

OPEMAM Analysis

BRIEFING PAPER:

G.C.C./An autumn of elections in the Gulf

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In the heat of the 'Arab Spring' five electoral processes have been held in states that form part of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). However, neither the international news media nor electoral analysts have paid much attention to these elections. At OPEMAM, we wish to underline the importance of these elections - in spite of their idiosyncrasies and shortcomings - amidst the wave of changes affecting the entire region.

The first of these five elections, for the Central Municipal Council of Qatar on 10 May 2011, have already been the subject of an Election Report published on 24 June¹. Although held on time, at the close of the Council's established four year mandate, the elections were announced hastily against the backdrop of the protests taking place in neighbouring countries of the GCC. They were also held following yet another deferment of the legislative elections slated to be held (and long overdue) ever since the country's constitution was passed in 1999².

The four next elections, held in September and October 2011 will be the subject of upcoming detailed election reports. In this analysis, each one will be commented on briefly.

Bahrain

The parliamentary by-elections in Bahrain, the member of the GCC most affected by protests, took place on 24 September. They were held to replace 18 vacant seats (out of a total of 40) in the Chamber of Representatives - last elected on 23 October 2010³. The vacant seats correspond to the 18 MPs from al-Wefaq - the Shiite Islamist party that is the country's most important opposition group - who resigned in protest at the violent repression of protesters in February and March⁴.

Al-Wefaq decided to boycott the elections, deeming the parliament illegitimate following the uprisings, as it also did the government's calls for "dialogue". Indeed, the government's calls for dialogue in July ended in the wholesale arrests of protesters and politicians who had returned to the country expressly.

The al-Mimbar grouping (Muslim brotherhood, pro-government) and the opposition National Democratic Action Society (Wa'ad) did not participate in the elections either.

Following the process of selection, appeals and withdrawal of candidates, a total of 54 out of the original 84 aspiring candidates ran for 14 seats. The remaining 4 seats were filled without elections taking place, given that the candidates there were the only ones in their constituencies - including one woman.

In the first round on 24 September, just 5 seats were filled by candidates who won an absolute majority outright. In the second round on 8 October, the remaining 9 seats were filled. Two of the 9 new MPs were women - the first to win their seats at the polls. Added to the above-mentioned woman who won her seat automatically and one other female MP already sitting, the number of women in the present Chamber rose to 4.

According to the government, 51.4% of the nearly 144,000 Bahrainis enrolled to vote participated. However, the opposition put the figure at just 16.3%, highlighting the success of their boycott and the poor representativeness of the winners. The breach that exists between the government and the

¹ Cf: [Electoral Report-Qatar/Central Municipal Council 2011](#), Luciano Zaccara, 24/06/2011.

² Cf: [CMC polls on May 10](#), 02/03/2011.

³ Cf: [Election Report-Bahrain/Parliamentary Elections 23 October 2011](#), Marc Valeri, 26/07/2011.

⁴ Cf: [Briefing Paper-Bahrain 2011/A deadlock in the social contract](#), Marta Saldaña, 05/03/2011.

opposition is such that even 20 medics who attended those wounded during the February protests are being judged, with the possibility of heavy jail sentences for all.

United Arab Emirates

The second elections to the National Federal Council (NFC) took place on 24 September 2011, several months after they were due to be held in December 2010 - the mandate of the council having been extended for "technical" reasons. The decision in February to at last schedule the elections was viewed as a response to the growing demands for participation both in the UAE and in neighbouring countries of the GCC.

The number of electors on this occasion rose to 129,274 randomly "selected" Emirati men and women over the age of 21 - a far higher number than in 2006 when the number of electors was a mere 6,689. The rise in the number of electors took place just a few months after the CFN's regulations were amended⁵ - to increase the number of voters to 12,000⁶ - which demonstrates the intent to fend off criticism of the scant representativeness of the Council members. It is worth remembering that the NFC is a merely consultative council made up of 40 members - 20 of whom are elected and 20 that are nominated by the country's seven emirs. The number of candidates on this occasion rose to 468, 85 of whom were women.

The elections were concentrated in 13 voting centres. In all of Abu Dhabi there were just four voting centres and in Dubai just two, which surely discouraged participation due to the long distances some voters had to cover to be able to vote.

The electronic voting system put in place should have guaranteed a seamless election day. However, complaints emerged about the machines malfunctioning and doubts were expressed especially about the "electronic counting system" which should have been guaranteed unequivocally by the touch-screen voting method. However, only 27 complaints were made officially, and all of these were rejected.

The final results were unsurprising in themselves, although the low turnout was a surprise and one that irked the Emirati authorities⁷. Only one woman was elected in the end, Sheikha Eisa Ghanem in Umm al Qawain Emirate. Participation nation-wide was just 27.75%, with the lowest turnout of 21.3% in Abu Dhabi, the federation's largest and most powerful state⁸. The feeble interest aroused by these elections - especially among Emirati youths - was evident, triggering scepticism both about their real impact on the empowerment process and the gradual process of inclusion of the citizenry in the decision-making process.

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's municipal elections went unnoticed given the paltry significance of the electoral process itself in that country. They did, however, attract media attention following the unexpected announcement made four days before the polls, that women would be allowed to vote in the next elections and that women would be allowed to sit in the unelected Consultative Council as of

⁵ See: [129.274 to vote in FNC polls](#), 11/07/2011.

⁶ See: [FNC election rules revised](#), 16/02/2011.

⁷ See: [Low FNC voter turnout was 'unexpected'](#), 26/09/2009.

⁸ See official results at: [اللجنة الوطنية للانتخابات تعلن القائمة الأولية للفائزين بعضوية المجلس الوطني الاتحادي 2011](#).

2013⁹. That said, it was the elections themselves and not this announcement that demonstrated Saudi concerns about the effects of the 'Arab Spring' on the Gulf countries. While it is true that the elections were due to be held about this time - after the renewal of these councils, initially due to take place in 2009¹⁰ was postponed - the fact remains that increasing protests in the eastern, Shiite-majority province as well as the events in Bahrain, led to the different phases of the electoral process being brought forward and its proclamation at the height of the Arab Spring¹¹.

Contrary to the 2005 elections¹², this time polling was held on just one day - September 24th - across the entire country. Men aged 21 and above were asked to choose between 5,323 candidates aspiring for 816 positions out of the 1,632 that exist in Saudi Arabia's 258 municipal councils. The other half were appointed by the government. In all 1,083,602 men were enrolled to vote, out of a total of some 11 million who were able to do so, and of which some 600,000 were already registered from the previous elections. 725 voting centres were set up around the country, and a process of internal observation was set up by the electoral authorities¹³. No international observation was allowed.

The debate generated by not allowing women to vote, and the boycott organised by youths, intellectuals and writers via Facebook and Twitter¹⁴, in conjunction with the meagre powers and poor performance of the previous elected councils¹⁵, increased doubts about the utility of this type of elections and augured a low turnout.

The results, which will be analysed in detail in an upcoming Election Report, showed varying, but generally very low rates of participation. In the cities of Riyadh and Jeddah it was less than 10%, in Eastern Province it was around 30%, while in Najran it reached 53%, according to official data¹⁶.

The controversy generated by a supposed plot to assassinate the Saudi ambassador to the USA eclipsed any possibility of thoroughgoing, international analysis of the results of these elections. In addition, the death of the heir to the throne, Prince Sultan bin Abdul-Aziz, and the appointment as heir of the more conservative, Prince Nayef bin Abdul-Aziz, demonstrated just how immaterial these elections were in the process of reform, whose viability - despite the granting of women's suffrage in the next elections - is still too early to judge.

Oman

The elections to renew Oman's Majlis al-Shura took place on 15 October. In this case, the elections were not brought forward in spite of the protests that took place (and were suppressed) mainly in the cities of Sohar and Salalah between February and May¹⁷. Indeed, the final date of the elections was only announced a few weeks before polling finally took place. The previous elections to these saw an official turnout of 62.7% (212,354 voters out of the 338,683 Omanis enrolled to do so). This time round, participation was 76.6% according to official data (397,000 votes cast out of a total 518,000 enrolled), although

⁹ See: [Saudi king gives women the right to vote](#), 25/09/2011.

¹⁰ See: [Saudi municipal polls put off for two years](#), 19/05/2009.

¹¹ See: [Government announces municipal elections](#), 02/04/2011.

¹² See the [Electoral Chronology of Saudi Arabia](#) at OPEMAM website.

¹³ See: [Engineers, lawyers to monitor civic poll](#), 20/08/2011.

¹⁴ See: [ويديليلا تباختن ال ا نوعطاقى نوي دوعين نابش: تاي حالص ال ب قيدا ديرن ال](#), 09/05/2011 .

¹⁵ See: [Municipal elections fail to inspire](#), 24/06/2011.

¹⁶ See official results at: [الموقع الرسمي لانتخابات أعضاء المجالس البلدية](#).

¹⁷ See: [Death in Oman protests](#), 27/02/2011, [Sohar, a fortified city](#), 08/04/2011 and [Crackdown on protesters in southern town of Salalah](#), 14/05/2011.

eyewitness reports in several regions such as Dhofar told of a much lower turnout, reflecting differences in the degree of public confidence in the Majlis' ability to bring about genuine changes.

Only 77 women out of a total of 1,133 candidates competed in these elections, and of these just one won a seat in the Assembly. Among the more significant outcomes of the polls was the election of three protesters who took part in demonstrations earlier this year, among which Salim Al Mashani¹⁸, who was imprisoned for 52 days, in the wilaya of Tabah in Salalah region. The Omani authorities commended themselves on the increase in turnout - one of their main objectives - in these elections which were cast as a step forward along the country's political reform path.

Another of the more noteworthy elements of the electoral process - to be analysed in more detail in an Election Report - is the fact that tribal alliances may have decided several results beforehand, assisted by the organisation of the constituencies and voting centres along the lines of the wilayas - thereby assuring more votes for government-backed candidates. Thus, in some districts candidates had to win between 2,000 and 3,600 votes to win a seat (in Sohar or Rustaq), while in others, such as Sanaina wilaya (in Al Buraimi governorate) just 96 out of the 99 votes cast was sufficient¹⁹.

The Sultan's concession of new powers to the Majlis al-Shura and the change of administrative divisions in the Sultanate, are among the other steps announced in the country's democratization process - although these announcements have been met with scepticism.

Preliminary conclusions

Although most of these elections were called hastily, the reforms undertaken to improve the electoral processes were done so in an attempt to guarantee the fairness of the elections and greater representativeness of the elected candidates. Although these are significant steps in countries where the systems of consultation between the governors and the governed follow different paths to those of liberal democracies, these systems are still extremely limited. The failure of women's empowerment (especially in Saudi Arabia), the limitations of independent candidatures (neither lists nor political parties are allowed) and the meagre powers attributed to elected institutions, are the three main factors rulers should be attending to. But nor they should overlook the guarantees of freeness, fairness and competitiveness, necessary not only for participation to increase, but also for results to be seen as legitimate and important.

¹⁸ See: [One woman, three activists get elected in Oman's Shura council](#), 16/10/2011.

¹⁹ See official results at: [انتخابات مجلس الشورى](#).