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Policy Alert

Qatar's Council Election Has Gulf-Wide Implications

by [Simon Henderson](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Simon Henderson](#)

Simon Henderson is the Baker fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute, specializing in energy matters and the conservative Arab states of the Persian Gulf.



Brief Analysis

The long-delayed poll will be watched carefully by the country's neighbors, though the sundry restrictions on voters and council members may limit its near-term policy impact.

As economies and societies in the Arab autocracies of the Persian Gulf have grown, their traditional forms of consultation and consensus have had significant difficulty adapting. In Kuwait, elements of the elected National Assembly, which can block laws and question government ministers, seem to wage an almost constant struggle against the ruling family, while in Bahrain, the majority Shia population is no longer able to act as a collective group politically due to the Sunni monarchy's ban on opposition parties and other restrictions. Although some rulers have organized legislative elections with varying levels of participation, in many cases they have resorted to the face-saving model of the consultative council (*majlis al-shura*), a more limited type of advisory body.

Hence the interest in the October 2 ballot in Qatar, a country that is still catching up to its neighbors in this regard and will be holding its first-ever vote for a partially elected consultative council. Although the body was established after independence in 1972, the notion of electing rather than appointing its members was not recognized until after a new constitution was approved by referendum in 2003. Even then, nearly two decades passed before an actual council election was scheduled, and the restrictions placed on the body will still be substantial going forward. Fifteen of its forty-five members will be appointed by Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, and the remainder will have to function as independents because Qatar does not allow political parties.

In light of these limitations, what issues might emerge for discussion in the council, and what degree of input will its members and the constituencies they represent be permitted to have in national debates? A row has already broken out because some members of the Murrah tribe have been barred from voting this weekend. Technically, they are ineligible because they do not meet an arcane law mandating that a voter's ancestors lived in the territory of what is now Qatar before 1930. Yet some speculate that the true reason for their disenfranchisement can be traced back to 1996, when members of the tribe conspired against Tamim's father Hamad at the urging of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. (The incident came amid leadership chaos at home and caused quite the diplomatic ruckus—the conspiracy took shape just after Hamad usurped his own father, but one plotter tipped him off just hours before the planned coup, prompting Hamad to summon the U.S., French, and British ambassadors from their beds in the middle of the night to bolster his hold on the throne.)

Another factor that may ruffle some feathers is the relative lack of gender diversity in this inaugural election. Of the 284 candidates running for the limited number of elected council seats, only 28 are women.

On the regional front, overt official criticism of Qatar has mostly stopped since this January, when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt pledged to end the [long political and economic embargo](#) they imposed on Doha in 2017 over its maverick behavior, ties to Iran, and other disputes. Yet Gulf social media channels are still awash in negative commentary against the Qataris.

Concerns persist in Washington as well, despite the kudos Doha has won for continuing to host the largest U.S. air base in the region at al-Udeid and, most recently, for playing a major role in the evacuation of Americans and other foreigners from Afghanistan. On September 29, for example, the [Treasury Department announced](#) sanctions against Qatari citizens who worked with individuals in Bahrain, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to transfer millions of dollars to Lebanese Hezbollah. On the positive front, however, these measures are taking the form of coordinated actions with the Qatari government, not unilateral U.S. moves.

The unstated reality is that the most important politics in Qatar and other Gulf Arab states are ruling family politics. Although the 2013 transfer of power from Hamad to Tamim was the smoothest transition in the country's modern history, some of his cousins still believe they have a [greater claim to the throne](#). At the same time, as Qatar's economy develops and its society modernizes, its citizens will naturally want a greater voice in the gas-rich sheikhdom—if not a share of the action.

Simon Henderson is the Baker Fellow and director of the Bernstein Program on Gulf and Energy Policy at The Washington Institute. ❖



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