

# Understanding Bahrain's Third Parliamentary Elections



**Policy Brief #2**

November 2006

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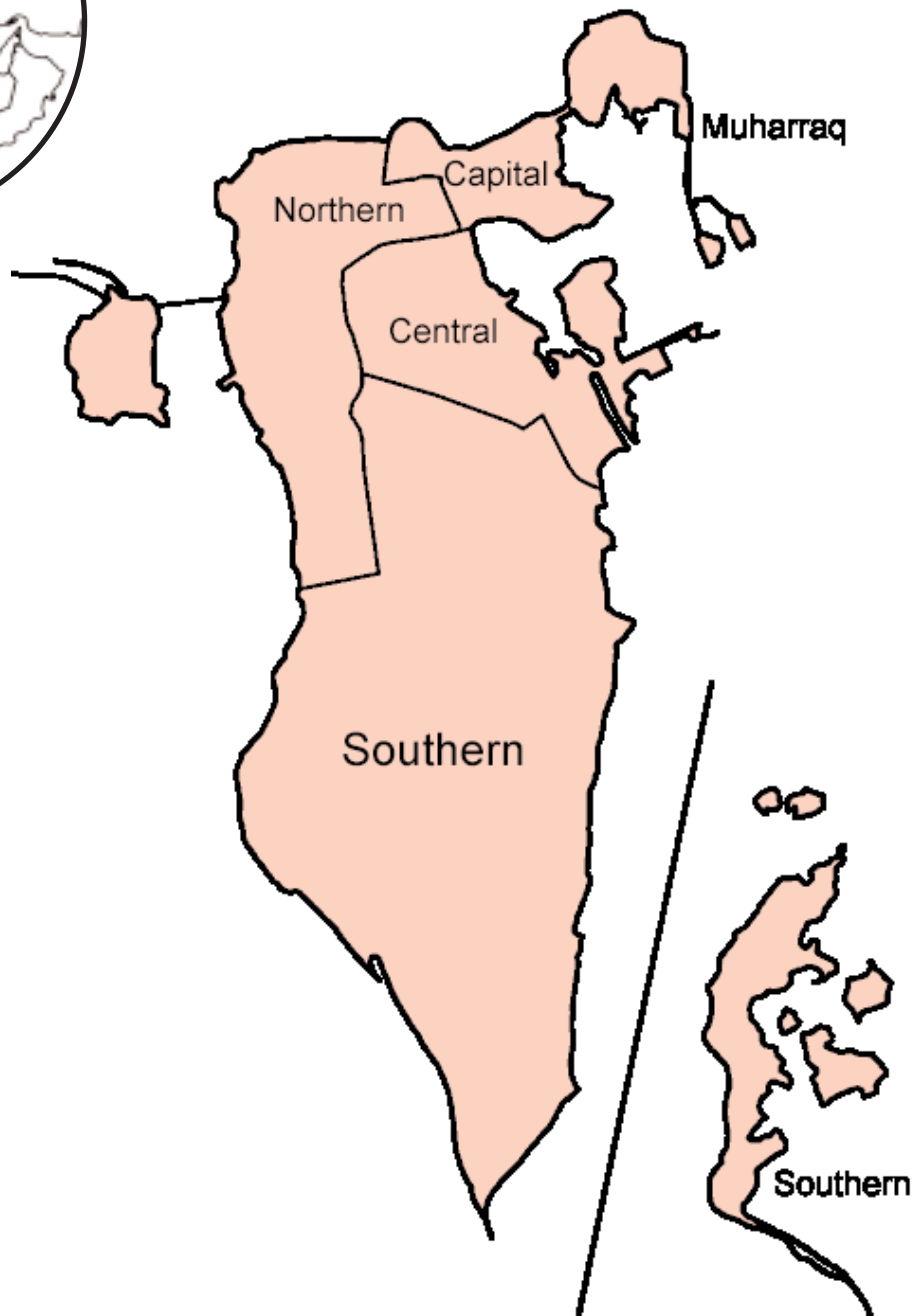
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# Facts & Figures

217 candidates will compete for 39 seats in 5 constituencies in the third parliamentary elections to be held on 25 November, 2006



# Overview of Bahrain's Elections

## *The role of the upcoming elections in Political Reform*



In Bahrain, the bicameral parliamentary elections (al-Majlis al-Watani) for 39 seats, and municipal elections for 5 municipal councils, will be held on 25th November 2006. In total 217 candidates, including 18 female candidates will run for election. In Muharraq Governorate 40 candidates are to compete for the 2006 elections, compared with only 38 in 2002, 49 compared with 49 in the Capital Governorate, 48 compared with 46 in the Northern Governorate, 55 compared with 41 in the Central Governorate, and 23 compared with 26 in the Southern Governorate.

The upcoming elections in Bahrain are particularly important as, following the elections held in 2002, they represent another important step towards political reform. However, the political reform process in 2002 was scarred as one of the major Shiite political blocs, the Al Wefaq National Islam Society, boycotted the parliamentary election in protest against the legislative rights granted to a royally appointed upper house. Furthermore, all 31 female candidates who contested the elections

failed to be elected. Yet, despite these previous setbacks, the 2006 election is still regarded as a major test of Bahraini commitment and acknowledgement to the process of political reform.

A diverse range of participants will contest the elections, each representing different constituencies and ideologies, which clearly demonstrates that identity politics will be a key factor during the campaigning, and in the final outcome of these elections. Bahrain has 16 political assemblies/blocks. In addition to Al Wefaq, other Islamist groups include Aslah, the main Salafist group which disagrees with women standing as candidates for election. Al Menbar Islamic Bloc is a Sunni Islamist Party which supports women's rights and actively campaigns for the introduction of a unified personal status law, although this clearly conflicts with the Shiite Islamists. In regard to secular groups, the National Democratic Action is the largest leftist political bloc, which also boycotted the election in 2002. The Democratic Bloc was previously the

Communist Party of Bahrain, and they strongly support political liberalisation and social freedoms. The Economist Bloc is a liberal political party. Each political bloc plays a role in reflecting the opinions and views of the Bahraini public, and these elections will show the world how Bahrain is reforming during the process of transformation into a constitutional monarchy.

To conclude, the elections scheduled for 25th November will be contested by a number of political forces, which adds to the sense of vibrancy and optimism hanging over the upcoming elections in Bahrain. Bahrain is at an important juncture in its process of political reform, and thus has the potential to act as a model of reform in the Gulf, and set into process reforming tendencies throughout the region. Moreover, the elections will allow all the people of Bahrain to perceive their identity not only as Muslims, but also as members of Bahrain by highlighting how Bahrain should reform, and also the direction which it needs to take in the future.

# Bahrain's Sunnis: Voting for Survival?

The Sunni political blocs have raised the spectre of the upcoming elections, bringing to the forefront the role of religion and identity. This makes the upcoming elections an interesting spectacle with the Shiite opposition also taking part and opening the door for a head on clash between the two. The Sunni opposition in Bahrain is represented by the Asalah- the main Salafist orientated party and the Al Menbar Islamic bloc, which is a representative of the Muslim Brotherhood. There are grounds of agreement and disagreement between the two, which are likely to come to the surface in the run up to the elections in November, 2006.

At times Al Menbar has seemed significantly more liberal than the salafist Asalah, particularly in its opposition to proposed legislation that it argues would restrict freedom of assembly. On the issue of women's political rights in Bahrain, Al Menbar MP Dr Ali Ahmed told the Bahrain Tribune (26 January 2006): "Granting women their political rights is not against Islamic precepts. Women should be motivated to achieve their aspirations and contribute to the Kingdom's development. We support women's political empowerment and want to field the best women who can win. We believe that having a female head of state or president is against religious regula-

tions, but any post below that is open to women." In 2006's general election, the party promised to field several female candidates, with eye specialist Dr Haifa Al Mahmood apparently selected; however after an electoral pact was worked out with Asalah, which opposes women candidates, Al Menbar produced an all male list of candidates. The party has though



backed women's rights activists' campaign for the introduction of a unified personal status law, which was vehemently opposed by Shiite Islamists.

The relationship between the Sunni opposition with Bahrain's Shiite Islamists, such as Al Wefaq is ambiguous. Asalah's salafist ideology sees Shiite as being misguided, which has prevented full cooperation between the 2 parties leading up to the elections. However, despite theological difference

between the 2, both are opponents of what they consider moral laxity and are ready to join forces in order to campaign together on morality issues. In fact both have criticised in the past Al Menbar for being to relaxed and flexible in relation to moral issues in Bahrain. Al Menbar has been more willing to work with Al Wefaq but its electoral alliance with Asalah has created an obstacle in its path to form a bloc with the Shiite opposition. Therefore a sense of politicking can be seen from the Islamist opposition, with formal and informal alliances and this type of relationships will characterise Bahraini politics in the future.

It will be interesting to see the gains of the Sunni opposition in the elections and if the Sunni and Shiite will be able to work together in a more constructive manner in the future to push the boundaries and parameters of political reform in Bahrain. This is in fact a necessity for political reform to be driven internally and to make full use of the limited opening which has been granted by the Bahraini state. One will have to wait and see the outcome but it is clear Bahraini opposition are at a crossroads and the wrong turning could inevitably spur the chance of political reform into the future.

# Bahrain's Shiites: Voting for a Confrontation?

The first notable point of divergence between the 2002 and the 2006 elections is the involvement of the Al Wefaq and the Islamic Action Association (Amal Islami) that boycotted the first elections. In 2002, there was widespread protest and political opposition to the legislative rights granted to the forty royally-appointed members forming the upper house (Majlis al Shura) that constituted a distinctly un-representative majority loyal to the King. However, the Shiite opposition leaders and spiritual leaders have called upon their supporters to actively participate on ballot day in the upcoming elections. The participation of Al Wefaq and Amal Islami in the upcoming elections sheds light on the different aspirations and motivations driving their desire to reform on the one hand, and the motivations driving the ruling elite on the other.

Unlike other Gulf States, Bahrain initiated its reforms in 1999 before any significant domestic or international pressure was exerted urging democratic reforms. Therefore, King Hamad's unprovoked reform process, arguably, stems from a generational change fuelled by his realisation that a new post-traditional Persian Gulf is emerging, in which tribal affiliations may no longer suffice to legitimise a ruling tribe. Therefore, since the start of his reign, King Hamad has promoted reforms characterised as liberalising, as opposed to democratising, by which he may maintain control of the pace and direction of these reforms, thus avoiding the elite's loss of political and economic privileges. Bahrain's Shiite population, on the other hand, clearly seeks a more fundamental political re-orientation that, if allowed, would undermine the current centralised power base of King Hamad by assuming political and legislative power as the majority indigenous group.

These different approaches to reform, and what they aspire to achieve, is at the core of why the upcoming elections are significant. This is clearly manifested in the political rhetoric and election campaign of Al Wefaq since it named its candidates in early October 2006. In his press conference, Al Wefaq president, Sheikh Ali Salman, promised the group's supporters that the association would fiercely work to revoke legislation passed by the outgoing parliament, and specifically mentioned the need to revoke the



Al Wefaq's Sheikh Ali Salman Commemorating Bahrain's "Martyrs"

Law of Associations, Counter-Terrorism Law and the Law of Assembly. According to Bahraini and International Human Rights Groups, these laws have been misappropriated to rein in civil liberties and dissent in the country.

Sheikh Salman also promised to work within the parliament to reform election laws criticising the division of electoral constituencies favouring Sunni tribes loyal to the Monarch. In 2002, Al Wefaq identified this divi-

sion as one of its reasons to boycott the elections. Al Wefaq did not confine its election campaigns to political questions; housing, unemployment, corruption and discriminate allocation of resources have also been key issues in Al Wefaq candidates' campaigns.

Both the soundness and the implications of forthcoming elections are a concern to observers and participants alike. Allegations of attempts to manipulate election results have surfaced, as a controversial report was leaked accusing key figures in the regime of actively using gerrymandering to disrupt the demographic composition. Opposition parties, including Al Wefaq and Amal Islami, organised a number of rallies and petitions condemning what they labelled "political naturalisation," a tool used by the government to "inflate the number of eligible voters from 36000 to 52000".

However, with Bahrain's institutional layout it gives the speaker of the appointed Majlis Al Shura the decisive vote in case both chambers come to a disagreement, the ability to affect legislation remains limited even if the Shiite opposition achieves a landslide victory. The repercussions of such a victory, however, remain the critical question for the future of Bahrain's reforms.

For the Shiite opposition, a choice must be made between accepting the King's controlled and gradualist reforms on the one hand, or a confrontational approach furthering the cause of reform based on democratisation. The latter choice is likely to trigger a 1975-style suspension of reforms and dissolution of political life in the Kingdom if the ruling elites feel a threat to their planned and controlled reform process.

# Women and the Election

In Bahrain women were given the vote and the opportunity to stand for office after wide ranging political reforms in 2001. In 2002, when women went to the polls for the first time, no female candidates succeeded in being elected, although one woman, Lateefa al Gaood, lost in a run off to a Salafist candidate, Jassim Al Saeedi.

Female candidates have complained that they are at a disadvantage as none of the popular Islamist parties have backed their candidacies. They cannot campaign in mosques, and without the backing of a political bloc they are at a financial disadvantage if they run as independents. In response, women have had to rely on support from the women's rights body, the Supreme Council for Women, which has also provided training for the candidates. However, several women have complained that this support is simply not enough for their campaigns.

Female involvement in the upcoming elections has not been without consequences. On 22 October, the Khaleej Times reported that female candidates were receiving anonymous threats and mobile phone messages telling them to withdraw from the elections. Complaints have been made to the Supreme Council for Women and the Ministry of Islamic Affairs. Allegations have been directed towards the Salafist circles because of their strong rejection of the role of women in politics and public life.

Despite these obstacles to female participation, the involvement of



## Lateefa Al Gaood

Lateefa Al Gaood became the first female candidate to be returned to Bahrain's parliament when she won by default after the other 2 candidates in her constituency in the South of Bahrain withdrew from the race in the middle of October, before the campaigning began. Ms Al Gaood is a British educated civil servant who worked for the Ministry of Finance.

women is an important step in the reform process, and a number of prominent women from Bahrain have decided to stand in the upcoming elections. The list below highlights some of the prominent women who have decided to stand in the elections:

## Dr Munira Fakhro

Dr Munira Fakhro is a former Harvard academic and Vice President of the ex-Marxist National Democratic Action. She is standing in Isa Town against Al Menbar's Dr Salah Ali



Dr. Munira Fakhro

## Fawzia Zainal

Fawzia Zainal is Head of Programme at Bahrain Radio and Television Corporation. Ms Zainal is a Sunni Muslim contesting a constituency in Riffa. She is Vice President of the Bahrain Transparency Society, and in October 2006 signed an opposition petition calling for an investigation into allegations that powerful figures in the government were fuelling sectarianism.

## Hoda Al Mutawa

Hoda Al Mutawa is a candidate in conservative Muharraq, an area that in 2002 was dominated by Asalah and Al Menbar. Ms Al Mutawa has pledged to campaign on securing adequate housing, providing medical insurance, helping the unemployed and promoting the personal status law.

# Run Up to the Election



Bahrainis Protest "Politicised Naturalisation"

✘ Protesters and opposition parties have accused the Bahraini government of extending citizenship and voting rights to migrants from other Arab countries, as well as Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India in order to dilute the voting power of the Shiite majority in the parliamentary elections.

✘ A report by former government advisor, Salah Al Bandar, describing a conspiracy by senior government officials to rig the upcoming elections to reduce the powers of Shiites has added to the tension. The report also includes hundreds of pages of supporting material, apparently authentic, including cancelled checks, hotel bills, accounting sheets and notes. The material suggests that at the very least, unusual business dealings were occurring between government officials. According to the report, this effort is led by the State Minister of Cabinet Affairs and head of the Central Informatics Organization, Sheikh Ahmad Bin Atiyatallah Al Khalifa.

✘ Bahrain's largest Shiite political society, Al Wefaq, which is planning to contest at least 19 seats in the 40-member lower house, has called for an independent probe into the report's allegations. Nine candidates, including former MP Abdulnabi Salman, have established a new alliance called the National Unity Bloc. Its platform calls for promoting constitutional reforms that would place legislative power entirely in the hands of the elected lower house, allow for the establishment of political parties, and redraw electoral constituencies

✘ Bahrain's judicial authority announced that it will for the first time fully supervise the elections.

✘ The Bahraini government is attempting to restrict the activities of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), a U.S.-based non profit organization that promotes democracy worldwide, ahead of upcoming parliamentary and

municipal elections. The head of NDI's office in Bahrain, Fawzi Guleid, was asked by immigration authorities to leave the country by May 12th because his residency had expired. According to Lulwa Al Awadi, head of the governmental Bahrain Institute for Political Development (BIPD), Guleid's residency was not renewed because NDI's activities in Bahrain violate the Law of Political Association, which prevents foreign organisations from funding political societies. Since its formation in 2005, the BIPD has demanded that NDI seek prior approval of contacts with Bahraini civic groups. NDI has rejected these demands on the basis that it operates independently in all other countries it works in (including nine Arab countries). NDI was invited into Bahrain in early 2002, ahead of Bahrain's first municipal and parliamentary elections in almost three decades. NDI announced it will continue its activities in Bahrain from its Washington office.



# Implications of the Elections on the Reform Process in Bahrain and the Gulf



The upcoming elections, in particular the conduct of the elections, will provide an indication of the commitment of the Bahraini state to political reform. It is one thing allowing elections to be held, but another allowing the elections to be enacted without interference and electoral engineering. There has already been concern raised by the oppositional blocs of state interference to minimise their presence in parliament, but one will have to wait and see if this is the actual outcome. Therefore, given the boycott of the 2002 elections by main oppositional actors, and the criticisms which were raised over the conduct of the elections, it is clear that these elections are crucial for the Bahraini state to show its willingness to reform in a real manner and move away from political semantics, which has characterised it and other Gulf states in the past.

In fact, these elections in Bahrain are coming at an interesting time, with evidence of change also being heard of in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Therefore the question emerges of whether Bahrain could unleash a

wave of political reform in the region? Could the Manama Spring spread to the rest of the Gulf region? Could Bahrain act as a beacon of political reform in the Gulf? Could Bahrain push the process of political reform in the Gulf? These questions are very appetizing, and the answers are something one will have to wait for. Despite optimism concerning Bahrain and the Gulf, questions marks still hang over the political reform process in the region.

In Bahrain the political reform process began before 9/11 and before the Iraq war in 2003 - therefore it was driven by domestic pressures and the need to reform to deal with outstanding economic, social and political issues linked to regime continuity and survival into the future. However, in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and the UAE, the reform process began post 9/11 and after the Iraq war in 2003, hence regional and international pressures were the real driving forces, rather than an initiative launched by the power brokers to encourage reform in order to allow a real say in the political system and the future of Saudi Arabia,

Qatar and the UAE. Therefore the drivers of political reform are as important as the reform process itself. This is due to the fact that the drivers indicate the nature and extent of reform which will take place. Additionally, they also indicate the level of reform which the Gulf States are likely to engage with in the future.

It is clear that there is both optimism and pessimism surrounding the forthcoming elections in Bahrain, and the wider political reform process in the region. Despite differing attitudes and perceptions towards reform, it is clear that something is happening in the Gulf and change is occurring. This in itself is a major break from the past, when the Gulf was characterised as standing still in the midst of global economic and political changes. Therefore the observation of the Gulf is important at this moment in time, and the upcoming Bahraini elections provide a useful starting point to observe the reforming tendencies of the Bahraini state, and a launching pad for the study of reform in the wider Gulf in the near future.