

# Bahraini Women and Municipal Elections:

A failure or a step towards the future?

## An Analytical View

By the AWAL Women Society

### Background Information:

Since coming to power in 1999, King Shaikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa of Bahrain has initiated important political reforms. Whether these reforms are a sincere attempt at democratic reform or a limited appeasement of the internal opposition is the challenge at hand. A review of the recent changes in Bahrain may shed light on how this small nation can move to a stable democracy that respects the rights of all its citizens, including women. We will have to determine the nature of these reforms and whether they will concretely take Bahrain on the road to participatory democracy. The starting point of these reforms was in February 2001, when Bahrain held a plebiscite in which an overwhelming proportion of Bahrainis approved the National Action Charter, a series of wide-ranging proposals for democratic reforms.

Bahrain is an archipelago of 33 islands in the Persian Gulf that gained independence from Britain in 1971, and adopted a constitution and elected a National Assembly in 1973. The majority of Bahrain's population of 650,000 is Shi'a Muslims, yet a Sunni Muslim family, the Al-Khalifa family, has ruled the country for the last 200 years.

Bahrain's fledgling democracy was aborted in 1975 when Emir Isa bin Salman al-Khalifa dissolved the National Assembly and ruled by decree until his death in 1999. The 1973 Constitution became the rallying cry for opposition groups who organized pro-constitution petitions, demonstrations and civil disobedience. The government reacted by clamping down on political freedoms suppressing political dissidence, giving rise to more unrest and violence, which peaked in the mid 1990s.

Soon after ascending the throne, King Shaikh Hamad announced that he would work towards national reconciliation. He reversed decades of suppression of political dissidents, released political prisoners, invited exiles to return home, and repealed emergency state security laws and courts. In February 2002, he transformed Bahrain from an emirate into a kingdom, introduced an amended constitution that established a bicameral legislature, and set the stage for municipal and national elections. In May 2002, Bahrain held municipal elections for the first time in almost five decades, and parliamentary elections are scheduled for October. For the first time, women are eligible to vote and to run for office.

The following is an analysis presented to Al-Raida by the AWAL Women Society in Bahrain.

The Awal Women Society (AWS), founded in 1967, is one of the leading women's organizations in Bahrain. AWS is dedicated to improving the lives of Bahraini women by increasing women's rights and participation in development and by opposing all forms of discrimination against women. Their past accomplishments include activities to eradicate female illiteracy, promote family education, and to educate and train women in their human rights and increase their participation in all parts of Bahraini society.

Undoubtedly, women in Bahrain deserve recognition for the participation of Bahraini woman candidates in the recent municipal elections (held in May 2002). Their strong belief in the importance of women's participation has resulted in women accounting for 10 percent of the total candidates. Such a percentage is considered to be high compared with other Arab countries and reflects women's confidence in their abilities to

deal with the municipal affairs. By participating strongly in the elections, these women have proved once again the pioneering role of Bahraini women over the last eight decades in many fields.

If women candidates did not win a single seat in the first municipal elections held in Bahrain, the mere fact that they were eligible to participate in those elections requires a comprehensive and serious analysis of the status of women candidates and the general circumstances in Bahrain. In order to accomplish this, a women's organization must conduct a detailed study to identify the real reasons why women did not win a single seat in the municipal elections.

We will try to present a quick analysis of the comments made in the last few days by local and international media on this historic event. The comments mainly concentrated on one headline: 'Not a single woman has won a seat in Bahrain's municipal elections'. The results of the elections were disappointing to many local, Arab and international observers since allowing women to vote and participate as candidates, reflects the wishes of many people who have been looking for a better status for Bahraini women.

We should also not ignore the importance i.e. significance of how boys and girls are brought up to think about the role of women. According to most men, women should be hidden and if they come out into the open, they should take a backseat to men. Such thinking, in addition to the family and school upbringing, continues to present women in their traditional role.

The current era of political reform in Bahrain has seen the rise of Islamic, democratic and liberal forces. However, these forces have not succeeded in erasing the dominant Bahraini thinking about women's role in society. Instead, many have attempted to demean the leadership potential of women and have used their power to maintain the traditional role of women. The view that women should participate in society by following a plan set by male leaders is deeply ingrained in the minds of citizens. This thinking was reinforced in the election campaign when some Islamic political societies failed to support female candidates, despite their popularity among women.

Is it possible that a woman could win an election within this social and political context? Although the answer is negative, it does not negate the hard work and perseverance of the female candidates, who used sophisticated, intelligent and civilized methods to reach out to voters. They have proven their ability to intelligently debate and discuss social and political issues as political candidates representing this diverse nation.

The backgrounds of the female candidates in the municipal elections are impressive. Among the candidates, 50 percent have Bachelor of Science degrees, reflecting high academic abilities. They have excellent proven employment records and play highly administrative roles in their professional fields. Eighty percent of the candidates are over 40 years old. Despite their experience, and academic and professional records, the general public did not seem to find these qualifications important in the selection of their candidates.

Forty eight percent of the women have a lengthy and strong record of volunteer work in civil society. An additional 13 percent have a shorter record of volunteer service showing that the majority of women have practical experience dealing with the public through their voluntary charitable service.

Another observation is that about 80 percent of the female candidates were in districts with more than six candidates. Having such a large number of candidates meant that there are fewer votes for each candidate, thus decreasing the opportunities for women in these districts. Many of the candidates tended to receive a large number of their votes from relatives, friends and neighbors. Many eligible voters did not even bother to go to the ballot boxes when they knew that their candidate had already had wide support in the community. It is also surprising that in about 55 percent of the districts, there was more than one female candidate.

We believe that it is important to conduct a detailed analysis of the percentages of votes won by the women in the elections compared to their qualifications, professional experience and involvement in community service. This analysis will reinforce the perception that the average voter desires women to remain in the "back seat" or as others might simply put it 'a man's wife' with no other role.

An important issue that we will examine is how far ladies' societies supported female candidates in the municipal elections. Before the elections, some of the women's civil societies made the decision to play an important role in the municipal elections. Both the Bahrain Women Society and the Bahrain Society for Ladies decided to support one of their members as a candidate. Both societies provided support and formed an electoral committee to assist both candidates. Furthermore, both the Bahrain Young Ladies Society (BYLS) and Awal Women Society (AWS) formed special electoral committees to support women in the municipal elections, and laid out goals for these elections in order to increase female participation.

AWS and BYLS created campaign slogans based on their election goals. AWS' slogan was 'Vote, the future

is yours', while the BYLS slogan was 'Vote, participation is a right and responsibility'. Both slogans voice the importance of the right of women to participate in the electoral process. To strengthen this message, both societies organized seminars and awareness meetings to educate women on how to select appropriate candidates. These meetings were held in all-female gathering places such as 'matams' in order to maximize attendance.

The two societies also coordinated with the National Democratic Institute (NDI), to conduct a training workshop for members of civil society. The purpose of the workshop was to raise participants' awareness on how to work and interact within a democracy. Another aim of the workshop was to educate participants on how to plan and conduct election campaigns. More than 150 people attended the workshop, with women making up 51 percent of the group. We believe that this demonstrates that the goals set by both societies have been successfully achieved.

To further support female candidates, both societies held separate meetings with the women to review the difficulties they faced before and during the campaigns. Although both societies provided support for the female candidates, some of whom are active members, neither society chose one particular candidate to represent them. Both societies have taken this stand because they believe that all women should have equal support and that choosing a specific candidate would

be detrimental to increasing the numbers of female voters and candidates.

After the disappointing results of the municipal elections, we call on all women's societies to adopt slogans for the upcoming legislative elections such as 'A parliament is incomplete without a woman'. It is the responsibility of all women's societies to work together to achieve the above slogan and to promote women in the next parliamentary elections in October 2002.

In order to achieve this goal, the support of all national, democratic and progressive Islamic movements is required to maintain Bahrain's image as a pioneer of democracy in the region. Women's movements should form a consensus on what qualities and characteristics in women candidates will generate approval from all political groups in society. This is one of the difficult but important tasks that must be accomplished. Bahraini political societies (parties) will have to prove in the next elections whether or not they believe that women can succeed as members of parliament.

We hope that the success of creating a voice for women in parliament will serve as the foundation upon which a strong and developed women's civic movement will thrive.

[Thanks to Katie Croake for her editorial contributions]



*Renew Your  
Subscription Now*