptions that the protesters were violent also lessened support for KW. Much of this related to poor frame planning, and a lack of coordination among leaders. Furthermore, the lack of credible articulators, especially opposition figures like Musallam Al-Barrak, highlighted a major sense of apathy in the Kuwaiti public towards opposition politics in Kuwait, which are often viewed as just as corrupt as those they pledge to reform.

Finally, material legitimacy actually played a very little part in the protests themselves, as Kuwaitis have come to expect these rewards and trust the authorities in providing these benefits. This article fills a gap in the literature by looking at the legitimacy of the KW protest movement, and helps to understand why movements, even with groundswells of popular support, can decline quickly without repression or payoffs as normative notions of democracy, respect, and support for the regime are just as important.

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