Legitimacy is almost entirely a matter of sentiment. Followers believe in a regime or have faith in it. The belief may be a product of conditioning, or it may be a fruit of symbolic debate, but in neither case is it, in any significant degree, the work of reason, judgment, or active participation in the processes of rule. To compartmentalise the notion of legitimacy through definitions and attempting to classify every regime may definitely be possible in theory, but in practice the task may not be the real. More importantly, it may not be the ideal.

In the case of Kuwait too, there may not be an absolutely clear framework to place the legitimacy of the Al-Sabahs in perspective, but since the society has a history of democracy and has progressed steadily along the democratic route after Independence, it is only right that the regime be placed within its existential framework and inferences drawn therefrom.

As a system of governance, democracy is a rare phenomenon in the Gulf Cooperation Council states. Despite modernisation and economic progress, they are yet to show their serious commitment to political development and
participation. Moreover, most of these kingdoms are ruled by established monarchies making hereditary family rule as their means of succession.

With the coming of the oil age, a new phase of "constitutionalism" was initiated. This involved the adoption of a written Constitution at independence, with some attempt at transference of the right to rule from simply tradition, within a tribal and Islamic context, to the exercise of authority in the name of the people, with whom sovereignty theoretically rests. In these, the rulers are under the same obligations and constraints as all the citizens are, although there are several cases of abuse and monopoly of power by the ruling families. Yet, the most durable and far-reaching political change has been the process of institutionalisation.

Objective of the study

The Al-Sabahs and the National Assembly is a case in point to correlate the legitimacy factor. This study focuses on the unique political system of Kuwait which combines a powerful hereditary rule with a "limited" democratic system — the National Assembly — which developed as part of a political strategy to contain Kuwait's vulnerability. The study attempts to chronicle the various stages of Kuwait's political development through the institution of the
National Assembly. Effort has also been made to concentrate on the role, structure, and mechanism of the National Assembly and the legitimacy aspects that could be linked to the Al-Sabahs through this outlet for political expression.

The study aims to answer several questions: Why democracy in Kuwait should not be scaled along with the notion of Western democracy? Why the ruling Al-Sabah family initiated democratic reforms, which are often considered an invitation to instability in traditional societies? Why the Al-Sabahs did not view sharing power, through the National Assembly, as a way of eroding their supremacy? Whether or not the National Assembly has contributed to the legitimacy of the ruling family? Why Kuwait is the only country in the Arabian Gulf, with notable exceptions in terms of limited degrees, to embark on such reforms? And most importantly, why the Kuwaiti experience lends itself as a viable blueprint for the political systems of the other Arabian Gulf states?

The thesis also argues that the Kuwaiti National Assembly played a positive role in Kuwait's political development, providing a sense of legitimacy and a sense of statehood and purpose. At the same time, care has been taken to highlight the deficiencies in the present system and some measures to remedy
the existing drawbacks, keeping in view its traditional, deep-rooted Islamic teachings and its tribal heritage.

Chapter One delves into the socio-political notion of legitimacy by addressing the key issues of its meaning, nature and constituent elements. To ensure that there is a sense of continuity between this and the subsequent chapters, the issue of legitimacy in the Arab regimes has also been attended to briefly with some specific references to the political system in Kuwait.

Chapter Two deals with the rarity of democracy as a system of governance in the Gulf Cooperation Council countries, with the exception of Kuwait. The reasons behind this development will be attended to along with the important provisions of the Constitution.

Chapter Three looks at some key issues, both domestic and foreign, that figured in the debates of the National Assembly and how these have affected the credibility of the Al-Sababs.

Chapter Four is an attempt to focus on the nature of contribution by the Al-Sababs in their effort to become legitimate rulers, and if their presence has actually led to the strengthening of their legitimacy. The question of whether civil legitimacy in toto is their ultimate and genuine aim is also discussed.
The concluding chapter seeks to identify the limitations for the stunted growth of democratic norms in Kuwait and also the possible repercussions that it could have on the other countries in the region.

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