

A MONTHLY REVIEW OF EURO-GULF RELATIONS

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Bahrain Elections 2018 Women and the Vote



On 24 November 2018, Bahrain held its 5th consecutive parliamentary elections and all 40 seats in the lower chamber — the Council of Representatives (Nuwab) — were contested. The Council of Representatives, together with the Consultative Council (Shura) which is composed of 40 appointed members,

constitutes Bahrain's Parliament—the National Assembly. Formed in 1973 and reformed by King Hamad Bin Isa Al Khalifa in 2002, the National Assembly retains limited but significant legislative powers that contribute, in niche areas, to the country's political choices. The elections took place in the context of

a region in turmoil: the unfolding intra-Gulf dispute, the reinstatement of US-led sanctions on Iran and an assortment of failed, failing states. These all have significant repercussions in the domestic politics of Bahrain. Additionally, the aftermath of the 2011 protests have significantly shrunk the political space

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What they Mean for Iran

Developments in the Kingdom of Bahrain have, historically, acted as a prelude to changes in the wider Middle East. The 2018 elections represented an important test. Their success in-

dicated Bahrain's ability to maintain the momentum towards further democratisation, reforms and continued stability while failure could have signaled setbacks for representation to all seg-

ments of the population and could have provided Iran more opportunities to destabilise the Island—further. The success of Bahrain's 5th consecutive parliamentary elections, and the high

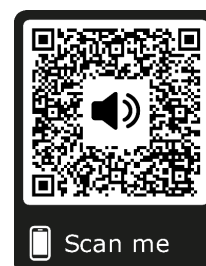
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Reflecting on Gulf Democracy

This November, Bahrain is headed 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 elections, held on 24 November 2018, were 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

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HISTORY IN FOCUS

BRITANNIA REJECTED?

THE BRITISH COUNCIL AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY IN KUWAIT, 1955-1961

This article offers a brief overview of the British Council in Kuwait between 1955 until Kuwaiti independence six years later. It shows that the Council faced formidable obstacles on its mission of cultivating cultural and educational links between Kuwait and the UK, but that a combination of astute policies and an urgent local need for high-level skills and education resulted in impressive achievements: Kuwaiti independence was not a cultural rejection of Britain.

The British Council was established in the Arab Gulf in 1955—an outcome of the British Foreign Office's growing appreciation of the economic importance of the region. It was not an easy posting. A constant problem was the high proportion of foreign Arabs, mostly Egyptians, employed locally as teachers, administrators and in other professions. Recruited by a rapidly-developing state in dire need of expertise, these men were supporters of President Nasser of Egypt and the Arab Nationalist vision which he so fervently propounded. Unsurprisingly, many of them regarded Britain with suspicion or outright hostility. The preponderance of Egyptians in the teaching profession was a potent tool in the propagation of Arab Nationalism and anti-Western sentiment, but there were other reasons why Kuwaitis resented the import of British culture. The ruling Al-Sabah family was steadily moving towards



political disengagement from the UK and was keen to assert Kuwait as culturally independent and staunchly Arab. Additionally, the

reform and saw the 'imperialistic' British as the underlying cause of continued Al-Sabah authoritarianism. Anti-British sentiment in

confidentially to London in November 1956 that 'It is impossible to say how far H.M.G.'s action has put me back and it may have done the Council prospects irreparable harm.' Long after Suez negative perceptions of Britain and its culture lingered. This was partly due to Britain's 'imperialist' image, partly to its continuing military and economic ties to the country. Muir also asserted bluntly that 'Some of the ideas for which we stand, democracy, parliamentary government, an ordered way of life, do not arouse much enthusiasm in this area; indeed sometimes they are met with mild disgust.' Despite such an unpromising state of affairs, there were grounds for optimism. The most important of these was the grudging acceptance of the high quality and value of British qualifications and expertise. Concerning language, for instance, it was recognised that the British Council was pre-eminent in 'ELT' (English Language Teaching); it was equally apparent that English was the global lingua franca and thus essential for the professional class of a modern state. Accordingly, demand for the Council's ELT services increased annually. 78 students were enrolled for advanced English in 1957, 364 in 1962 (in the same time frame membership of the Council library grew from 69 to 1131). British qualifications in other fields, such as teacher training, engineering and admin-



expanding middle class – the chief target of the Council's educational services – were enthusiastic Arab Nationalists; many were impatient with the slow pace of domestic political

Kuwait was most visible during the Suez Crisis, as Kuwaitis took to the streets in protest at this latest act of 'imperialism.' John Muir, then the Council Representative in Kuwait, wrote

Jordan, A Gateway to EU-GCC Relations

The Middle East is a region in turmoil. Conflicts rage in Yemen, Iraq and Syria, while ongoing and the future of Libya remains uncertain. In addition, the underlying causes which triggered the instability wave in the first place have not been addressed. This can potentially spark a new wave of unrest and violence in the region which would endanger the interests of countries in Europe, and the Arab Gulf and com-

promise the security of the very few countries which have, so far, remained stable in the Arab Levant. The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is a strategic partner for key regional actors. In particular, Jordan enjoys long-standing relations with strong foundations with powerful international players such as the European Union (EU), the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), and their member states, which share com-

mon concerns with regard to the ongoing instability, but have been unable to coordinate and join forces to achieve common objectives in the Middle East and North Africa. Jordan retains the potential to become a primary facilitator for future EU-GCC joint stabilisation efforts in the region. For instance, Amman carved a role for itself as a privileged interlocutor for both Western and Gulf states involved in the fight

against terrorism across the Arab Levant and the wider Middle East. Since 1996, Jordan has been regarded as a major non-NATO ally and has signed...

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JORDAN-A-GATEWAY**

istration, were also highly esteemed. The 1960-1961 annual report (written just before independence) asserted that there was a real and increasing demand for what we have to offer and ... in a territory where the people of the country, realising their own limitations and lack of qualifications and becoming increasingly irritated at their dependence on the foreign expert, are keen to improve their own education and equip themselves with the knowledge necessary to take over the running of their own affairs. Again, statistics bear this out: in 1956 there were around 90 Kuwaiti students in higher education in the UK; by 1962 there were more than 200. In terms of overcoming Britain's image problem, both Muir and his successor O.J.J. Tuckley were determined that British Council policy in Kuwait must be discrete: overt competition with the ascendant Egyptians would be suicidal, and it was considered tactless and counterproductive to try and impress the lo-

cals with pompous assertions of Britain's cultural achievements. Instead, the Council emphasised its role as a provider of language tuition and information to potential students interested in study in the UK. This non-intrusive approach appears to have paid dividends. Through diligence, resilience and undoubtedly a measure of charm, the Council won the trust of senior officials and members of the Al-Sabah family. Soon its ostensibly limited services were supplemented by a range of other activities. Council officers' expertise was called upon by several government departments: Health requested instructional films for surgeons, Education needed advice on curricula and plays in English, recently-created Broadcasting and Television required guidance in assembling a library as well as a weekly television programme on the English language (the preparation of which took up the Council officers' one free day, Friday). ELT was provided to an impressive

array of clients: bank workers, pilots, the director of the television station, a senior judge and elite officials at the Diwan (the Ruler's residence). Council officers' wives gave language classes to the wives and daughters of prominent Kuwaitis, including the Ruler's wife, Shaikha Najima. Finally, the Council performed much unacknowledged work liaising between the Kuwait government and various international agencies: for a state with little experience of this kind of interaction, and yet which wanted badly to manage independently of the British government such mediation was extremely useful. Thus, the Council acted as informal intermediaries between the government and the Danish archaeological team, whose findings from 1957 at Failaka were given pride of place in the newly constructed National Museum: Muir's brief was to ensure that the Danes did not consider plundering the artefacts! During the Kuwaiti negotiations prior to joining UNESCO in 1960, Muir

was obliged to entertain officials from the organisation and to assist in the preparation of membership documents. Foreign diplomats were also referred to the Council for information and entertainment, as were officials from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. The period from the mid-1950s to 1961 was one in which the military and political bonds connecting Kuwait to Britain were increasingly irksome to the former. However, the case of the British Council suggests the advent of an independent Kuwait in 1961 cannot be explained in terms of a cultural as well as a political rejection of Britain. On the contrary, beneath the surface of a triumphant march to independence lay a less visible undercurrent of cultural and educational engagement with Britain that actually intensified as Kuwait joined the world stage in 1961.

BY GERALD POWER

Bahrain's Diversity in its Electoral Districts

Focus on Bahrain Elections 2018

Special thanks to 'Citizens for Bahrain'

for collecting and sharing specific data regarding all electoral districts of Bahrain

Bahrain is the smallest state in the Arab Gulf and yet, the Kingdom is also extraordinarily diverse archipelago. This is apparent when looking closer at the features of the 2018 parliamentary elections. For instance, the features of its 4 Governorates, designed for electoral purposes, resemble several characteristics, such as religious and socio-political diversity, also present in larger neighbouring countries. As such by comparing and contrasting trends across Bahrain, it is also possible to get an understanding of the political balance in the wider region.

Muharraq Governorate-

Seven out of eight electoral districts in Muharraq are traditionally composed by mainly Sunni municipalities. Muharraq is experiencing the decline in support for established political groups. In the 2014 elections this constituency has been a fierce battleground for leading Sunni societies like Minbar and Asalah. Although key candidates from the previous parliament are formally standing as independents, first-time representatives from the two aforementioned Sunni societies are expected to outperform both other groups and their former members who are running independently. Turnout during the 2014 elections reached 85% among eligible voters in 2018 it reached roughly 70%. Media surveys of voters have found voter priorities in this constituency to include housing, living standards, education

and improving public infrastructure. Whereas the countryside areas tend to be Minbar or Asalah strongholds, urban areas of Muharraq island are expected to favour an independent loyalist candidate. Lack of suitable jobs for young graduates and lack of activities for younger people is likely to drive an Islamist surge in Muharraq's suburban areas. Al-Minbar, a society which in the past was affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, is expected to increase its popularity among young voters in deprived areas.

Capital Governorate-

The Capital Governorate is certainly the area in which the sectarian divide has had historically a less relevant impact on electoral results. For instance, the second constituency, characterised by an estimated 80% Shiite population, witnessed in 2014 the victory of Ibtisam Hijres, a female Sunni MP. Her election signalled hope of overcoming sectarian and gender divisions. Many of the urban Shia from the Ajam community residing in Manama have shown a tendency to send apart from Al-Wefaq and the mainstream opposition. Many established Ajam families are staunchly loyalist and ignored al-Wefaq's election boycott in the past. Conversely, both the third and fourth constituencies, which cover most of the city's suburban and residential areas, are set to be heavily impacted by Al-Wefaq's decision not to run in 2018. These are traditional-

ly Al-Wefaq's strongholds. Many of this society's candidates have decided not to run, either to follow the party line or because they received multiple intimidations. As such there is a strong risk that this part of the city would be left without proper representation. On the other hand, the rise of independent moderate Shia candidates is expected throughout the governorate.

Northern Governorate-

The Northern Governorate includes areas which have been the epicentre of the post-2011 unrest. So, unsurprisingly, in 2014 the boycott was very strong here and voter turnout was only around 8%. For instance, the Governorate includes the Diraz constituency, home of Ayatollah Isa Qassim, spiritual leader of the disbanded Al-Wefaq Islamic Society, who in 2014 was leading the call for a boycott of the parliamentary elections. In 2014 candidates themselves came reportedly under pressure: Mahmoud Al-Jamri withdrew his candidacy and Hussain Al-Hamar's decided not to run after his car was set alight by militants. The third constituency marks an exception within the governorate. It encompasses many of the Sunni localities along the north of Bahrain's west coast, like Budaya, Hamala and Jasra which have been, throughout history, very supportive of the Al-Khalifa ruling family. In 2014 turnout reached 65% in this area. In the past, local elites tended to perceive the elections in

this precinct mostly as a contest to show which tribe was more influential and hence it would be very relevant to analyse the results of this year's run.

Southern Governorate-

This Governorate, despite its low population density, is by far Bahrain's largest and most diverse one with significant distinctions between North and South. Northern constituencies are the most likely to require a second round following what is expected to be a three-way contest between three prominent Sunni political societies: Al-Asalah, Al-Minbar and the National Unity Gathering. For example, in 2014 the Salafists of Al-Asalah won the first constituency following the second round and only by a narrow margin. Most electoral constituencies in the central and southern part of the Southern Governorate are characterised of having a mixed population between Sunnis and Shiites. Overall turnout in the Southern government is the second highest, after Muharraq only, and most constituencies will go to a second round in which the candidate who has alienated the least amount of voters is likely to have the upper-hand. The tenth constituency, comprising the southern edge of the main island and the Hawar islands, needs a special mention. This is the constituency with by far the smallest number of voters in Bahrain and in which interest in the election process is rapidly declining. Compared to

other Southern constituencies where participation of over 80% has been the norm in 2014, in this constituency's turnout was 45% and is expected to further decline

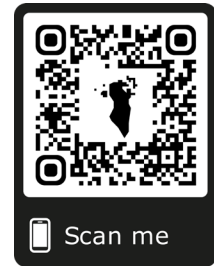
Despite their unique characteristics, the examination of Bahrain's electoral constituencies shows that there is a common trend. Bahrainis are increasingly less attracted by the traditional establishment represented by both loyalist candidates

and opposition parties. In 2018 both independent candidates and Islamists are expected to increase their share of the vote. Lack of political participation, especially in the Northern Governorate and in the Hawar islands, should be monitored and addressed to avoid inadequate representation and further marginalisation. The Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC) believes that independently from their result, elections

can provide very useful insights regarding voters priorities and the direction the country is taking. The secrecy of the choice and the ballot box represent the ultimate mean available to citizens to express expectations and grievances.

BY ANTONINO OCCHIUTO

SPECIAL THANKS TO
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50 Years Ago... Focus on Bahrain Elections 2018

50 Years Ago... The United Kingdom readied itself to redeploy out of the Arab Gulf, the USSR and US were still snuggled in détente, Iran had a Shah while the Rolling Stones' 'Sympathy for the Devil,' sat atop the charts. Then, as now, the call for democracy echoed. On Czechoslovak streets — from Prague to Bratislava and everything in between — the 1968 call for elections, for democracy, for tolerance was met by Soviet tanks, arrests, violence. The Prague Spring was not aborted, it was stifled. Since those bloody days, Czechs, Slovaks and all the others behind the Iron Curtain worked hard to shed their communist dictatorship pasts and then march forward, albeit with the occasional teeter, to build democratic states anchored in the political, social, economic and military folds of Europe and the wider West. Many have sought to liken the Prague Spring to the so-called Arab Spring, but the comparison is hollow. There are no real points of convergence with the exception of the use of the

term democracy—but not democracy itself. For the Czechs and Slovaks that sought change and resisted Soviet occupation, democracy had a very different meaning then for those that took up arms in Yemen or waded into the sectarianism and tribalism of the wider Middle East. In some places, the word democracy has become an aphrodisiac and it is used so wildly so as to eclipse other political motives and justify violence. Think about Bahrain. Iran-backed militias — like Hezbollah and Saraya al Ashtar — use the term democracy to justify arming Bahraini citizens to attack other Bahraini citizens. And despite the fact that such groups want to recreate Iran's Islamic Republic in Bahrain, to overthrow the country's leadership and replace it with a theocracy in Khomeini's image, many in Europe and the wider international community are quick to criticise Bahrain's government for taking actions to curtail violence and protect its citizens. It seems that the Rolling Stones did more than



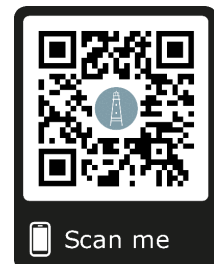
sing, they predicted! The case of Bahrain shows that too many have sympathy for the devil as long as the devil justifies his actions in the language of democracy.

As Bahrain headed to the polls in its 5th consecutive parliamentary elections it is essential to underline the fact that these were free and fair. The candidates came from across the political spectrum: women and men, Shia and Sunni, Christian and Jewish, socialist and pro-business. This is an election to celebrate and while Bahrain has its political problems — all states do — it is really time to let it make its own adjustments to reflect

the interests of its people. With so many wars raging on in the Middle East, Bahrain's impending battle for parliamentary seats is a sign of real, not rhetorical, democracy—and no one will die in the process.

BY MITCHELL BELFER

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Correcting the Myths

Focus on Bahrain Elections 2018

With election fever gripping the Kingdom of Bahrain, it is striking to see the contrasting opinions in the international press. While some are very keen to point out that the Middle East remains a region awash in sectarian and political violence and that Bahrain is part of a very small group of Arab states to have turned their energies to more democratic means — such as holding meaningful democratic elections — others seek to vilify Bahrain through exaggerations and misrepresentations. Two myths need to be corrected in that regard.

Myth 1: Al Wefaq was Dissolved Because it is Shia

The Al Wefaq National Democratic Action Society was not dissolved because its leaders and membership are of the Shia sect. Instead, the bloc (a puritan, Shia Islam-centric society) was dissolved, and many in its leadership arrested, because of its links to enemies of the state—notably those with evidenced connections to Iran and an assortment

of Iranian-backed terrorist groups operational in Bahrain. For instance, Hezbollah, Saraya al-Ashtar Brigades, the Youth of February 14, Sacred Defence Bahrain...and the list goes on. Additionally, serious accusations have been made against the leader of the Al Wefaq bloc — Ali Salman. He is accused of inciting violence and of working with agents from other states (re: Qatar and Iran) to the detriment of internal stability in Bahrain. Finally, Al Wefaq's spiritual leader, Ayatollah Isa Qassim (part of Iran's Qom elite and, previously, part of Khomeini's inner circle) has been stripped of his Bahraini nationality due to inciting people to violence. In other words, the Al Wefaq was dissolved because of its behaviour not the sect of its members. Alternative explanations are simply false

Myth 2: Al Wefaq is Not the Only Shia or Only Opposition Group in Bahrain.

Many depictions of Al Wefaq regard it as the only 'opposition' group in Bahrain.

This is patently false and inflates the importance of the bloc while understating the plurality of the country's parliamentary system. Al Wefaq boycotted the 2014 elections in a bid to increase the international perception that they alone represent the country's Shia community and hence is the only true opposition group. However, the boycott only served to further splinter an already splintered sect — 'the Shia' is a misnomer since there are several Shia groups living in Bahrain notably the Ajam and the Baharna — since Al Wefaq began a campaign to intimidate non-Al Wefaq Shia from running. The bloc attempted to assert a near hegemonic control over the Island's Shia community. But, Al Wefaq bloc was not the only Shia representation or the only opposition group in the country. Other parties — that do not have external support — are very active on the political field such as: 1. Progressive Democratic

Society 3. Al Wahdawi 4. Al Ekha 5. Nationalist Democratic Assembly The reasons being Al Wefaq's dissolution may be a matter of international interest, but it was also a matter of Bahrain's domestic politics where it was regarded as a threat to the constitutional order under construction. These points may stir debate and discourses. However, beyond debate is that Bahrain's political system is based on pluralism and Al Wefaq is not the opposition. With the region in turmoil, the holding of democratic elections in the smallest of the Arab Gulf states sent a message far beyond the shores of the Island. The inter-candidate competition, the participation of socialists, business people, Sunnis, Shias, Christians, Jews (etc) shows that the politics of the Middle East need not come from the barrel of a gun, but may also come through the ballot box.

BY JASMINA AMETI



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What they Mean for Iran

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voter turnout signals that a true democratic culture has been anchored among the Kingdom's body politic (re: civil society). Turning to the polls was the ultimate reflection of a people that peacefully express grievances and insulate themselves from the radical aspiration of extremists and external actors that seek to export violent sectarianism — between Sunnis and Shiites — for their own agenda. Topically, in International Relations, is the notion that democratic dyads are war averse. Bahrain fits that model well. Many would like to see the elections blighted, however. Contested results and political violence would plunge Bahrain into an uncertain future and is on the agenda of some in the international community. This is particularly worrying since uncertainty is precisely what Iran's military-political-theological leaders pray for (literally, in the case of Khamenei). They want chaos between the sects so

they could 'legitimately' intervene and swoop in to establish control over Bahrain—a long-term objective of Tehran from even long before 1979. The Islamic Republic has a long history of using Shiite communities across the Arab Gulf and the Levant to create parallel states loyal to Tehran, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon or to project its power in the region as it did by supporting militias in the ongoing conflicts in Syria, Iraq and Yemen. Bahrain, with its estimated 55% Shiite population has, so far, been prudent enough to steer clear of Iranian meddling; mostly because the Shiites of Bahrain are nationalist first—they are Bahraini before being Shiite. It is vital that Bahrain continues to develop independently, in its own way, at its own pace so to transition into what its people and leaders want. Otherwise, the risk is great that Iran turns Bahrain into yet another offshoot of the Islamic Republic.

BY ANTONINO OCCHIUTO



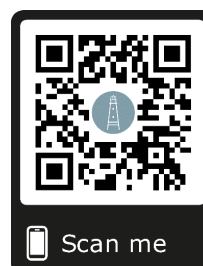
Religious Tolerance in a Changing Gulf

The Arab Gulf is rapidly changing. The ambitious 2030 economic diversification programmes carried out by most members of the Gulf Cooperation Countries are set to reshape the economic landscape of the region, traditionally reliant on oil income, for years to come. The lack of international attention has, however, characterised another important shift which entails long term implications: the unprecedented focus of the leadership in key Gulf countries to promote religious tolerance while tackling Islamism and extremist preaching in a region which has long suffered from jihadi violence and from which a considerable number of terrorists have been recruited from. The landmark 2018 summit, held in Dubai, UAE, which involved more than 15 international and local universities, focused on the crucial role of women and the youth in spreading tolerance. This is only the latest of a series of initiatives aiming to prevent religion can be used as a weapon to divide. As a matter of fact, Gulf momentum behind the focus on religious tolerance was generated by the 2017 Manama Declaration, issued by Bahrain's King

Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, in which Bahrain's leader called for pluralism, the unequivocal rejection of compelled religious observance, and strongly condemned acts of violence, abuse and incitement in the name of religion. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud, as part of his efforts to modernise the Kingdom, has also demonstrated on several occasions, how one of his top priorities is ensuring that the country's youth and future generations are not contaminated by extremist preaching and teaching. A crackdown on Islamist teachers and schools, stripping the religious police of arrest powers and expanding the space for women in public life, represents an important step to guide Saudi Arabia towards a more moderate form of Islam and modernity. Due to the Arab Gulf's growing economic indicators and a large, youthful population, the changes which are currently undergoing are likely to affect the region for the foreseeable future. This is particularly important considering the increasing importance of the Gulf in the Middle East, North Africa, and beyond.

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Women and the Vote

Focus on Bahrain Elections 2018

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in Bahrain. However, such a challenging background makes it even more pertinent to focus on the candidates running for office in the country especially since one of the more captivating factors seems to be the unprecedented number of women candidates who submitted their candidacy. A total of 430 candidates — 293 for parliament, 173 for municipal councils — ran in the country's four Governates. Women ran in all four. Among them, seven women (including first-time contenders) ran as independents in Muharraq, where more than one-fourth of the total 365,467 citizens eligible to vote reside. A survey of their electoral campaigns highlights the many issues concerning the candidates, focusing on economic challenges the country faces. The complex dynamics correlating sovereign debt, the recently introduced tax policies and the protection of Bahrain's generous welfare are indeed pivotal questions in the political debate. In a statement to the local press, 9th constituency nominee, Dr Zahra Haram, declared that: 'The involvement of women in this process is without hyperbole extremely necessary and, thank God, we have seen a significant number.' Another candidate, architect Aliaa Rashid Al Junaid, shared a similarly confident message

on her Instagram account: 'There have been efforts to empower women politically and there are now better opportunities for women to succeed in elections.' In fact, less than 20% of the members in the previous parliament, between both chambers, were women. Yet, women's involvement in Bahrain's parliamentary politics has been a growing trend. While both men and women were granted the right to vote in 1973, it was only within the framework of the 2002 constitution that women they also became eligible to run for political office. That year, in the country's first democratic election in nearly 30 years, 8 women candidates ran for office, but none of them secured spots in parliament. In the following elections (2006), 18 women ran for office and Latifa Al Quod, who had narrowly lost in 2002, secured a historic win and became the first woman elected to parliament in the country and one of the first in the Gulf. A few years later, in 2011, another glass ceiling was shattered as four women won seats in the Kingdom's parliament including Sawsan Al Taqawi, who became the first Shiite woman to enter the Nuwab. In 2014, three women over a record number of 22 female candidates, won seats in the Council of Representatives. The expecta-

tion is that this round will see an even better result for women parliamentarians. Bahrain's wider context, of the instruments and initiatives to empower women and of the achievements of its female citizens, is encouraging. For instance, according to the 2017 Annual Gender Gap Report of the World Economic Forum (WEF), Bahrain is near to closing the gender gap in key indicators such as enrolment in all stages of education and wages as well as ranking top in the region for economic participation and opportunities. In fact, in 2017, women made 49% of public sector employees, in the executive, legislative and judicial branches and in diplomatic activities, and 34% of private sector employees, with female entrepreneurs holding 47% of active commercial registrations. In other words, Bahraini women seem to have reached a mature stage of involvement in the Kingdom's public life and there certainly appears to be an abundance of female citizens qualified to participate in the Kingdom's parliamentary politics. Interestingly, a similar argument was advanced by Hala Al Ansari, the Secretary General of the Supreme Council for Women, a government body tasked with elevating the status of women in the country, in the debate on

a quota system for women. Such a system, which would guarantee a minimum of women in office, is rejected by Al Ansari who argued in the local press that: 'Public life, and specifically political activism, must be based on fair competitiveness and logical sustainability without the need to introduce temporary measures that restrict voters' right to choose and make them deal with Bahraini women as a minority.' While quota systems might favour those who are not necessarily the most experienced or the best-suited for the job, she further argues, it would be better for associations and civil society organisations to further support women to get elected working to boost community awareness about the significance of women's participation in public life. Indeed, while a large number of women stepped forward in these elections, a crucial test for gender parity in Bahrain will also be when measuring the voters' confidence in those candidates and their ability and stamina to contribute to the country's development at such a critical time.

BY CINZIA BIANCO



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WOMEN IN THE GULF

Exploring the evolution of the political, economic and social status of women in the wider Arab Gulf region.

EGIC.INFO/WOMEN-IN-THE-GULF

Reflecting on Gulf Democracy Focus on Bahrain Elections 2018

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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 left 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-Men-

bar 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 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 were used to gauge the level of political participation among Bah-

rainis. 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 legitimised the democrat-

Participation in the elections has been 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.

BY ANTONINO OCCHIUTO



GULF MONITOR

The latest events through our insights, analyses and explanations of the unfolding dynamics in the Arab Gulf states.

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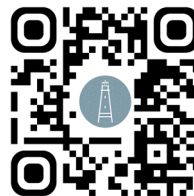
The Euro-Gulf Information Centre (EGIC) is an initiative that aims to build social, political, strategic, cultural and economic bridges between the people of Europe and the Arabian Gulf.

While the EGIC was only formed on 01 October 2015 as a legal association in Rome, Italy, it draws on the expertise of a multitude of scholars, policy makers, economists and members of European and Gulf civil societies to enhance inter-regional relations.

The EGIC has tasked itself with 5 activities over the short, medium and long terms:

- **Publishing Hub**—the first objective of the Centre is to act as a publishing hub on information related to the wider Arabian Gulf. This entails the launching of a new journal (re: The Arabian Gulf), book series, policy papers and newsletters. Literature will be made available in several languages (Arabic, English, Italian, German, French and several of the Slavonic languages) and be done in both hard and soft copy formats.
- **Seminars, Conferences and Roundtables**—in order to continue to attract attention for the Centre, a series of seminars, conferences and roundtable discussions will take place on a regular basis.
- **Specialised Certificate, Internships and Scholarship Programmes**—the EGIC will begin a targeted certificate programme for university-aged students, run as Spring Schools. Themes will vary, but stay related to European-Arabian Gulf dynamics. Also, the EGIC will also offer a 3 month internship based on the European ERASMUS Programme. This programme will focus on building the skill-set required of a socio-political organisation and includes: organisational, writing, presentation and innovative thinking skills. Finally, the EGIC will offer monthly and annual scholarships for research on Arabian Gulf-related topics.
- **Cultural Events**—the EGIC strives to offer a comprehensive cultural platform to expose the people of Europe and the Gulf to each other's cultural rites, rituals, festivals and writings. From book launches, poetry readings, talks, films and cookery, the EGIC aims to bring people together.
- **Web and Tech**—the EGIC has adopted a tech-savvy approach that entails the use of high-tech platforms to generate an interactive platform beyond the physical boundaries of the EGIC headquarters. All EGIC research and events will be made Open Access and the deployed technologies will reflect this approach.

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www.egic.info
info@egic.info

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