



BAHRAIN ELECTIONS 2018

Correcting the Myths

By Jasmina Ameti

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 Tribune
2. Islamic Action 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 will likely send 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.

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