

Thursday, 18 April 2013

## Kuwaiti police teargas opposition protest



Kuwaiti police fired teargas late on Wednesday to disperse thousands of people protesting against the conviction of a prominent opposition politician for insulting the country's ruler, witnesses said. Musallam al-Barrak, an outspoken former member of parliament, was sentenced to five years in jail on Monday for comments he made in a speech last year, when he urged Kuwait's emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmad al-Sabah to avoid "autocratic rule". Barrak's supporters have staged several rallies since the start of the case which has exposed deep political tensions between opposition figures and the government, headed by a prime minister picked by the emir. The OPEC member state has avoided the sort of mass unrest seen in other Arab countries. But it has been beset by political turmoil. Investment projects and political reforms have been held up by along-running power struggle between the appointed government and a series of elected parliaments. Barrak has yet to be taken into custody since the ruling. Special forces entered his guest house and a neighboring home on Wednesday but failed to find him, witnesses said. Barrak, who gave a speech at the gathering on Wednesday evening, has said he did not insult the emir. Thousands of men packed the guest house and surrounding gardens to listen to the political addresses as supporters fired guns into the air. Riot police stepped in as the supporters started taking to the streets. Barrak's legal team has filed an appeal against his conviction, his lawyer Mohammed Abdulqader al-Jassem said. "The court decided not to listen to any kind of defense and this is against all of Kuwait's rules," he said on the sidelines of the gathering. Kuwait, a U.S. ally across the Gulf from Washington's main regional adversary Iran, said Barrak was given a transparent and fair hearing. The government has said it supports freedom of speech but must apply the law in such cases. Kuwaitis staged large street protests and the opposition boycotted a parliamentary election last year after the emir changed the electoral law. The current parliament, voted enduring the last election, is seen as more pro-government. While Kuwait allows more freedom of speech than some other Gulf Arab states, the emir has the last say in state affairs and is deemed "immune and inviolable" in the constitution. He is protected from criticism by the penal code. U.S.-based Human Rights Watch has called on Kuwait to drop charges for offending the emir, saying they violate freedom of speech. It said earlier this week that at least 10 people have been convicted in recent months on related charges, including some who made comments on social media.