

Kuwait During the Pandemic of Covid-19

Government Measures and the People Reaction

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Introduction

Policy making is the general approach a government undertakes to influence and/or to identify decisions necessary for the welfare of the community. It reflects the choices made at the highest level of government to reach specific results. Government policies can also be adjusted or corrected to suit a state of emergency as in the case of the current outbreak of the coronavirus (a.k.a SARS-CoV-2). The spread of the virus, which the world has been witnessing since the beginning of 2020, has placed governments in a position to meet the challenges and make informed policy choices “that [would enable] them to overcome the crisis.”¹

The first case of coronavirus in Kuwait was detected on 24 February 2020 and was related to a citizen who was returning from a visit to Iran.² Because many Kuwaitis visit Iran, the government of Kuwait expected to witness infected cases in Kuwait very early and took preventive measures that were announced on the government’s official communication platform.³ In fact, these measures were declared two days before discovering the first case.

The government’s measures were based on the Kuwaiti constitution, which considers caring for the public health and well-being as one of its top responsibilities. According to article 15 of the constitution “The State shall care for public health through measures of precaution and cure of diseases and epidemics.” Furthermore, article 25 of the constitution stipulates that “The State shall guarantee the solidarity of Society in bearing burdens arising from catastrophes and public calamities.”⁴ Using those two articles, the government enforced several laws and measures to contain the spread of Covid-19. While these measures came as a surprise to the citizens and residents of Kuwait, they reflected the government’s vigilance and strong feeling of responsibility. At the same time, the people in Kuwait considered these strict and swift measures necessary for their well-being.

In this article, I will first explain the reaction of the government of Kuwait to the crisis of Covid-19, and the course of action that it undertook to protect the public health of its citizens and residents. I will also evaluate how these measures have changed the public’s behaviour during the crisis. Then, I will discuss how the people responded to these procedures. In the final section, I make some conclusions.

The Response of the Government of Kuwait to the Crisis

The government measures were based on four criteria: evidence, observations, best practices, and a cost/benefit analysis. In practice, the government of Kuwait was informed in January by the International Audit Center on the Application of Global Health Regulations at the Ministry of Health, which submitted an official report to the Minister of Health, Dr. Basil Al Sabah, on the presence of a new virus that was rapidly spreading

¹ Cabinet, Policy Development Guide, United Arab Emirates, 2019, p. 12

² “Ministry of Health declared the infection of three persons who were returning from Mashad in Iran”, Kuwait News Agency, February 24, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2864376>

³ The actions of the Government of Kuwait during the Corona crisis can be viewed on <https://www.instagram.com/cqckuwait>

⁴ “Kuwait Constitution”, Constitution Project website, n.d. Retrieved from : https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Kuwait_1992.pdf?lang=en

in Wuhan, China.⁵ In parallel, the government watched carefully the spread of the virus in Iran, especially in the city of Qom where large numbers of Kuwaiti citizens go to visit every year.

The first three cases came from Iran and were discovered at Kuwait airport on 24 February 2020: a Kuwaiti, a Saudi, and a third person whose nationality was not declared; all of which were transferred to Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Hospital for further tests. As of 19 May 2020, there are 15.691 cases of which 4.339 recovered and 118 died.⁶

The government also evaluated how different countries reacted to the crisis and used the Chinese model to prevent the spread of the virus. This model is based on bold and swift decisions to protect the community. Aware of the fact that China went too far in using technology to track its citizens, which might have violated their human rights, the government in Kuwait only borrowed from China the measures that are related to social distancing (see below).

The government also estimated the extra costs to equip the health care system with the necessary medical supplies at KWD 500 million.⁷ The Minister of Health designated Jabber Al Ahmad Hospital, with a clinical capacity of 1.130 beds, as the main hospital for coronavirus cases. The health care system in Kuwait is well-developed; the hospitals of the public sector have the capacity of approximately 15.000 beds. The number of beds in intensive care units is approximately 1.000 beds. Expecting demands for masks and ventilators, the government bought 12 million masks for the month of January alone and it increased the number of ventilators in hospitals. There is also a plan to import 250 ventilators to cope with the crisis and the increase in the number of cases of Covid-19.⁸ It also bought tens of thousands of testing kits and medical supplies in order to create a strategic stock.⁹ In addition, the government supported the Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Science in this crisis, which in turn imported more than 170 ventilators and personal protective devices from China as part of the foundation's efforts in the Emergency Response Program for the Covid-19 crisis.¹⁰

It is important to note that the government has left the decisions on the type of measures that are needed to be taken to the Ministry of Health and asked the Ministry of Interior to enforce them. The measures and laws that were enacted are intended to enforce the notion of social distancing by regulating the social behaviour of individuals through banning social gatherings within or outside any public or private institution as well as in public spaces. A partial curfew and several penalties were declared to ensure the public's respect of these measures.¹¹

The partial daily curfew was announced on 22 March 2020 and it is still in place. It was initially enforced from 5 pm until 4 am, and during Ramadan, from 4 pm until 9 am to prevent people from gathering during the five daily prayers, a practice that significantly increases especially in Ramadan due to night prayers (known in the Muslim countries as Taraweeh). The government commissioned the Ministry of Interior to establish mechanisms for the implementation of the curfew and asked the National Guard to assist the police during the implementation process. Furthermore, the government closed all showrooms, shops and central markets and encouraged online sale. It also imposed penalties of up to three years of imprisonment and a fine of KWD 10.000 for curfew violators. However, based on recommendations from the Municipality of Kuwait, who was

⁵ "Interview with Dr. Basel AlSabah, Minister of Health", AlRai Tube, April 20, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0S9EgAwf0j4>

⁶ All updates on cases of Corona virus in Kuwait can be followed on Kuwait government website: <https://corona.e.gov.kw>

⁷ "Weekly Statement of the council of ministers", Secretariat of the council of ministers, March 16, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://t.co/079iQRXAU1?amp>

⁸ "Alhejlan: the ventilators in Kuwait are sufficient", Alqabas Newspaper, April 5, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://alqabas.com/article/5765934>

⁹ "The author interview with Minister of Health Dr. Basel AlSabah", May 18, 2020.

¹⁰ "Kuwait Foundation for the Advancement of Science: ventilators and personal protective devices from China", Alqabas Newspaper, May 3, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://alqabas.com/article/5771858>

¹¹ "Minister of Health: The partial curfew was made because some people did not commit to prevent public meetings", KUNA, March 22, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2880593&language=ar>

tasked to identify the necessary businesses and institutions that should be excluded from the closure, the government left open the marketing outlets and the central markets for food where household needs are sold.

Under the guidance of His Highness Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, the government also announced an economic reform package to maintain the good living standards of the Kuwaitis and to support businesses. The package included “postponing the payment of social insurance to the workers in the private and oil companies, as well as for the owners of small and medium enterprises for six months.”¹² Instructed by the government, the Federation of Kuwaiti Banks also suspended the repayment of loans and debts to citizens for six months. Finally, the government ensured that the supplies of food and medicines to citizens and residents will continue with affordable prices. The Ministry of Trade and Industry also stabilized the prices in order to prevent companies from taking advantage of the citizens’ needs.

During the crisis, the government was very transparent. It posted all information it possessed on Covid-19 as well as of its measures on the government communication platform, an official media website that gives the latest laws, facts, and statistics related to Covid-19.¹³ This information is also available on the media platform of the Ministry of Health, which gives information about the number of the new cases, recovered ones, and the latest developments of the pandemic.¹⁴ The World Health Organization praised the high level of transparency of the government in dealing with the crisis during its visit to Kuwait on 29 February 2020.¹⁵

The Kuwaitis’ Reactions during the Crisis

At the beginning of the crisis, the Kuwaitis did not understand the seriousness and the scale of the problem. However, when the government took the decision to enforce social distancing, together with news reports about what was happening in Italy, Spain and later on in the United States, the people of Kuwait became active citizens. They accepted the government’s decisions out of patriotism and many of them volunteered to assist the government in different fields including in the health care system. Brig. Gen. Jamal Al-Fudary, the Director of the General Directorate of Civil Defence, announced that 25,000 people have registered in his department since the call for volunteering to face the repercussions of the spread of the Coronavirus.¹⁶ Volunteerism is a feature that has strong roots in the Kuwaiti society and dates back to the 1960s at which time the voluntary work contributed to the building of the country in several fields. The government commissioned the General Directorate of Civil Defence to organise the volunteers including the establishment of the necessary regulations and the needed training for safety precautions.

Social changes during the crisis

The Corona crisis has brought about social changes in the behaviour of civil institutions and individuals as well as in the nature of social life within Kuwaiti society. To begin with, the civil institutions have cancelled or postponed conferences, workshops and training courses. The people maintain social distance in their daily interactions and public social events have been cancelled. Family and social gatherings that characterize the Kuwaiti society have been stopped. The people maintain physical distance when they access food shops, markets, and hospitals. Families have also closed their diwans, which are considered one of Kuwait’s important features of democracy where many government policies and social issues are discussed among people and with decision-makers.

¹² “Kuwait council of ministries hold an exceptional meeting”, KUNA, April 1, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2883631>

¹³ See the press conference of the spokesman of the council of minister, YouTube, April 22, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sE1NCdPFsUU&feature=youtu.be>

¹⁴ “Covid-19 updates”, Ministry of Health. See <https://corona.e.gov.kw/en>

¹⁵ “WHO praises Kuwait for the measures it took to counter the spread of Coronavirus”, KUNA, February 29, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2871342>

¹⁶ “Civil defense: 25 thousand volunteered to face the repercussion of Covid-19”, KUNA, April 2, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.kuna.net.kw/ArticleDetails.aspx?id=2883847&language=ar>

Further, the consumption pattern of individuals has changed. People, as observed by media, are spending less because of the closure of restaurants, entertainment facilities and shops.¹⁷ However, most of the people are using online shopping to get their needs. According to Hind Al-Nahed, the president of the World Electronic Media Club, 36% of the population depends on online purchases and the volume of e-commerce in Kuwait reached \$1.1 billion since the beginning of the curfew during the crisis.¹⁸ There are almost 2.4 million active accounts in Kuwait of which 80% are bank accounts; among them 66% belong to Kuwaiti youth. On the other hand, Bashar Al-Estada, the marketing director of Zaida, said that the use of electronic applications in Kuwait has increased by 50% during crisis, adding that apps related restaurants make the largest share of the volume.¹⁹ Additionally, the people became more reliant on social media to get the latest developments about the disease, and to engage in the discussion surrounding the pandemic and/or issues related to Kuwait. This is partly because most civil society organizations have moved their activities to virtual platforms: online awareness lectures on the disease and its related subjects, capacity building training programs, and political workshops have become a defining feature of this period in Kuwait. Additionally, Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter and other virtual means of videocall interaction have increased tremendously to share news, information and to discuss issues of the Kuwaitis' concern.

The people also started to use the government's website more frequently, as they can get the services that they are looking for safer and faster. The Ministry of Health, for example, is using WhatsApp to communicate with patients in order to deliver their medicine, and the Ministry of Interior provides the electronic service for renewing documents such as identity cards and resident cards online. Other government institutions such as the Office of Social Developments have started to provide online psychological, social and family service programs. This will most likely make the realisation of the e-government project faster, a project that has been discussed in the government since some time.

One of the issues that was debated intensively in Kuwait was the status of expatriates during the crisis. It is well known that Kuwait has a very large number of migrant workers. Their number according to some estimates is approximately three million.²⁰ The government of Kuwait provides free healthcare services during the crisis to residents and citizens without any discrimination. It is worth mentioning here that this practice is not the same in all countries. For example, Dr. Ali Lairi, a Kuwaiti doctor who lives in London, reported that he was infected with Coronavirus but did not receive medical treatment because he was not British.²¹ However, a crisis emerged in Kuwait when the government allowed nearly ten thousand Egyptian employees working originally in Kuwait and who travelled home during the national holiday's period on 25 and 26 February to return back to Kuwait during the crisis. Some Kuwaitis used social media to criticize the government arguing that this puts more pressure on the healthcare system and doubles the work of the interior ministry. Aware that these criticisms might hurt Kuwaiti-Egyptian relations, many educated elites intervened. They made the point that these expats had valid contracts and defended the government's position. Other civil society organizations, such as the Kuwait Bar Association, issued statements against the provocation of racism and hatred.²²

However, it should be noted that the coronavirus crisis is no longer only a health concern; it also has implications on the economic growth of Kuwait. Due to the slowdown of economic activities, the government

¹⁷ "Council of ministers decide to close malls and entertainment facilities", YouTube, March 14, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5qjT2EA8Kog>

¹⁸ "After the council of ministers' decision to close malls, trades with electronic marketing will win", albanba, March 16, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.alanba.com.kw/ar/economy-news/956689/16-03-2020>

¹⁹ "Kuwait electronic trading increases", Albayan, March 22, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.albayan.ae/economy/last-deal/2020-03-22-1.3809954>

²⁰ "Central Statistical Bureau", April 30, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.csb.gov.kw/Pages/Statistics?ID=67&ParentCatID=1>, https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RE8_t2Lt2RX9j6lr8hP6ztJvjvcf637g/view?usp=sharing

²¹ "How a Kuwaiti medicine got infected in Britain", YouTube, March 24, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YItIsYMq51Q&feature=youtu.be>

²² "Kuwait Bar Association: We refuse discrimination against immigrants", Alanba Newspaper, April 5, 2020. Retrieved from: <https://www.alanba.com.kw/ar/kuwait-news/960344/05-04-2020>

is now reconsidering its measures concerning illegal workers who live in Kuwait. New measures to return illegal workers and residency violators to their homes are underway, without affecting their financial rights or their right for free medical treatment if they are already infected with the disease. The scope and the numbers of individuals who will be affected by these measures are unknown so far.

Conclusions

A recent poll by the Gulf and Arab Peninsula Center for Studies shows that more than two-third of Kuwaitis support the government measures to control the spread of the coronavirus.²³ This was only possible because the government's social distancing measures were coupled with a package of economic reforms to maintain a good living standard for the Kuwaitis and to prevent the private sector from collapsing.

In the absence of an effective vaccine to the virus, the road to contain its spread in Kuwait seems to be long. However, the waves of Kuwaiti volunteers with the wide spread of patriotism inform us that Kuwaitis are ready to withstand the repercussions of this period. The Kuwaitis are already adapting their lives to deal with the era of social distancing: online shopping became preferable by most people, social gathering and professional meetings are taking place in the virtual space, and the government is providing its services through the portal of e-government.

Acknowledging that the virus has slowed the economic growth everywhere including in Kuwait, the future of the immigrant workers in the country will certainly be affected. The number of immigrants and the sectors of the economy that will mostly be impacted in this period are yet to be seen.

²³ "The public are satisfied with the government performance during Corona crisis", AIRai, March 19, 2020. Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/CGAPS_KUNIV/status/1240642453063053312/photo/2

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