

# **Bahrain's October 24 and 31, 2002 Legislative Elections**

**Prepared by**

**The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs**

Copyright © National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) 2002. All rights reserved. Portions of this work may be reproduced and/or translated for noncommercial purposes provided NDI is acknowledged as the source of the material and is sent copies of any translation.

## I. Executive Summary

On October 24 and 31, 2002, Bahrain held its first legislative elections in 29 years for a 40-seat lower house of Parliament. The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) sent a small study mission to witness the parliamentary election period, and in cooperation and consultation with its local partners, found that the election was generally well administered, with no evidence of fraud in favor of any particular candidate or faction. With 243,449 voters registered, over 50 percent of the population participated in the first round of the elections, with just over 40 percent casting ballots in the second round. No women were elected to Parliament, but in contrast to the May 2002 municipal elections, two women reached the second round of voting.<sup>1</sup>

Despite this outwardly positive picture, many issues cloud the background. In 2001, when the King Hamad bin Isa al Khalifa submitted the National Charter (a wide-ranging set of reforms) for approval by referendum, he assured Bahraini society that successive reform would be subject to public consultation, and many assumed that the way forward would be based on the framework of the 1973 constitution, which afforded an elected parliament considerable authority.<sup>2</sup> Political activists, therefore, were disappointed when the King released a new constitution in February 2002, called for municipal and parliamentary elections two years ahead of what had previously been scheduled, and declared Bahrain a kingdom without having consulted any of the main political societies.<sup>3</sup> There was also disappointment that under the new constitution, there will be an appointed chamber with powers and numbers equal to the elected chamber, with the president of the appointed chamber presiding over joint sessions.

After the King's February 2002 announcement, there was speculation that some societies would boycott the municipal elections, but all took a decision to participate in a gesture of good faith that constitutional issues might be addressed in advance of the parliamentary elections. Lack of action on constitutional issues in the period between elections, coupled with what many societies have termed arbitrary decrees on issues ranging from housing allocations to trade union laws to electoral laws, led some to argue that the King was not serious about a consultative process.

Citing a lack of movement on the constitution and the constraints posed by the electoral law, the main Shia Islamist society and the main liberal intellectual society, along with two of their partners, decided to boycott the legislative elections.<sup>4</sup> The government made

---

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix A for NDI's report on the municipal elections.

<sup>2</sup> Upon his ascension to the throne, Hamad released political prisoners, allowed and encouraged the return of exiles, and relaxed restrictions on political and civil society and the press. These actions were followed by the release of a new constitution and by the return of suffrage rights, such as the 2001 vote on the National Charter and the 2002 municipal and parliamentary elections.

<sup>3</sup> Political parties are not permitted in Bahrain, but civil societies with a political bent registered with the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs have been functioning as *de facto* parties.

<sup>4</sup> The four boycotting societies were: Al Wefaq (the main Shia Islamic society); Al Amal (aka National Democratic Action Society, a liberal/secular society); Tajamor al Qawmi (National Assembly Society, also a liberal society); and, Al Amal al Islami (Islamic Action, a Shia Islamic Society). Al Wefaq in particular

attempts at reconciliation, meeting with the political societies and subsequently announcing that some portions of the law (e.g., that political societies could not name or support candidates and that there could be no public rallies) would not be enforced. These attempts, however, were unsuccessful. Having lost the support of the influential Al Wefaq, yet determined to go forward with the elections, the government launched a visible, active voter mobilization campaign in the weeks leading up to the elections. With many of the main political actors on Bahrain's political stage choosing not to stand as candidates, the election was perceived by many more as a referendum on the King's political reform agenda than a vote for particular candidates.

Thus, with the opposition calling into question the legitimacy of the entire reform process, and approximately half the population staying home on election day, many obstacles must still be overcome if Bahrain hopes to have a government that is truly representative of all sectors of society. The King has clearly been the driving force behind the reform process to date, and he maintains the initiative, with a potentially quiescent lower house and 40 members to appoint to the Parliament's upper chamber. Many Bahrain analysts postulate, however, that reforms instituted from the top can just as easily be retracted, leaving Bahrain with diminishing prospects for democracy.

It remains to be seen what influence and impact Bahrain's new elected bodies – the lower house of Parliament and the municipal councils -- will be permitted to have on Bahrain's continued reform agenda; whom the King appoints to the upper house of Parliament will also be a strong indication of the direction in which the King wants to go. Government supporters argue convincingly that the King has instituted this deliberate process of reform in order to achieve eventual reconciliation between the Sunni minority and Shia majority and cannot move more quickly due to historical and cultural factors. Critics contend that the King's steps to date have been primarily for the benefit of the international community and that his moves may have the effect of solidifying the power of the al Khalifas and the Sunni minority.

## **II. Election Framework**

The original electoral law, which consisted of relevant portions of "The Law of the Shura Council and the Chamber of Deputies" and "Law by Decree No. 14 for Exercising Political Rights," was extremely restrictive. It prohibited political societies from running lists or supporting candidates, forbade candidates from receiving monetary assistance, and outlawed campaigning in public places.<sup>5</sup> After meeting with the heads of political societies in mid-September, however, the King announced he was amending the parliamentary election law, and lifted the ban on public campaigning by and the

---

commands a very loyal following, especially in the Northern governorate, which is quite impressive for an organization less than a year old.

<sup>5</sup> Articles 22 and 25 of the "The Law of the Shura Council and the Chamber of Deputies." Please note, however, that NDI believes that these laws were enacted in good faith, and were more in response to candidate complaints during the municipal elections that the mosques were being used to unduly affect people's decisions and that money was being indiscriminately spent on campaigns rather than any hidden government agenda.

participation and support of the political societies in the election process.<sup>6</sup> Critics charge that result of the ban on accepting money from outside sources meant that only those of independent means could mount viable campaigns, and that the lack of spending caps enabled the indiscriminate use of funds by those same candidates.

Although these laws provided a basically acceptable framework to protect voters' rights, they were also very broad and offered few details on many election procedures (e.g., vote count). The Bahraini government did not issue election bylaws or regulations to supplement the released parliamentary election law and fill in the necessary gaps. This resulted in an uneven application of the law, both before and during election day.

### *Drawing of constituency lines*

As was the case with the municipal elections, the government's demarcation of legislative districts is a significant issue in the minds of many Bahrainis. While the seat allocation for the legislative elections made slight adjustments to reflect the population distribution, the system remains inequitable. The Southern governorate, for example, which is sparsely populated but has a majority Sunni population,<sup>7</sup> received six seats, while the Northern governorate, which is heavily populated with the Shia majority, only received nine seats. The exact number of voters per constituency has never been released.<sup>8</sup>

It was possible, for example to win a seat with over 50 percent of the vote but only receive a few hundred votes (in the Southern constituencies), while it required thousands of votes to win a seat in others (in the Central or Capital regions). This allocation system diluted the voting power of the Shia majority, and in fact may exacerbate the sectarian divide; as there has never been an explanation as to how these decisions were taken, it is widely assumed that the government drew these borders to ensure that the Sunnis remain the dominant force even in Bahrain's newly elected bodies.<sup>9</sup>

### **III. Election Administration**

For the legislative elections, as for the municipal elections in May 2002, Bahrain was divided into five governorates – Muharraq, Northern, Capital, Central, and Southern, each with a specific number of single member districts.<sup>10</sup> Three seats (one each from the

---

<sup>6</sup> This was widely perceived as an attempt to prevent Al Wefaq from boycotting the elections and thus potentially decreasing the legitimacy of the elections.

<sup>7</sup> Sunnis are the minority sect in Bahrain, but control economic and political power.

<sup>8</sup> Each candidate received a list of registered voters for his or her constituency, which theoretically should have easily enabled the deduction of the exact number of voters. The lists were not numbered, however, nor could NDI ascertain if all the lists were the same; NDI consistently found that every candidate in a particular constituency came up with a different number, which was also different from the number revealed by the polling station officials.

<sup>9</sup> *Al Wasat*, an independent Arabic daily, predicted that the Parliament would consist of 11 Shia and 29 Sunnis. Because of the boycott, those Shia who did run for seats are much more closely linked to the government. By contrast, the municipal councils, which have a total of 50 members, have 23 Shia and 27 Sunni, and are more evenly distributed among the different factions in society.

<sup>10</sup> Muharraq was allocated 8 seats, Northern 9, Capital 8, Central 9, and Southern 6.

Central, Capital, and Southern governorates) were elected unopposed, leaving 177 candidates to vie for 37 seats. Eight of these were women.

In order to avoid a second round run-off, a candidate needed to receive 50 percent plus one of valid votes cast in his or her constituency. The greatest number of candidates in a constituency was nine, the fewest was two. After the vote tallies and appeals were finalized, 19 candidates (including the three unopposed winners) were elected, leaving 21 seats for the October 31, 2002 second round. Two women contested the second round, but neither was successful in winning a seat.

For the first round, there was one constituency-specific polling station in each district, and 15 general polling stations spread out across Bahrain where voters could cast a ballot for his/her own constituency, bringing the total number of polling stations to 52. All 15 general polling stations were again open for second round. Each constituency was made up of a set number of residential blocks; if voters did not know to which constituency they belonged, when presenting their Central Population Registry (CPR) card (Bahrain's national identification card) at a polling station, the computer would tell them in which district they were eligible to vote.

To deter the possibility of citizens voting multiple times in various centers, the government announced that voters would need to bring both their CPR cards and their passports to the polling stations; upon a receipt of a ballot, the passport would be stamped as a control mechanism. Polling station computers could determine whether a voter had voted in that particular constituency, but not in any others. By contrast, there were no general polling stations in the municipal elections, and voters were only required to present their CPR cards.

Based on NDI's limited presence on and around voting day, there is reason to believe that the elections were generally well administered, with no apparent evidence of fraud or attempted fraud by administration officials, the candidates or their representatives in the polling stations with an NDI presence. NDI has also not received any reports to the contrary from its local partners. Except in a few instances, election day was extremely smooth: for the most part, voters did not have to wait in line for very long to cast their votes, candidate representatives were in place, and there seemed to be no need for the security that was present outside the polling stations. The fastidious work by election administration officials (supervised by the Central Statistics Bureau) to streamline voter lists and to hire and train conscientious poll workers greatly helped the overall effort.

NDI also noticed an improvement in the administration of the elections during the second round. Veiled women's identifications were more consistently verified, ballots were secured, and more attention was paid to those requiring assistance, for example.<sup>11</sup> More judges also released vote totals, both valid and spoiled, to candidates or their

---

<sup>11</sup> Note, however, that there was a considerable increase in the number of polling officials (all officials who had worked in polling stations where a winner was decided in the first round were reassigned to a new station) and a decrease in the number of voters, which doubtless helped facilitate the process and enable more attention to be paid to the details.

representatives, although this was not done in a consistent manner. Some judges, for example, announced the tallies while others pulled individuals aside to relay their particular totals.

There was considerable confusion and contradictory information about the presence of general polling stations for the second round; newspapers with official links originally printed that the number of general stations would be reduced to six, then there was word that there would be no general stations; on election day, papers announced that the original 15 would in fact be open.

Polling stations were open from 8:00 am until 8:00 pm, with polling stations staying open later if there were still people in line to vote at 8:00 pm.<sup>12</sup> Candidates or their representatives were present to witness the opening of the polling stations all the way through to the vote count at the polling station level. Each polling station then sent a copy of its results to the supervisory center in each governorate, where the final votes were tallied and announced. The ballot boxes, accompanied by one polling station official and security personnel, were sent to the Ministry of Justice for safekeeping.

The lack of specific bylaws (see Electoral Framework section) resulted in each polling station carrying out its duties in slightly different ways; the judges in each station had to interpret this framework on an ad hoc basis. The NDI team witnessed considerable unevenness in several voting procedures, particularly during the vote count, as some candidates were not afforded all their rights, e.g., review of spoiled ballots or complete certified results. NDI believes that in order to prevent future confusion, and to guarantee transparency, detailed regulations must be drafted and implemented to prevent such subjective interpretations.

Those regulations that were specified were often ignored, such as the 24-hour quiet period before election day.<sup>13</sup> NDI and its local domestic monitoring partners, the Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS) and the Bahrain Transparency Society (BTS), observed several examples of campaigning the night before the elections, distribution of campaign material in and around the polling stations themselves, and candidate supporters gathered outside polling stations giving out tea, coffee, and water to voters. The government prevented none of these activities, especially in the first round,<sup>14</sup> resulting in impartial across-the-board violations, but this obviously does not lend credibility to the existence of the rule of law.

---

<sup>12</sup> The 8:00 p.m. closing time was implemented in response to concerns that the 6:00 p.m. closing time, which was in force during the municipal elections, did not afford citizens enough time to vote. This contradicts, however, Article 21 of the “Law by Decree No. 14 for Exercising Political Rights.”

<sup>13</sup> Article 27 of the “The Law of the Shura Council and the Chamber of Deputies.”

<sup>14</sup> Security personnel at the polling stations made a bigger effort to enforce the “neutral zone” around the polling stations during the second round, but NDI still noted violations such as candidate supporters outside the polling station with campaign material and campaigning in polling stations.

### *Security of the ballots*

In an extraordinary security measure, every ballot had a magnetic strip inside it, with polling station exits equipped with sensors to prevent voters from leaving with their ballots. In many of the polling stations during the first round, the boxes containing undistributed ballots were not secured; the boxes were often left open in an easily accessible location. This was much less the case during the second round; the NDI team made a particular point of verifying the ballots' location, and found that they were much more often stored under the judge's table or in other secured locations.

### *Privacy of the vote*

The NDI team noted that each ballot paper had a serial number that was not removed when given to the voter. While unlikely, the computerized registry could theoretically trace those numbered ballots back to an individual voter, compromising the sanctity of a secret vote. Recognizing the need to control the number of ballots produced and distributed, it may be advisable to implement a system where the ballot paper is perforated, with the serial number on the top; a polling station official could then give the bottom section of the ballot to the voter, leaving the portion with the number for quality and quantity control.

In addition, there were several instances where the privacy/integrity of the vote of disabled or illiterate voters (who were assisted in voting by the polling station officials) was not guaranteed; polling station officials, especially during busy times, did not always bring the individual voter to a private place to choose a candidate, nor did they ensure that that vote was witnessed by another official. A possible solution to this problem would be to designate polling officials to deal exclusively with disabled or illiterate voters and to provide those voters with a private room in order to communicate their choice. These issues, as mentioned above, were less prevalent in the second round as there were additional poll workers to assist voters in need.

### *Military vote*

In a press conference two days before the election, the Crown Prince stated that he was encouraging every Bahraini citizen, military or civilian, to vote, but that ordering people either to vote or to boycott was unconstitutional. Despite the Crown Prince's comments, there is some speculation, especially by the opposition, that the military was ordered to vote. Opposition figures accuse commanding officers of ordering military personnel to bring their passports to work on the Saturday after the elections to prove that they had voted; others add that on the buses in which they were transported to the voting centers, personnel were also instructed for whom to vote. Being made up exclusively of Sunnis or naturalized foreigners, the military vote would solidify support for the minority Sunni candidates. A confirmation of these reports, however, would be impossible to procure given the nuances in language or inference that personnel might have received from their commanders.

## *Appeals Process*

Three candidates in three separate constituencies filed appeals contesting the results of the first round with the Cassation Court as stipulated by “The Law of the Shura Council and the Chamber of Deputies.” All three requested a review of the ballots in order to confirm the number of votes that they had received. One resulted in an outright winner (Northern Constituency #9); two others were successful in gaining spots in runoff elections in place of individuals who had originally been announced as second round candidates (Capital Constituency #8 and Northern Constituency #4). In each case, the court rendered judgment expeditiously and all parties accepted the court’s decision.

## **IV. Election Observation**

### *International and Local Monitors*

Integral to the success of the democratic process is the active, educated participation of Bahraini citizens. In the pre-electoral period, NDI had stressed to both its local and government partners that a widespread domestic monitoring effort of elections should be viewed as an opportunity to validate the work that has already been done rather than an implied criticism of the government’s handling of the process; more transparency can help ensure that no abuses creep into the system. In addition, as a monitoring effort includes the periods before, during, and after election day itself, it would give the government and the societies a chance to raise awareness of the process. NDI and its partners believed that a domestic effort to monitor the elections was crucial to increasing the investment of the population into the political changes in Bahrain; such an effort could involve citizens who are not yet eligible to vote (i.e., those under 21 years of age), and could help to validate a process in which some still had doubts.

Despite some initial indications that it might, the Bahrain government did not certify any official election monitors for the elections. NDI had provided domestic monitoring training to two of its local partners, the Bahrain Transparency Society (BTS) and the Bahrain Human Rights Society (BHRS), but citing concerns about the specifics of BHRS’ and BTS’ monitoring plan, the government was reluctant to afford local organizations an official or public role.<sup>15</sup> These groups were only offered two seats on the election administration committee, which was responsible for overseeing the government’s logistical and technical implementation of the elections. Furthermore, there is no mention of domestic monitors in the electoral framework, only that all citizens should be able to participate in the process.

---

<sup>15</sup> On September 29, the King announced that BHRS would be a supervisory and monitoring body, but election officials were purportedly upset that BHRS and BTS had proposed to include university students not yet eligible to vote in their monitoring teams, and the directive was then interpreted as an offer of seats on the election committee. The local organizations believed it important to include young people in the democratic process in some form, but some officials found the prospect of being monitored by students “insulting.” The government thus concluded that NDI’s partners were not appropriately prepared, and declined to certify them.

Ultimately, NDI staff and the Elections Executive Director, Shaikh Ahmed bin Ateyallah al Khalifa reached a compromise on the issue of local monitors; just before election day, however; NDI received eight press/visitor badges that guaranteed BHRS and BTS representatives access to the polling stations, which the Institute was permitted to disperse at its discretion. No formal international observers were invited, although a large number of international journalists had access to the polling stations.<sup>16</sup>

For the election, NDI was represented by two NDI staff members and two pro-bono experts with considerable elections expertise, Ms. Amy Hawthorne and Mr. James Kirk. Paired with members of BTS and BHRS, the NDI team visited half of the polling stations on October 24 and 31, both the constituency specific stations and the general polling stations.<sup>17</sup> NDI was on hand to witness election day procedures from the opening of the stations all the way through to the vote count in the supervisory centers. BHRS and BTS also had a team of 140 people dispersed throughout the country that remained outside the polling stations to observe/note possible candidate or boycott activities, security presence, etc.

NDI would like to note the initiative taken by BHRS and BTS to organize an official monitoring effort; in addition to training provided by NDI, the BHRS/BTS teams received local training, created checklists, conducted straw polls, and generally deployed in an effective manner.<sup>18</sup> BHRS' and BTS' presence and professional behavior in the polling stations generated significant publicity after the first round due, as did their outreach to candidates after the first round to document complaints and get voter results, and their attempts to remain impartial arbiters of the process.

As a result, BHRS, BTS, and NDI gained easy access to polling stations in the second round, and in most instances found polling station officials welcoming and eager to answer any questions that were posed. On several occasions during the second round, candidates or their supporters requested the monitors' presence in a particular polling station to note or to prevent irregularities. In future elections, official recognition or validation of the local monitoring effort would only help to increase the legitimacy, integrity and transparency of the entire election process; failure to do so could unduly raise suspicions that there is something to hide.

NDI did receive one complaint about the government's conduct in the pre-election period; in a meeting the Bahrain Human Rights Center on October 30, NDI staff were informed that an additional number of opposition websites (more "chat rooms" than websites) were shut down for discussions deemed inappropriate by the government. One government official told the NDI team that these websites had been shut down for spreading "untruths" about the government and the political conditions. NDI can neither confirm nor refute either accusation.

---

<sup>16</sup> Note, however, that most of the international journalists did not visit many polling stations.

<sup>17</sup> See Appendix B for specific polling stations visited by the NDI team.

<sup>18</sup> The BTS president also took the initiative to visit NDI's Morocco office to discuss the domestic monitoring effort there.

### *Candidate pollwatchers*

Each candidate was allowed to designate a total of four representatives to be present in the polling stations to safeguard the candidate's interests. This would probably have been adequate had the original system of voters casting ballots only in their particular constituency's polling station. By announcing the addition of the 15 general polling stations without increasing the number of candidate representatives, however, the government rendered it impossible for candidates to have representatives safeguarding their rights in every polling station. Representatives could not be on hand for all of the counts, for example. In addition, representatives continued to display a lack of sophistication and understanding of their role in the polling stations, namely to ensure that *their* votes were counted.

In many of the polling stations that NDI visited, for example, candidates and their representatives showed little interest in important issues such as: 1) voter identification and passport verification; or 2) ballot separation and counting, instead staying in their seats far from the counting tables even when they were invited to observe the process by polling station officials. Some candidates also revealed to the NDI team that due to the abbreviated nature of the campaign, they had not been able to focus on the careful selection of their representatives, nor to make those representatives aware of their responsibilities. In the future, candidate representatives should be allowed to be present in all polling stations where ballots will be cast for their candidate, and they should be properly trained in the importance of their role.

### **V. Boycott**

To demonstrate their unhappiness with the direction that political reform has taken, particularly the government's presentation of a new constitution without public consultation and the constraints posed by the electoral law, four political societies, including the main Shia society and the main liberal intellectual society, chose to boycott the polls, asking their supporters to stay at home on election day.<sup>19</sup> For its part, the government launched an active and visible voter mobilization effort in the two weeks leading up to the elections.<sup>20</sup> Rather than a vote for specific candidates on specific issues, in some quarters the election was perceived as a type of referendum on the government's reform agenda, making the participation percentage as interesting as the actual candidate results.

Two nights before election day, the four boycotting political societies held a rally in Manama.<sup>21</sup> The presidents of the societies reiterated their grievances against the government, including their concerns about the way in which the Constitution was amended and the installation of a 40-member appointed council with powers equal to

---

<sup>19</sup> See footnote #4.

<sup>20</sup> Especially noteworthy were the King's speech that appealed to the population to fulfill their civic duty by voting, and his wife's meetings with citizens in all five governorates – particularly women.

<sup>21</sup> Numbers for this rally vary widely, but NDI staff estimate that there were at least 10,000 people in attendance.

those of the elected body, and called into question the legitimacy of the entire process. To dispel many of the rumors that had been circulating about the role that the opposition would play on election day, however, the president of Al Wefaq, Shaikh Ali Salman, stated that he believed the boycott should be peaceful, and that boycott supporters should stay off the streets in the coming days rather than trying to prevent people from going to the polls. His guidance appears to have been followed; in the main boycott areas, namely the Northern governorate, the polling stations *and* the streets of the villages were all but empty. The NDI team saw no evidence of picketing outside polling stations or any other attempt to prevent interested voters from casting ballots.

On October 30, after some debate, the boycotting societies announced that they were asking their supporters to again stay away from the polls. In public and in private consultations, both the boycotting societies and the government were ambivalent about the second round; government efforts to mobilize voters decreased and the societies seemed uninterested in taking a decision about whether or not to try to enforce another boycott. These factors lend further credence to the notion that election day on October 24 had been a referendum on the King's reform agenda rather than on specific candidates or issues.

The Shia and liberal<sup>22</sup> societies had participated in the municipal elections under the assumption that their grievances about the democratic transition might be addressed before the parliamentary elections, or that they would get a commitment from the King that he would not be opposed to an immediate amendment of the constitution when the new Parliament took its seats.<sup>23</sup> It is the Shia and the liberals who suffered the most under the previous regime; many of them were forced into exile or imprisoned, and they feel that they have the moral legitimacy that merits their inclusion in a democratic dialogue.

## **VI. Voter Turnout**

The final voter turnout figures released by the government put first round participation at 53.48 percent, with second round participation at 43 percent. As in the municipal elections, slightly more women than men cast ballots.

### *General polling stations, passport stamps, and control of multiple votes*

The government announced the institution of the general polling stations on October 9 in response to concerns expressed by some candidates and voters that prospective voters were being intimidated either not to vote by the boycotting societies and their associated supporters or to vote a certain way by their families or candidates. NDI found that the general polling stations were conveniently located (e.g., at the airport and at the biggest mall), and certainly allowed any who might have felt uncomfortable voting in their home

---

<sup>22</sup> There are several tendencies in Bahrain, Shia and Sunni Islamist, and liberal or secular, although the liberal and secular societies sometimes self-select by religious sect.

<sup>23</sup> The lower house does have the authority to amend the constitution under the new statutes, but it is more difficult.

districts the opportunity to cast a ballot. The issue of the passport stamp, which as previously mentioned was a way to prevent citizens from voting multiple times in different locations, was a much more controversial issue.

Opposition societies were opposed to the passport control mechanism. They perceived the measure as an unacceptable method of intimidation to increase the participation rate. Questions arose as to whether a voter would have to present his/her passport (i.e., with the stamp that proved participation in the election) in the future in order to receive benefits like jobs, housing, or future passports. The government also announced that registered voters within the uncontested constituencies could present their passports to be stamped, indicating to many that the government was interested in increasing the participation rate than in the actual vote. Passports are dear to Bahrainis, as they jealously guard their citizenship in a state with an extremely high number of foreign nationals.

With the participation rate at approximately 50 percent, it cannot be stated definitively if the boycott or any other factor including passport stamping affected people's decisions to come to the polls. It should also be noted that during the municipal elections, when passport stamping was not an issue and the political societies actively called for citizen participation (while the government remained passive on the issue), the turnout rate was still approximately 50 percent.

## **VII. Election results**

### *Release of specific constituency figures and tallies*

As of November 12, 2002, the government had yet to release official turnout figures or complete vote tallies – including spoiled ballots -- for each constituency. It is public information that there are 243,449 registered voters in Bahrain, but the breakdown of that number by district is unknown. Furthermore, the government has only released the number of total valid votes by constituency, not the number of spoiled/blank ballots.<sup>24</sup> There has of yet been no figure breakdown by polling station, nor a release of the number of spoiled/blank ballots. Certified copies of the vote count have not been released to any candidates; some received figures from the judges at their particular polling stations, but this was by no means a common practice.<sup>25</sup>

Shaikh Ahmed bin Ateyallah al Khalifa, the Elections director, gave a press conference on October 31 at which he was purportedly going to produce the complete numbers from the first round, but he instead only gave a breakdown of participation figures by governorate:

---

<sup>24</sup> The total number of valid ballots for each candidate released divided by the number of registered voters does not equal the 53.48 percent participation rate claimed by the government. The assumption is that the government counted as 100 percent participation the three constituencies that were uncontested, as well as the spoiled ballots, but those figures are unknown to the public. The public, in fact, has been forced to rely entirely on figures from news broadcasts or newspaper articles.

<sup>25</sup> As mentioned above, this particular issue could be easily solved by the existence of specific bylaws.

Muharraq (predominantly Sunni):	70.35%
Southern (predominantly Sunni):	72.8%
Central (Sunni/Shia split):	56.22%
Capital (Sunni/Shia split):	50.74%
Northern (predominantly Shia):	38.3%

A few important points can be gleaned from these figures. First of all, it appears that the boycott held for Shia, while the government was successful in calling out the Sunnis; the government and the opposition can thus claim to have equal sway over the population. Secondly, the population disparity between the various governorates is stark even *without* the release of the official number of registered voters in each constituency. That the low turnout percentage in the Northern governorate dramatically lowered the overall turnout figures despite the high turnout in two Sunni-dominated governorates (Muharraq and Southern) shows that the total number of possible votes in the poor, heavily populated North is disproportionately high.<sup>26</sup>

### *Women*

Neither of the two women who made it to the second round was successful in gaining a parliamentary seat. Lateefa Al Gaoud in the Southern governorate lost by 280 votes (1,673 to 1,393) in the second round, but won more votes than winners of seats in 12 other districts. In the Northern governorate, Fawzi Al Ruwaie lost by 388 votes (1,405 to 1,017) in the second round, more than winners of seats in seven other districts. Most people had believed that Al Gaoud had the best shot at winning a seat, as: 1) the King's wife, Shaikha Sabika, lives in that governorate and had made no secret of her desire to have a woman win; 2) the Southern governorate is heavily military and people believed that the military might heed Shaikha Sabika's call to have a woman in Parliament; and 3) voters at the polling station seemed energized by the prospect of a woman gaining an elected seat. It is therefore interesting to note that despite these factors, Al Gaoud only gained 189 votes in the second round (from 1,204 to 1,393), while Jassim Ahmed Abdulkarim Al Saeedi, her male opponent gained 306 (from 1,367 to 1,673).<sup>27</sup>

By contrast, Al Ruwaie had a much higher overall gain in votes, increasing her total from 691 in the first round to 1,017 in the second (a gain of 326 votes), while Yousif Zain Al Abedeen Zainal, her male opponent, gained only 139 (his total went from 1,266 in the first round to 1,405 in the second).

---

<sup>26</sup> Note that the Northern governorate, despite its much larger population, only received an allotment of 9 seats. See Appendix C for a possible comparison in population between the North and Muharraq.

<sup>27</sup> There are two ways to look at this result. Al Gaoud's opponent is a Sunni Islamist, and Sunni Islamist groups were extremely successful in getting out the vote for their candidates. In addition, Al Gaoud is a liberal woman, and the South is very conservative. Many thought that the King's wife's influence, though, could override these concerns. The fact that it could not indicates that most voters did vote their conscience, however disappointing that may have been to the liberal and feminine causes.

## VIII. Beyond the Elections

### *Parliamentary Makeup*

Due in part to the boycott which nullified the participation of some of the more seasoned politicians, but also due to the political inexperience among most of the Bahraini population, the incoming parliamentary class is primarily made up of political neophytes. It remains uncertain whether these new Members of Parliament (MPs) will be equipped to successfully address some of Bahrain's serious problems, such as a shortage of housing, high unemployment, and a lack of clear, consistent labor and family laws. It is also unclear whether the MPs will evolve into *bona fide* legislators with their own initiatives.

The makeup up of the new parliament is predominantly Sunni, and many members are Islamist in tendency. Many have already publicly claimed a desire to clamp down on Bahrain's vital hotel and tourism industry because of morality concerns about alcohol and prostitution. Others insist, however, that they will work within the parameters of the constitution and will respect all the freedoms that those convey.

According to the independent Arabic daily *Al Wasat*, 28 of the elected MPs are not officially affiliated with any society, but this is expected to change as the societies already with representation in Parliament and those without jockey for influence. Currently, there are 18 secularists, 19 Islamists, and three independents,<sup>28</sup> meaning that the Islamists form the largest block, and almost half of the elected Parliament.

Twenty-two of the MPs are affiliated with the following political societies:

1. Islamic Forum: a relatively moderate Sunni Islamic society, has six MPs and supports an additional MP who is independent.
2. Asaala: a fundamentalist Sunni Islamist society, has six MPs and supports an additional MP.
3. Shura Society: a relatively pro-government Sunni Islamist society, has two MPs
4. Rabita al Islami: a pro-government Shia society, has three members
5. National Charter Society: a pro-government liberal, mostly Shia society, has one MP
6. National Democratic Assembly: a mostly Shia secular society, has two members<sup>29</sup>

### *Opposition*

It is legitimate to question whether the boycotting societies could have participated in the elections and then attempted to affect change from within the Parliament itself. They would argue that they tried this tack with their participation in the municipal elections,

---

<sup>28</sup> Please note that other analysts consider MPs that NDI has termed "secularists" to be independents.

<sup>29</sup> All of the above societies except for Rabita al Islami have participated in one or more NDI workshops. See Appendix D for a list of the new MPs and the affiliations that NDI has been able to confirm.

but have not been able to move the reform process forward.<sup>30</sup> The King, however, has given no indication that he would be opposed to constitutional amendments, or that he would prevent the Parliament from addressing issues such as reducing the power and numbers of the appointed chamber or legalizing political parties.

It remains to be seen what role the boycotting societies can or will play now that they remain outside the elected parliament. In consultations with members of the boycotting societies, NDI has learned that opposition members do not plan to shun elected members; Shaikh Ali Salman, for example, has called all the new MPs to congratulate them on their success at the polls and to state that they will not be working against them. Anger and frustration are dominant emotions among many opposition activists, however, and whether they will be able to put their frustrations aside in order to adopt a pragmatic approach that will allow them to constructively influence national priorities and actions is by no means certain. Many are determined not to grant the new government legitimacy until their constitutional concerns are addressed.<sup>31</sup>

### *Democratic change*

Also uncertain are the prospects for fruitful cooperation between the new Parliament, the municipal councils, civil societies, and the government in order to address some of the issues most important to Bahrainis;<sup>32</sup> the former three must define their role in this new political landscape, while the latter still seems to be deciding how large a role to afford them. The King's ultimate destination for the wheels that he set in motion when he took power in 1999 is the subject of some debate. Given Bahrain's history of sectarian strife and the pressures undoubtedly brought to bear by a ruling class unwilling to cede power too quickly, this deliberate process may be a calculated way to acclimate all factors of society to the notion of power-sharing, and predicated on the assumption that an accelerated pace might undermine national stability.<sup>33</sup> The opposition argues, however, that the King's actions to this point may be designed to legitimize the power of the al Khalifa family and their allies within the Sunni community, and that these initial steps may be in fact represent the culmination of the democratic process. The King has given no clear signs that he favors either of these possibilities, and the opposition fears the latter.

---

<sup>30</sup> As noted in the municipal election report (Appendix A), the power of the municipal councils is very limited, and their mandate has yet to be clearly defined even six months after the elections.

<sup>31</sup> The London-based Bahrain Freedom Movement, which was active during the years of political repression, has released a statement at the end of October saying that Bahrain's new constitution is not legally binding since the King ignored Article 104 of the 1973 constitution, which states that any changes to a constitution must be sanctioned by a freely-elected national assembly.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., housing, employment, and labor and family laws.

<sup>33</sup> In a meeting with NDI's president, Ken Wollack, in June 2002, the King argued that an appointed chamber was the only way to guarantee that women and minorities would be represented in Bahrain's parliamentary bodies. He did not believe that women or minorities would be elected to the lower house, the truth of which was borne out in the election results.