

## Gulf Elections:

### Small Steps and Mixed Results

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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#### Brief Analysis

On December 2, 2006, the Persian Gulf state of Bahrain held the second round of runoff elections for its national assembly, an advisory body. Meanwhile, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), December 16-20 will see the first-ever elections for half of the advisory federal national council, all of whose members were previously appointed. Strategically, both Bahrain and the UAE are important to U.S. interests, affording a vital foothold in the area from which 40 percent of the world's internationally traded oil is shipped. While their cautious moves toward democracy are a nod in the direction of Washington, the emerging regional power, Iran, provides additional context.

#### Bahrain

All Gulf states have populations of Shiite Muslims, coreligionists of Iran, but only Bahrain has a Shiite majority of at least 60 percent. It also has deep historical ties to Iran; indeed, Iran only renounced its claim to sovereignty over Bahrain in 1970. The island-state has virtually no oil reserves, relying on the generosity of neighboring Saudi Arabia for much of its income. Economic inequality and unemployment are significant issues that affect the Shiite majority in particular. The U.S. Fifth Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain, which has been home to the U.S. Navy's Gulf force for more than fifty years.

Bahrain's elections were held among allegations and counter-allegations. Although one small Shiite political party boycotted the poll, the main Shiite party, al-Wefaq, took part. Shiite advocates claimed that constituencies had been drawn unfairly and that Sunni immigrants had been rushed through a naturalization process to boost votes. In the months before the election, a Sudanese-born, British passport-holding advisor, Dr. Salah al-Bandar, provided credible details about a government-supported plan to counter Shiite influence, including the naturalization of a large number of foreign Sunnis (such as Pakistanis, who already make up a noticeable portion of the police force). On

the other hand, Bahraini officials, quoted in the London Daily Telegraph on the eve of the elections, accused the Shiite majority of receiving guns, money, and training from Iranian agents. The contest became one between parties identified as either Sunni or Shiite. A secular party depicting itself as technocratic failed to win a single seat. In the end, there was no violence. Shiites won 18 of the 40 seats, with many of the remainder going to two religious Sunni parties: the Salafists (as the Wahabis dominant in Saudi Arabia prefer to be called) and the Muslim Brotherhood, both of which support the government of King Hamad.

King Hamad of Bahrain was recently described by the French news agency Agence France-Presse as "reclusive." The king disappointed democracy advocates when, in 2001, he decreed the balancing of the elected lower house of parliament with an appointed upper house of equal size (forty members). On the other hand, he has appointed seventeen women -- including one Christian -- and a Jew to the upper house. It is known that much power is held by King Hamad's uncle, Sheikh Khalifa, the long-time prime minister, whom the king recently asked to form a new cabinet. Sheikh Khalifa is bitterly detested by many Shiites. On December 12, King Hamad made the surprising gesture of reaching out to the Shiite community by naming one prominent Shiite, Jawad Oraied, as a deputy prime minister and another, Nizar al-Baharna, as the state minister of foreign affairs -- the number-two foreign affairs post.

## UAE

Dramatic economic development in the seven emirates of the UAE federation has been driven by both extensive oil production in the main emirate, Abu Dhabi, and the extraordinary openness of the emirate of Dubai. Perhaps 80 percent of the UAE's population are foreigners, many from South Asia (at least 30 percent are from India alone). While most expatriate workers are satisfied with the economic rewards boosted by currently high oil prices, the last six months have seen labor unrest among South Asian workers upset by unpaid wages and rising costs.

The UAE is in a long-running dispute with Iran, which in 1971 (prior to the Islamic revolution) occupied the islands of Abu Musa and the Greater and Lesser Tunbs. Yet Dubai remains a busy trans-shipment port for Iran. On the other hand, it is where the U.S. State Department, in the absence of diplomatic relations with Tehran, has set up its Iran regional office -- to which Tehran strenuously objects. In addition, the Dubai port of Jebel Ali receives numerous U.S. Navy visits, and is one of the busiest ports in the world in this regard.

The founding generation of UAE rulers has passed from the scene in recent years. Sheikh Khalifa al-Nahyan, the ruler of Abu Dhabi and therefore the UAE, is still trying to fill the gap left by his father, Sheikh Zayed, who died in 2005. Sheikh Khalifa's half-brother Muhammed bin Zayed is hard-driving, competent, and ambitious. So too is the new ruler of Dubai, Muhammed bin Rashid, who took over in January when his elder brother, Maktoum, died. The two Muhammeds -- MBZ and MBR, as U.S. officials call them -- are both good friends of the United States.

Compared with the recent Bahrain elections, the UAE elections appear to be more cautious in scope and are less likely to be controversial. The federal national council advises the supreme national council, composed of the seven rulers of the federation's constituent emirates. Just 6,689 UAE nationals are being given the chance to practice their vote. This is depicted as the UAE method of developing political participation its own way rather than as a reflection of foreign pressure or intervention. The president of the UAE, Sheikh Khalifa of Abu Dhabi, put it this way in a recent interview with al-Sharq al-Awsat: "We in the UAE fully believe that change does not tolerate haste when it is fundamental, systematic and tied to the nation's destiny. Like every other thing in life, it has to be well calculated, gradual and in tune with the society's nature, orientations, aspirations and demography." A number of women are among the over 400 candidates (numbers keep changing as several candidates have withdrawn in recent days), and much effort has gone into generating interest in the election, with candidates' billboards dotting the country. On the other hand, the semi-official press worries voter turnout may be around 50 percent of the 6,689 permitted to vote. While things may be off to a slow start, the government has definitely announced its interest in fostering greater

democracy over the next five years. A possible indicator of its sincerity is the selection of Dr. Anwar Muhammed Gargash, a committed democrat and respected intellectual, as the minister of state for federal national council affairs and head of the national election committee.

## U.S. Policy

Washington's interest in promoting democracy in the region has been largely ignored by Arab governments since Palestinian elections produced a Hamas majority in parliament from a minority vote. While democratic expression takes small steps forward in the smaller oil-rich states of the Gulf, real power will remain in the hands of the monarchs for the foreseeable future. The actions of the region's leaders must remain a prominent U.S. concern. Such leaders have -- at least recently -- managed the region's economic development with deftness. Can they do as well in managing foreign policy challenges such as Iran's drive for regional dominance, and popular desire for more political participation?

Simon Henderson is a Baker fellow and director of the Gulf and Energy Policy Program at The Washington Institute. Patrick Clawson, the Institute's deputy director for research, is currently on a trip to the UAE and Bahrain. ❖

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