



BAHRAIN ELECTIONS 2018

Women and the Vote

By Cinzia Bianco

On 24 November 2018, Bahrain will hold its 5th consecutive parliamentary elections and all 40 seats in the lower chamber — the Council of Representatives (Nuwab) — will be 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 upcoming elections take 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 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 submitting their candidacy.

A total of 430 candidates — 293 for parliament, 173 for municipal councils — will run in the country's four Governates. Women are running in all four. Among them, seven women (including first-time contenders) are running 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 incumbent parliament, between both chambers, are 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 expectation 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.

16 November 2018