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Kuwaiti Parliament to Debate Ailing Emir

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KUWAIT (Reuters) - Kuwait's succession crisis deepened on Monday amid a confrontation between the ailing new emir and parliament over his fitness to rule.

The row over the new emir Sheikh Saad al-Abdulla al-Sabah, who is 76 and incapacitated by illness, touches on the bitterly contested principle of alternating power between the two rival branches of the ruling al-Sabah family.

The crisis has forced parliament to postpone indefinitely regular sessions, including debate on an \$8.5 billion plan to boost oil output in partnership with foreign firms.

The succession dispute intensified when the government, led by powerful Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah, asked parliament to vote on Tuesday on Sheikh Saad's ability to take office. The new emir is due to swear his oath of office on the same day.

In an apparent bid to pre-empt the vote, Sheikh Saad asked parliament to bring forward the ceremony to Monday, but assembly speaker Jassem al-Kharafi rejected his request, lawmakers said.

Sheikh Saad became emir of this U.S. ally on January 15 after the death of his cousin. Poised to succeed him is Sheikh Sabah who has been Kuwait's de facto ruler for four years.

"We are now facing a crisis over the rule," analyst Ali al-Baghli, a former oil minister, told Reuters.

"Things are now in parliament's hands... it has a government request backed by health affidavits that the emir is not fit medically. Therefore it should look into this first before he can take the oath."

"Surely, this instability creates confusion economically and politically in the country," Baghli added.

Any step to remove Sheikh Saad would require a two-thirds majority in the 50-member assembly. Under the constitution, the cabinet can also have a medical team examine the emir and report to parliament on his health.

Sheikh Sabah took over Kuwait's day-to-day affairs four years ago due to the ill health of both Sheikh Saad and the late emir, Sheikh Jaber al-Ahmad al-Sabah. The prime minister has won support from many in the ruling family, especially his own clan.

Sheikh Sabah and the late emir hail from the family's Jaber branch which holds several key government ministries. Sheikh Saad is from the Salem wing, whose only other cabinet post is that of foreign minister.

Kuwait's cabinet last week swiftly named Sheikh Saad emir to avert rifts within the ruling family and reassure investors about the stability of Kuwait.

After Sheikh Jaber died, Kuwaiti oil officials said the country would maintain its oil policy and that energy sector operations and projects would proceed normally.

Three international consortia led by BP, ExxonMobil and Chevron are competing for Project Kuwait, which has undergone stop-start debates for more than a decade.

Kuwait sits on about one-tenth of the world's oil reserves.

Some powerful MPs oppose the project, arguing that foreign energy firms should not be allowed into the lucrative upstream sector. The project aims to raise output at the four major oilfields to 900,000 barrels per day (bpd).