

Osamah Alsayegh, "Lessons From Kuwait: How the Country's Rentier Democracy Is Slowing Its Energy Transition" (Houston: Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy, April 5, 2023), <https://doi/10.25613/R1ZE-AM65>.

Although achieving a sustainable energy transition poses critical challenges for the hydrocarbon-dependent economies of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), the GCC countries have announced ambitious energy transition targets, seizing potential economic opportunities involving clean technology deployment and energy demand management measures. Energy transition progress varies among the GCC states, however, Kuwait, for example -- the only democratic country in the GCC -- has made slow headway, giving rise to the question of whether there is a relationship between political system type and advancement toward energy transition goals.

This study investigates the role of the GCC states' political systems in advancing (or discouraging) the energy transition. It focuses on Kuwait, which embraces a democratic political system and has made slow progress toward energy transition targets, and addresses the following questions:

To answer these research questions, a review of Kuwait's legal and legislative proposals and approvals from Jan. 1, 2012, to Jan. 31, 2023, was completed using the document database made available by the Kuwait National Assembly, the country's legislative body. Then, a quantitative and associated qualitative analysis was carried out to deduce the results. The findings suggest that Kuwait's broader political system has persistently played an indirect role in slowing the country's pace of progress toward the energy transition. The study concludes by recommending short- and long-term mitigation policies to stimulate Kuwait's energy transition development.

As such, a nation's political system has a strong role in the development and progress of its energy transition process.[4] It influences the design of the transition's governance framework, the development of its financing tools, and the regulation of its market, in addition to driving public opinion and awareness.[5] Historically, there has been a causal relationship between a society's transition from one energy system to another with its type of political system. This causal relationship has evolved throughout time.[6]

In nations with democratic political systems, the political strategies surrounding the energy transition usually involve coalitional structures that advocate for (or discourage) the transition process. Such coalitions typically involve government, businesses, and the public.[7] Nations develop energy policies through the framework of their political ideology and the influence of public opinion.[8] As such, the sociopolitical feasibility of achieving a net-zero target is always taken into consideration, in addition to technological and economic feasibility.[9]

The GCC states' overall progress toward net-zero targets shows Kuwait as an outlier in energy transition endeavors -- hence, the research motive for investigating the role of the GCC countries' political systems in the development of their national energy transition efforts.

Because it is the only democratic GCC state and lags behind the others with regard to energy transition development, Kuwait is the focus of this study. The lessons that emerge are a call for Kuwait's policymakers and elite to reform their political system into one capable of responding to the short- and long-term challenges of the sustainable energy transition.

The case of the GCC states is somewhat unique. Though their people share similar cultures and values, their political systems vary significantly. Most are absolute monarchies with limited political representation and restricted civil liberties. Kuwait is the exception; its public contributes to the country's administration by influencing legislation and monitoring the government-run employment system via the Kuwaiti National Assembly, whose members are freely elected.

Table 1 -- Parliamentary Structures of Gulf Cooperation Council States

Kuwait is a constitutional monarchy headed by the emir. Constitutionally, the emir must be a member of the ruling Al-Sabah family and descended from Mubarak Al-Sabah, who ruled until 1915. The system of government is based on the principle of separated executive, legislative, and judicial powers, which are all headed by the emir. The emir also appoints the prime minister, who holds the authority to appoint the state secretaries who make up the Kuwaiti Cabinet.

Unlike other democratic nations, Kuwait lacks a process by which coalitions of government, businesses, and the public can influence the political strategy surrounding the energy transition. This is reflected in its energy transition progress. The Arab Future Energy Index (AFEX), which uses 30 indicators to assess key aspects of the energy market in Arab countries, including policies, institutional and technical capacities, strategies, socioeconomic factors, and investments,[14] ranks the GCC states by their level of progress in renewable energy and energy efficiency. Kuwait -- the GCC's only democratic nation -- has fallen behind most of the nondemocratic GCC states in these areas (Table 2).

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