

# Understanding the 2018 Parliamentary Elections in Bahrain: Mapping the Pre-Election State of Affairs

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## Understanding the 2018 Parliamentary Elections in Bahrain: Mapping the Pre-Election State of Affairs

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© November 2018

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*Occasional paper*



## **ENAR**

The Election Network in the Arab Region (ENAR) is an organization of 24 member organizations from 16 Arab countries. It was founded in 2006 on the initiative of the Amman Center for Human Rights Studies (ACHRS) and held its first General Assembly in Amman.

The aim of ENAR is to bring together different associations, organizations and observer groups to form a coalition working to promote democracy and good governance in the different Arab countries. The three main objectives of the network are: to encourage the participation of women and young people in democratic processes, to observe the actions of the media and to coordinate their efforts and develop a democratic culture within the Arab countries.

The organization has produced numerous publications, including reports on the monitoring of elections, general information on electoral observation and the current electoral situation in various Arab countries. As well as publications, other activities have been conducted by ENAR, such as seminars and election observation training programs.

The major work of ENAR focuses on the observation and monitoring of elections. Since 2006, ENAR has sent observers to more than 20 parliamentary or presidential elections in 10 different countries.



## INTRODUCTION

On The 24th of November, Bahrain will hold its second parliamentary elections since the anti-government protests in 2011. During the first parliamentary elections after the uprising between Sunni and Shia communities, the Shia opposition party al-Wefaq boycotted the elections and its leader Ali Salman was arrested. With the upcoming parliamentary elections right around the corner, similar trends are taking place. King Hamad has banned members of opposition parties from running the elections, dissidents have been imprisoned, and the opposition groups al-Wefaq and Waad, respectively Shia and secular, have been outlawed. On an additional note, Sheikh Ali Saman, the leader of al-Wefaq, was recently sentenced to life for supposedly spying for Qatar.

King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa has voiced his hopes for this election to be 'a new chapter of the march of democratic development'. However, with the state of affairs it is adequate to question this objective. It is noteworthy to address the pitfalls in the nature of the elections in order to move towards a more legitimate climate and hence support the international standard of Free and Fair Elections in Bahrain.

## POLITICAL BACKGROUND

Bahrain is a majority Shia country that is governed by a Sunni constitutional monarchy led by the Al Khalifa family. Currently the monarchy is ruled by King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa. The political structure in Bahrain can be compared to other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) States: Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The ruling family rules the sovereign ministries, hence the most important ministerial posts. An interesting transformation took place in 2002 in which the emirate Bahrain turned into a kingdom, giving the ruler the title of King.

The assembly in Bahrain is divided between two councils; a upper house, also known as a consultative council, directly appointed by the king, and an elected council of representatives, which is seen as the main lawmaking body.

Bahrain returned to an electoral process in 2002, the election voter turnout amounted to 50% and Sunni oriented political societies won two thirds of the 40 seats. The November 2006 elections ended up with a voter turnout of about 70% of the eligible voters. The increase in turnout can be explained by the reengagement of the boycotting parties, as well as the involvement of human rights and monitoring organizations in supporting a transparent involvement of the elections. The period from 2006 to 2010 was characterized by increased participation from various political societies in Bahrain, as for the election turnout it dropped to 67%, but still marks a relatively high number. The 2014 elections were primarily won by Sunni independence and ultimately 37 out of 40 seats went to Sunni independence. Where the government reported that 51% of the registered voters turned out to vote, the opposition claimed the turn out was about 30%, which in both cases mark a significant drop. Indicating that the boycotts and the



repression had a big impact on the turnout. In 2006 the lower house was seen as partly representative, however, by 2010 this was no longer the case.<sup>1</sup>

The upcoming elections in Bahrain are of great importance since the council is the only elected governing body in the country. These elections will be the opportunity for the people of Bahrain to choose some of their leaders and to influence politically.

### **MAPPING THE STATE OF AFFAIRS OF THE UPCOMING ELECTIONS**

Political parties are banned and political societies operate as the functional equivalent, and the government has dissolved the two most important of those. In May of this year, the National Assembly advanced legislation that essentially bans individual members of the political opposition from seeking election. Meaning that there are no parties, and key leaders will not be able to run as individuals either. Additionally, many key opposition leaders are jailed for exercising fundamental human rights, the only independent newspaper has been closed, and international election monitors have been banned. The political climate is progressively becoming more tensed as the elections approach.

The standoff between the Sunni-led government and leaders on the one hand and the country's Shia majority is unlikely to end by the November elections. Just like the last elections in 2014, the opposition parties have called out to boycott the upcoming parliamentary elections. The National Islamic Al-Wefaq Society officially announced the society's boycott in a press conference in the beginning of October of this year. In the statement Al-Wefaq stressed the need of the people in Bahrain from different classes and affiliations to take an inclusive national stance and hence to boycott and refuse participation.

Besides the fact that political leaders and dissidents have been imprisoned, and the opposition parties are outlawed, civil disobedience is deeply rooted. No real reforms have been accomplished since the 2011 uprising, and the national authorities seem to be determined to work along the same methods that aggravate the current crisis or so-called crackdown. The room for democratic dialogue and the option to peacefully demanding rights seems to be out of reach at this point.

In addition, the opposition has asked the international community to support the people of Bahrain to get out of this impasse by encouraging national consensus.

Some foreign voices can be determined. The UK foreign secretary, Jeremy Hunt, has voiced the need to promoting human rights and press freedom in Bahrain. Additionally, US pressure came from congressmen James McGovern and Randy Hultgren who, in a

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<sup>1</sup> Briefing on Bahrain: 2018 Elections June 10, 2018. Statement of Leslie Campbell, Senior Associate and Regional Director, Middle East and North Africa, National Democratic Institute (NDI).



written letter<sup>2</sup>, call on Bahrain to end repression and to run the elections free and fair. Without an independent electoral commission and the permit of domestic or international observers the standards of 'free and fair elections' are far from being achieved.

## **TOWARDS FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS**

Holding elections has been adopted at a global scale. However, not all elections are free and fair. The Inter-Parliamentary Council unanimously adopted a declaration on Free and Fair Elections in march 1994. This declaration states that in order for elections to be free and fair they have to be guided by the following principles and standards<sup>3</sup>:

1. The authority of the state can only be derived from the people's will as expressed through free and fair elections
2. Voting and election rights for citizens
3. The right for everyone to candidature, party and campaign
4. States should take up legislative measures to guarantee free and fair elections under international law

As such, 'freeness' can be described as the rules of the game, and 'fairness' is related to the procedural elements of the elections.

Hence, for elections to meet these international standards and subsequently to be legitimate, it is crucial for citizens to be able to organise politically and express their political will.

In the case of Bahrain, the dissolution of the major opposition parties, the imprisonment of public figures, and the impossibility to organize individually as issued by the May 2018 amendment called the Law on the Exercise of Political Rights, makes it problematic for to recognize the upcoming elections as legitimate. In addition, it is likely that the cancelled registration of the biggest political parties will reflect negatively on the percentage of people voting and participating in the elections.

To move towards Free and Fair elections and enhance the legitimacy it is a priority to build national consensus and preserve the status of the citizens. This means re-establishing the political rights of the citizens, releasing imprisoned leaders and key public figures, establish an independent electoral commission, and approve the presence of observers. In addition, the closure of the only independent news outlet in Bahrain has a huge impact on the fairness of the elections, since citizens are not able to express their views in an independent manner. Finally, the fact that polling stations are not associated with constituencies, and as such are not linked to specific districts, makes the voting exposed to exploitation.

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. Washington D.C. 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Declaration on Criteria for Free and Fair Elections (Paris, 26 March 1994).



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## CONCLUSION

Under the current political conditions in Bahrain it is difficult, if not impossible, to recognize the upcoming elections as legitimate. The climate in which the elections are held are concerning, and the current political path might even lead to growing instability in the country. The political environment does not provide a basis for free and fair elections. In order to support democratic development and enhance the human rights situation in Bahrain, it is essential to take measures and revise the current situation based on international standards of Free and Fair Elections.