

Kuwaiti Cabinet resigns in new political crisis

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KUWAIT CITY: The Kuwaiti Cabinet resigned on Monday, saying the opposition-dominated Parliament had refused to cooperate, in the latest political crisis to hit the oil-rich emirate.

The move raised the prospects of a new dissolution of Parliament and early elections amid rising sectarian tensions and nonstop confrontations between MPs and the government.

Premier Sheikh Nasser Mohammad al-Ahmad al-Sabah, a nephew of the emir, handed the letter of resignation to the deputy emir and crown prince, Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah, as the ruler is out of the country.

During the weekly Cabinet meeting, First Deputy Premier and Defense Minister Sheikh Jaber Mubarak al-Sabah earlier tendered the resignation of Cabinet ministers en masse to the prime minister, citing noncooperation from MPs.

"It is regrettable that we have been confronted with obstructive positions and practices" from MPs, the defense minister said in the letter, which was made public.

Sheikh Jaber added that MPs "have refused to respond positively to the extended hand of government and its appeals for a constructive cooperation.

"Our political scene has lately witnessed events that undermine our national unity, in addition to confrontations, crises and violations of parliamentary norms," he said in a clear reference to sectarian tensions.

Kuwait has been experiencing sectarian tensions after activists from the Shiite minority held a rally last month to mourn Lebanese Hezbollah commander Imad Mughniyeh, killed in a car bombing in Damascus.

On the economic front, Parliament was due to vote on Tuesday on a law to increase salaries for Kuwaiti citizens by an extra \$188 a month despite strong opposition by the government.

The government last month already raised the salaries of citizens by \$450, but that increase was seen as inadequate by a majority of MPs.

Kuwait has a native population of 1 million, in addition to 2.2 million foreign residents. The country, the fourth-largest OPEC producer, sits on 10 percent of global crude reserves and pumps around 2.5 million barrels per day.

Under the Kuwaiti constitution, the emir can either accept the Cabinet's resignation and ask the current premier or a new one to form a government, or dissolve Parliament and call for early elections.

Parliament was last dissolved in May 2006 following a standoff with the government, leading to early elections in June in which women took part for the first time.

"I believe that Parliament is going to be dissolved soon, and early elections will be held. But this will not resolve Kuwait's ongoing crises," political analyst Ayed al-Manna told AFP.

He said such crises would continue as long as the Kuwaiti political system was not fundamentally reformed.

"The solution to our crisis is through allowing the establishment of political parties, so the government can enjoy the support of a majority in Parliament," Manna added.

Political parties are banned in Kuwait, although the government allows political groupings, considered as de facto parties, to operate.

The emir had faced calls to sack the government, appoint a new premier and hold early parliamentary polls in the Gulf Arab state.

Leading liberal MP Ahmad al-Mulaifi last week said the government should go and called for changes within the ruling Sabah family. He said the premier had failed to carry out reforms and resolve the nation's crisis.

Sheikh Nasser was appointed premier for the first time two years ago after emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah ascended to the helm following a power struggle within the ruling family.

Since then, Kuwait has undergone a series of political crises that forced the resignation of four governments, the dissolution of Parliament, fresh elections in June 2006 and the grilling of several ministers by MPs.

A number of MPs welcomed the latest Cabinet resignation, saying it could help resolve the emirate's political crisis.

"The Cabinet resignation is timely. The problem in Kuwait is that the government does not have a majority in Parliament," Islamist MP Ahmad Baqer said.

"The Cabinet resignation is good news. We welcome holding fresh elections," independent MP Ali al-Deqbasi said. -