Blueprint for Public Sector Good Governance in Kuwait: Four Policies for Administrative Reform

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Abstract

It has become common wisdom that political conflict in Kuwait has done damage to the country’s reputation as a business hub and to its economic reform and privatization program. One of the largest, and often unrecognized, collateral victims of political stalemate however has been the integrity of the Kuwaiti state apparatus itself, whose efficiency has been sagging and whose governance remains adrift in the face of political stalemate. Weak administration has become a heavy burden both on business and Kuwaiti citizens.

This policy paper aims to survey major challenges of public sector governance in Kuwait against the backdrop of international and regional best practices, aiming to develop a number of priority reform proposals to restore the Kuwaiti government’s status as partner for growth and diversification for local business. While drawing on original research and interviews in Kuwait, it will also build on a large body of existing work that has been done on Kuwaiti governance reform by a number of international organizations and consultants.

The fact that possible solutions to Kuwait’s public sector governance challenges have been debated behind closed doors for a long time however also motivates a key difference between this report and previous work: The report explicitly aims to generate public debate among key stakeholders about governance reform – which hitherto has been limited – and focuses specifically on ways in which necessary reforms could be seen through in Kuwait’s complex political environment, which has stymied most reform projects to date.

The report will argue that there are potential ways of “packaging” reforms that could broaden public support. One option could be a grand bargain that would involve wholesale reform to government employment in exchange for other, less distortionary public welfare measures. Other, more modest policies would insulate core parts of the civil service from day-to-day politicking, and allow the build-up of administrative capacity
and coordination mechanisms in strategic areas, while treading more cautiously in the reform of politically sensitive employment practices in the civil service at large.

The policy focus of the report is mostly on public sector employment, performance management, the structure of government agencies and inter-agency coordination. It concentrates on the executive branch of government. The report does not review regulatory frameworks and practices in individual policy areas, assess the Kuwait judiciary, discuss public finance management, the provision of specific public services or political issues of executive accountability involving the parliament. All these are important and complex topics in their own right that deserve a fuller treatment than this report could provide.

The report is divided into two halves: The first analyzes the status quo of public sector governance in Kuwait and the reasons for underperformance in strategic areas. The second half will develop four strategic policy priorities: civil service reform at large, the building of non-political “senior executive service”, the creation and protection of small, autonomous elite agencies in strategic policy areas, and the strengthening of high-level coordination and planning mechanisms. The policies have been developed with Kuwait’s political constraints in mind and are accompanied by proposals of how to make them more palatable in the face of potential resistance from within and outside of the administration.