

## **Kuwaiti MPs demand vote against oil minister**

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Ten Kuwaiti MPs on Monday filed a motion for a vote of no confidence against Oil Minister Sheikh Ali Jarrah al-Sabah after grilling him for nine hours over alleged financial irregularities.

The vote is due to take place on July 9 and if passed would mean an automatic dismissal of the minister, who is a member of the ruling Al-Sabah family.

The motion requires a simple majority of 25 votes in the 50-seat parliament. Two elected MPs are cabinet members who cannot vote on no-confidence motions under Kuwaiti law.

Outspoken opposition MP Mussallam al-Barrak, who was one of three lawmakers who grilled Sheikh Ali, told reporters outside parliament that he is confident the minister will be voted out of office or be forced to resign before the vote.

"Now, we have the support of 28 MPs and I am confident the number will rise to 35 by the time of the vote," Barrak said.

Opposition MPs have charged the minister of involvement in the multi-million dollar Kuwait Oil Tanker Company fraud case in which former oil minister Sheikh Ali Khalifa al-Sabah and four other top KOTC officials are accused of stealing more than 100 million dollars. They have denied wrongdoing.

During the tense questioning session, the MPs pulled no punches.

"The stolen money in this case has come through the bank in which you had been a chairman," charged MP Abdullah al-Roumi, who also accused the minister of facilitating the opening of bank accounts to channel money linked to the case.

Barrak accused the minister of failing to take action against top oil executives who allegedly committed financial, administrative and moral violations.

He used a projector to present pictures of the executives partying with a number of different women.

The oil minister denied any wrongdoing and described the grilling as politically motivated.

"They want to kill me politically because I stopped deals suspected of being corrupt. I wanted to clean the oil sector," which generates 95 percent of public revenues in this oil-rich emirate, the minister said.

"This is a grilling of vested interests," he added.

A number of MPs who spoke in support of the minister branded the grilling as "political terrorism" by the opposition.

The oil minister has been under fire since telling Al-Qabas newspaper on May 12 that he considered Sheikh Ali al-Khalifa as "my master and that I consult him occasionally on oil issues."

He issued a statement afterwards in which he apologised for what he said and stressed he would pursue people accused of stealing public funds.

Opposition MPs were infuriated by his comments, which came as parliament began a debate over several graft cases involving public funds.

The controversy is the latest in a string of political crises in the past 18 months that saw a bitter power struggle, the dissolution of parliament and the forming of three governments.

Oil experts believe that the resignation of the oil minister will not dramatically affect the emirate's oil policy but may further delay key projects in the sensitive sector.

Sheikh Ali is the eighth oil minister since the emirate's liberation from seven months of Iraqi occupation in 1991.

He is the second ruling family member to be questioned in four months.

In March, the Kuwaiti cabinet resigned after barely eight months in office to abort a no-confidence vote against former health minister Sheikh Ahmad Abdullah al-Sabah.