

# A REPORTER'S LIFE IN KUWAIT: AN HOUR IN POLICE CUSTODY

By Ben Garcia

**T**his past week, I was detained by the police while investigating a story in Farwaniya for Kuwait Times.

Let me start by saying that reporting in Kuwait isn't easy for anyone, especially for an expatriate like me. There are many challenges including a lack of official communication, lack of organized information or government statistics, language barriers and for expats especially, the nascent fear of being caught by the police while out investigating a story. One of my worst fears was realized this week when I was detained by the police for taking photos with my mobile while the police were arresting an alleged thief.

What happened was this: I was in Farwaniya in a small shopping complex when I saw a group of people gathered around a small white sedan. I moved closer to the crowd to find out what was going on and asked several bystanders for details. Shopkeepers had detained someone they suspected of using stolen civil IDs to obtain smartphones. They had called the police and were holding the suspect until the authorities arrived.

Since I was without a camera, I took a few photos with my mobile of the scene and the suspect. Many others among the crowd were taking mobile photos too. The reality is that we live in an age of 'citizen' journalism as well as social media and many photos and videos of such types of events are now common in Kuwait. Recently, a police officer was videotaped with his mobile at a police station in Kuwait forcing an expat to do pushups. Photos of car crashes taken on mobiles or fights in The Avenues captured by smartphones are now common.

After a few minutes, the police arrived to arrest the suspect and to hear the story from the shopkeepers. At that point, I again snapped a few photos of the events with my mobile. That's when one of the arresting officers saw me and called me over to him. He asked what I was doing and why I was taking photos with my phone. I tried to explain but he took my mobile from me and then asked for and seized my civil ID. The police officer then told me he was detaining me.

I asked the officer to please release me because I wasn't in anyway involved in the incident. He told me to explain this the police station because he'll be charging me with taking photos of the incident. Walking along with the police officer to the police car was quite awkward and embarrassing. I wasn't that worried, but knowing that you are being escorted to the police car was a heart-pounding and shocking experience. People were staring at me as if I was one of the robbers too. I saw Filipinos offering sympathy at my predicament with their eyes. Perhaps they were thinking I did something wrong.

But anyway, I was placed at the back of the police car with the alleged mobile phone thief. I was in shock but I remained calm. When I checked the time, it was noon and I was on my way to the Farwaniya police station. On arrival at the police station, the other suspect was taken to the jail and I was placed in a holding area. I heard one police



officer tell another that I too should be placed in the jail and that they would be filing a case against me for 'misuse of a personal mobile'. Since there are no statutes in the press and publications law with regards to personal mobiles, I wasn't sure where I stood legally.

So I called the newspaper and explained the situation to our managing editor. The

police officer explained that I had taken photos of Ministry of Interior officers without permission and this was illegal. After another half hour or so, the police officer asked me to delete all the photos from my mobile and then told me I was free to go.

There is a very negative impression of MoI officers and police stations in Kuwait, especially among the expatriate population.

I would like to say that though I was terribly shaken by the episode, the Ministry of Interior officers treated me with professionalism and courtesy. At no time was I mistreated or mishandled in any way.

At the end of the day, I was just doing my job which is to keep the Kuwait Times' readership informed. But it's all part of the life of a reporter in Kuwait.