



ISO110 | 2018
01/10 |

EGIC
Euro-Gulf
Information
Centre

Reflecting on Gulf Democracy

Bahrain and the 2018 Elections

By Antonino Occhiuto

This November, Bahrainis will be heading to the polls for their fifth consecutive parliamentary election since 2002. Participation in the electoral process often signals the development of democratic culture. This is likely to carry positive elements for Bahrain's society and the Gulf as a whole. Developments in Bahrain often spearhead change in larger countries across the Arab Gulf and, examining the status of democracy and election competition in Bahrain may also be useful for viewing trends in neighbouring countries.

The upcoming elections, to be held on 24 November 2018, are a direct result of the democratic reforms which Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, enacted. The King focused on strengthening representative plurality by appointing, for the first time in Bahrain's history, non-Muslims and women to the Consultative Council (Shura). February 2001 marks a landmark as Bahrainis overwhelmingly backed King Hamad's proposals under which Bahrain would become a constitutional monarchy with an elected lower chamber of parliament (Nuwab) and an independent judiciary. Such progress occurred despite the scant democratic tradition, which has historically characterised the Gulf region.

Democratic developments are difficult in the Gulf and the wider Middle East and Bahrain's example is worth exploring. The turmoil that spread throughout the Arab world in 2011 generated sectarian tensions in the Kingdom. Violence by groups tied to the Islamic Republic of Iran, interested in destabilising the country, plunged Bahrain almost into a civil conflict and authorities were forced to arrest thousands of individuals to restore order. The Al-Wefaq Islamic Society boycotted the 2014 elections and tried to force other Shia, both groups and individuals, not to participate. That intimidation failed. Al-Wefaq was later excluded, in 2016, by Bahrain's judiciary due to the links that senior members of the bloc retain to Iran.

Al-Wefaq's exclusion leaves more electoral opportunities to the independent Shia candidates running in the 2018 election and to the other main parties such as the independent pro-business bloc, the Sunnis of Al-Menbar National Islamic Society, (a party that promotes a conservative agenda but is often not in contrast with the government) the Al-Asalah Salafist party and even for Bahrain's communists. All in all, Bahrain's democracy weathered the storm and is now stronger than ever before.

Bahrain and Kuwait are the Arab Gulf countries in which parliaments with elected members have the most pronounced impact on policymaking. As such, the upcoming elections retain a considerable importance due to the nature of Bahrain's parliament. Bahrain's Council of Representatives, the Kingdom's lower house, is entirely comprised by MP's elected through the ballot box. In contrast, other regional parliaments are appointed by the ruler. Bahrain's Parliament has, in the past, demonstrated its effectiveness in policymaking and even, in March 2012, voted to reject a Royal Decree issued by the King.

This election will be used to gauge the level of political participation among Bahrainis. Popular participation offers a useful indication regarding the status of democracy. The ballot box represents both the right to vote and the freedom to vote without intimidation. By turning up in significant numbers, now for the fifth time, Bahrainis would legitimise the democratic process, show trust towards the institutions and demonstrate that they are increasingly aware of the benefits deriving from participating in a democratic electoral process.

New voters should know that amid rising sectarian tensions in the Arab Gulf and the wider Middle East, inclusive democratic processes generate consensus and limit violence. This is particularly relevant in a small country, which faced high levels of sectarianism in the context of the 2011 uprisings across the Arab world. Only political participation across sects and sectors of society can guarantee that the elected members of parliament will represent the various aspirations of the Bahraini people.

Participation in the upcoming elections is also crucial to keep the momentum behind women's political empowerment in the Gulf. Bahrain has the oldest Political Empowerment Programme for women. The Princess consort of Bahrain, Shaikha Sabeeka bint Ibrahim Al-Khalifa, President of the Supreme Council for Women, spearheaded this. The programme has increased women participation rates over the five subsequent

elections. Bahrain is the only in the Arab Gulf state which had women representatives in both the lower and upper chambers of parliament and if the trend follows previous elections the number of women in parliament is expected to increase.

The Euro-Gulf Information Centre, regards the November 2018 election in Bahrain as an important milestone for the development of the Kingdom's democracy. It is worth notifying that electoral processes carry with them new levels of political participation that are needed to develop a more cohesive democratic culture. Stronger democracies in the Gulf could have a number of positive effects such as increased plurality and reduced risk of discrimination against sections of society, thus promoting peace, stability and cooperation.

01 October 2018