

PERSPECTIVES

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BAHRAIN TOO, GOES TO THE POLLS [Part II]

BY SCOTT DAVID McINTOSH

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EDITORS NOTE:

November 8, 2002 GulfWire published a report on Bahrain in the context of its recent parliamentary elections. That report, which focused on the Arab island-state's position in regional and international affairs, also provided context and perspective with regard to the longstanding, special, and multifaceted relationship between Bahrain and the United States. The following report, by Scott David McIntosh, of the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, zeroes in on the elections themselves. In it, he provides analysis of the domestic dynamics of a GCC member-state that for reasons of its relatively small size and the fact that its economic resources are more meager than those of its neighbors, is insufficiently understood.

Patrick W. Ryan

Editor-in-Chief, GulfWire

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The Kingdom of Bahrain conducted its first nationwide parliamentary elections in more than a quarter of a century from October 26-31, 2002 building on municipal elections that were held this past spring. The following report looks at the elections in the context of Bahrain's history as the oldest oil-producing country among the GCC member-states.

BIRTHPLACE OF THE OIL BOOM

Bahrain's geography has shaped its position and role in regional trade. Transporters of goods have long used the archipelago as a stopping point; millennia of trade have resulted in a country whose 600,000 inhabitants come from a variety of ethnic, regional, and religious backgrounds.

In the modern era, a more finite and depletable commodity thrust Bahrain onto the global stage. The oil hidden in the sands was nothing new to the Bahrainis; for thousands of years they had used natural surface tar as a fixative, an ingredient in medicine, and in various other ways.

In the early 20th century, however, the value of oil increased considerably with the development of a new generation of machines lubricated and powered by petroleum-based oils and oil distillates. In the wake of

these revelations, a worldwide search for oil reserves began.

Having gained permission from Bahraini Amir Shaikh Hamad Al-Khalifah, the Standard Oil Company of California (Chevron) commenced to drill for oil through its subsidiary, the Bahrain Petroleum Company (BAPCO). As Bahrain was then a British protected-state, the company was registered in Canada,

which was a British dominion. In 1932, these efforts resulted in the discovery of the first major oil fields on the Arab side of the Gulf. The discovery of oil and its subsequent production and export brought substantial amounts of new capital into Bahrain's economy. Although it replaced by a considerable degree Bahrain's previous income from one of the world's most famous sources of natural pearls, the total volume of oil discovered in Bahrain turned out to be relatively small compared to the amounts found later in other countries.

As a result, Bahrain's leaders were forced to seek ways to diversify the country's economy, which they did. Today Bahrain, serving as a base of operations for over 100 banks, has grown into a major financial and investment center in the Middle East.

EDUCATING BAHRAINIS

Bahrain's first modern school was founded in 1919, more than two decades earlier than some polities elsewhere in the Gulf; it would be the forerunner of two major Universities, Bahrain University and the Arab Gulf University (AGU). AGU, the first institution of its kind in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf states, and a venture intended to serve not just Bahrain but the needs of all the Arab Gulf countries, was the culmination of a 1979 cooperative effort by the Arab Gulf states' ministers of education.

For decades, in pursuit of their higher education, many Bahrainis went to the American University in Beirut. At one point in the early 1980s, a majority of the members of the country's council of ministers (cabinet) were reportedly either graduates of AUB or had earned certificates in non-degree programs there.

Today over 650 Bahraini students study abroad yearly. Although the United States served as host for the majority of Bahraini students studying abroad prior to September 11, 2001, new U.S. Patriot Act restrictions on student visas from many Arab and Islamic countries have forced Bahraini students to pursue their higher education elsewhere. The resulting disruption has broken the previous trend of Bahraini and other Arab students coming to the United States to obtain their education. Previously, upon completion of their studies abroad, the students would return home in most cases to assume positions of leadership in the public and private sectors.

In the short term, America's loss in helping to educate and train the coming generation of many Arab and Muslim leaders has not been without cost to both sides. At America's expense, the new trend is two-fold. In one, Bahraini and other Arab and Muslim students are either not being allowed to enter or return to the United States.

In the other trend, such students, upon entry and re-entry, are being subjected to what most regard as degrading mandatory requirements that they be fingerprinted and photographed upon arrival as well as expected to provide personal data never required before. All of the collected data on such students is deposited in a file to which U.S. naturalization, immigration, intelligence, and security officials may be granted access. Very rapidly, what was previously considered a net benefit to the United States and Bahrain alike has become, by default, Australia, Canada, Great Britain, Ireland, and New Zealand's gain.

THE ROAD TO CONSTITUTIONAL MONARCHY

The long reign of H.H. Shaikh Isa bin Salman al-Khalifa (1965-1999) brought considerable change to Bahrain in the last third of the twentieth century. While Shaikh Isa presided over the successful modernization of the country's economic system and transformed Bahrain into a key financial center in the Gulf, changes to the island-state's political system did not come as easily. Bahrain's first attempt at representative democracy lasted less than three years. A constitution was drafted after Great Britain ended its protected-state rule of Bahrain in 1971, and within a year elections were held for a constituent assembly. After another year, the constitution came into effect and parliamentary elections were held. The newly elected parliament, however, could hardly have commenced its proceedings in an atmosphere that was less favorable or in a moment less propitious for calm and reasoned debate and deliberation. It was convened under an atmosphere of exceptional volatility -- in October 1973 the effort to evict Israel from the Sinai Peninsula, which it had invaded in June 1967 and occupied ever since, began.

Soon thereafter, numerous Arab countries decided to embargo their export of oil to the United States, Great Britain, and the Netherlands in reaction to their perceived inordinate support for Israel. The sum effect of the heightened emotional, political, and national security climate surrounding these events compelled the Amir to accept Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifah bin Salman Al-Khalifa's recommendation to dissolve the parliament. The governance of Bahrain thereupon returned to that of a traditional hereditary dynasty. This was in keeping with not only Bahrain's own previous system of rule and relationship between sovereign and subjects.

Contrary to myth that there was cause and effect involved, the measures taken then also brought Bahrain's system back into alignment with most of the other polities that lined the littoral of the eastern Arabian Peninsula.

POPULAR POLITICAL PARTICIPATION REDUX

Notwithstanding Bahrain's prior parliamentary experiment, remnants of the country's far older political system reflected various attributes imbedded in its tribal institutions, customs, and practices. Not until after the passing of Shaikh Isa in 1999, and, more particularly, not until after a stretch of sustained domestic violence in the mid-1990s had subsided, did his son and successor, Shaikh Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, renew work on reforming Bahrain's traditional political system.

In 2001, Bahrain's voters overwhelmingly passed a referendum in support of transforming the country's system of governance to that of a modern constitutional monarchy while retaining many of the values and principles imbedded in its local culture and heritage.

Last week's parliamentary elections in Bahrain, the first held under the new system, saw 190 candidates competing for the 40 seats of the elected house of parliament. In nearly half the races, close results required runoff elections between the top two vote getters.

The new constitution provides for an additional appointed house in parliament as well. Some political analysts have advocated this concept, which has also been introduced in Oman and Yemen, for emulation in the United States. The analysts opine and the advocates argue that, if nothing else, such a body would allow the American government and people to continue to benefit from the wisdom of former presidents, senators and others who spent a lifetime in public service. A corollary to the merits of such an idea is that, once out of office, such individuals are far freer than before to recommend policies and positions from which the republic might benefit. In any case, an appointed additional consultative body in Bahrain would have a chance not only to provide precisely such reasoned advice and guidance that might otherwise go unused. It would also have the potential to assure representation to all sectors of the population - women, racial minorities, and representatives of the island's major religious denominations. The latter phenomenon points to Bahrain's unique religious history and position in the Gulf region, in particular its tradition of religious

tolerance extending beyond its Islamic sects to the active Christian and Jewish populations in the country.

A POSITIVE STEP

Under the new Bahraini constitution, women have the right to vote and run for political office, and they have already done so twice. Although none of the women candidates for office in either the municipal or parliamentary elections to date have won, the early indications are positive: 31 women ran for office in May's municipal elections, and 51 percent of those voting were women.

In the parliamentary elections, fewer women ran than in the municipal balloting, but their success overall was greater. Of the eight seeking election, two forced runoff elections by being among the top two vote getters. Again, in the parliamentary elections as in the contests for seats on the municipal councils, women constituted over half of those voting. Voter turnout was a topic of much concern for domestic and international observers. Echoing a motif from the first round of elections in 1971, leaders of Bahrain's Shi'a population and labor-oriented groups of more diverse sectarian composition called for an electoral boycott because of their dissatisfaction with the structure of the parliament. Depending on one's viewpoint, the boycott had mixed results. That the voter turnout was 53.2 percent was lower than Bahraini officials had hoped. (On the other hand, the number who voted was substantially more than the percentage of those in the United States who exercised their right to vote this past week.) In another result, it is clear that so-called "secular" candidates won a slight majority over so-called "Islamists" in the elected house. By all accounts, the elections ran smoothly. In only a handful of cases did human error, a near universal occurrence in elections worldwide, play a part in the process. Two cases were settled by Bahrain's highest court. For example, in one case in the Northern Government constituency, the court ruled that human error had led to the wrong candidate being named the winner.

LOOKING FORWARD

At the end of the day, of greater significance than the fact that elections have been held is the question of how effective the new parliament will be in representing the people of Bahrain. Difficult questions must be faced. Will problems from the earlier Bahraini parliamentary experiment resurface? Is the new parliament likely to endure for long in the event of a regional conflict's sudden occurrence that shatters the area's currently stable but uncertain near-term future?

Much of the pressure will lie with King Hamad, who has, on one hand, an opportunity to learn from mistakes made during the old and inconclusive 1970s' attempt to increase the level of popular participation in the national development process.

On the other hand, the King has the opportunity to benefit from the richness and diversity of political experimentation that has occurred and continues to take place elsewhere, which he is free to consult as meaningful frames of reference for the period that lies ahead.

With the eyes of the region and much of the rest of the world fixed on Bahrain's newly elected national parliament, there is little room for error.

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Scott David McIntosh is a Program Coordinator at the National Council on U.S.-Arab Relations, Washington, D.C.

HELPFUL LINKS:

Bahrain's National Action Charter (2001 Constitution)

http://www.bahrain.gov.bh/others/charter/Chart_content_e.asp

Results of the Parliamentary election:

<http://www.bhaintoday.net/index.php?newlang=eng>