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## Between Popular Representation and the State: The Politics of Municipal Council Elections in the GCC

Kristin Smith Diwan

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## About the Author

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## Executive Summary

The participation and election of women in Saudi Arabia's December 2015 municipal elections have drawn international attention and assertions of progress for women's empowerment in the kingdom. Yet any assessment of the significance of this noteworthy milestone needs to consider the role of municipal councils and their contribution to political dynamics in Saudi Arabia, and in the Gulf Arab states more generally.

Municipal councils are among the earliest civil institutions in the Gulf region. This objective study of their history and political significance reveals three distinct periods that constitute a cyclical rise and fall of popular municipal governance. It also identifies four political dynamics that characterize the current revival of popular input into municipal governance.

In the 1920s and 30s, merchants played a key role in the establishment of municipal bodies in several states of the Gulf, and used them to press for civic improvements and for a greater role in decision making over public expenditures. In the 1950s through the 1970s, the influx to massive oil revenue to the ruling family-led executives resulted in a centralization of state authority over municipal councils, which played a larger role in managing rapid urban development, but, save for a partially-elected council in Kuwait, without the input of elected councils. By the late 1990s, a confluence of factors – economic challenges brought about by a decade of low oil prices, popular protests, and demands for greater political participation, increased international scrutiny after the Gulf War, and later, the September 11 attacks – prompted a state-led revival of municipal elections.

A number of political dynamics can be discerned in this recent revival of popular municipal governance. The holding of municipal elections has been useful to Gulf states in countering international criticism of their nonrepresentative character. But beyond this, the establishment of elections and quasi-representative institutions has allowed particular royal factions to cement alliances with Western governments and facilitate beneficial relations with a host of international organizations, academics, personalities, and foundations. The state-led establishment of elected councils has responded to domestic demands for political participation without ceding significant political accountability. But it has also played a role in a broader strategy of civic education and national integration under the paternalistic management of ruling families. Former Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani's skillful use of the Central Municipal Council to attract support for his rule from the United States and to project Qatar as a center for democratic engagement and discussion is a noteworthy example of this dynamic.

Women's inclusion serves both of these missions, the international and domestic, by drawing positive international attention and furthering women's integration into nation building, while serving as a useful check on popular Islamist movements.

Women are but one example of how marginalized groups have been drawn to municipal elections as a vehicle for inclusion and advancement. Shia political movements have excelled in municipal council elections with the aim of using the councils to strengthen local self government and the advancement of their communities in Bahrain and Saudi Arabia's Eastern

Province. Other political movements such as Islamist networks in Saudi Arabia and tribal networks in Kuwait have seen municipal elections as a symbolic means of demonstrating their domestic strength and a material way of garnering resources.

Gulf states have not welcomed the entry of political movements into municipal elections. Political parties are banned across the Gulf and the entry of political movements complicates the carefully managed civic engagement the state seeks to cultivate. Especially after the Arab uprisings of 2011 elevated demands for popular government and the profile of Islamic movements, Gulf governments altered municipal districts and electoral voting systems to curtail any national mobilization through municipal councils. Bahrain in particular witnessed sharp political contention at the municipal level as councilors associated with the Shia Islamist *al-Wefaq* movement sought to use their municipal positions to garner support for protests, and were dismissed from their seats. Elections for the al-Wefaq-led capital municipal council were later abolished along with other electoral changes to municipal elections meant to curb the influence of Islamic movements, both Shia and Sunni.

The future of municipal councils in the Gulf Arab states will likely be colored by these political dynamics. As the Gulf monarchs confront growing demands for greater popular participation and accountability, the attraction and danger of elections at the local level increase. One may expect Gulf states to maximize the first while minimizing the second. Such precautions taken by governments across the Gulf suggest that elected municipal councils are unlikely to provide a path to national mobilization in the short term.

If the limited democratic openings at the local level are to play a supportive role in the citizen engagement and national integration sought by Gulf authorities, steps need to be taken to deepen the experiment in popular municipal governance.

## Policy Recommendations: Arab Gulf States

- *Increase powers of municipal councilors.* Most Gulf municipal councils serve as mere advisory bodies without authority over budgets and zoning regulations. Election to office without the authority to respond to citizen demands is a formula for disillusionment for councilors and apathy from voters. Participation in municipal elections is already dangerously low, threatening the positive goals of citizen engagement and civic education. Seeing tangible results will do more than awareness campaigns to regain the attention of the public.

## Policy Recommendations: United States

- *Don't intervene in municipal politics.* U.S. officials should not intervene in the establishment of municipal governance or politics at the local level, except in the general sense of encouragement of political participation. Initiatives to improve technocratic capabilities, if sought, would be welcome.
- *Advocate – vocally – a supportive environment for political inclusion, free assembly, and expression.* While direct intervention in municipal politics would be counter effective, U.S. officials should not shy away from advocating for the basic elements integral to a supportive environment for genuine citizen engagement: full participation, free assembly, and free expression.

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## Municipal Elections in the Gulf

The December 2015 municipal elections in Saudi Arabia marked the first time women participated as both voters and candidates. Twenty one women successfully navigated the difficult administrative and social terrain to win seats among the 2,100 councilors elected into office across the kingdom.<sup>1</sup> While many celebrated this advancement of women into the public sphere, others noted the underrepresentation of women as registered voters and elected councilors, and decried the weak popular mandate and limited powers of these local councils.

A full assessment of the potential of the councils to advance women's broader democratic empowerment must take into account the history of these institutions and their political use by monarchs and political movements across the Gulf states. This policy paper aims to set the Saudi municipal council elections in their proper historical and regional context. This history contains several earlier examples across the Gulf of marginal or underrepresented communities seizing the political opening offered by municipal elections to advance their cause and community. However, it also contains ample evidence that Gulf political leaders will not allow these experiments in popular participation to disrupt the balance of societal forces they have cultivated, or to empower any political movement able to challenge the political dominion of the ruling family-led executive.

As Gulf monarchs employ elected municipal councils to address often contradictory demands such as countering international criticism, responding to domestic political pressures, and managing the economic need for a more educated and engaged citizenry, their overall influence is uncertain. However, the larger impact of popularly elected municipal governance may be found in incremental social change that is more inclusive, not political transformation.

## The History of Municipal Councils in the GCC

Gulf states have been experimenting with elected municipal governance since the 1920s. Municipal councils were among the first formal civic institutions established in the region. Their evolution reflects important shifts in power between private capital and the state. It also reveals notable differences in the political development of the six states that make up the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Three distinct historical periods are discernable in the evolution of Gulf municipal councils: a merchant-led push for a share of political power in the 1920s and 30s, the consolidation and centralization of state control from the 1950s through the 1970s, and the revival of municipal elections beginning in the late 1990s as part of a package of state-led political reform. The municipal councils once again became a tool of both the state and opposition in the politically fraught era of the Arab Spring.

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<sup>1</sup> Khaled Almaeena, "Saudi women have spoken!" *Saudi Gazette*, December 20, 2015.

## The Merchant-Led Councils, 1920s and 1930s

The British established the first municipal council in the Gulf in Bahrain in 1919. Their goal was to bring more bureaucratic order to the tribal government.<sup>2</sup> The ruler, Sheikh Hamad, was the president of the municipality and he initially appointed, with British consultation, eight members to represent the island's different communities. After 1926, half of the members were selected by an electorate restricted to male property owners. The merchant elite dominated the council, using it to defend the group's interests. This ruling family-merchant municipal alliance survived the economic downturn of the crash in the pearl market in the 1930s and continued through the rise of the oil era.

The municipal experiment in Bahrain served as an inspiration for Kuwait, and a merchant class of a different character. In 1930, the British proposed the establishment of a municipality to Kuwait's Emir Sheikh Ahmed al-Jaber al-Sabah, who permitted its opening later that year.<sup>3</sup> While the chairman came from the ruling family, the rest of the council's 12-member board of directors was elected and represented by prominent merchants.

Kuwait's community of merchants was well established, confident, and had the social cohesion and financial leverage to openly confront the ruling sheikh. A dispute with the emir over the administration of education led

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*A dispute with the emir of Kuwait over the administration of education led to demands for more political reforms and eventually to the establishment of a majlis, widely viewed as the first democratic experiment in the Gulf.*

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to demands for more political reforms and eventually to the establishment of a *majlis*, or National Legislative Council, widely viewed as the first democratic experiment in the Gulf.<sup>4</sup> In the short time it lasted, the majlis was able to place significant constraints on the ruler and assume control over most of the emirate's finances. However, the emir was able to overturn the majlis by force less than a year later, drawing upon support from oppositional tribes, the excluded Shia community, and significantly, the British. Yet while the experiment of the majlis came to a close, the municipal council persisted and continued to serve the needs of the public.

A similar dynamic took root in Dubai, where merchants, organized in an informal majlis offering consultation to the ruling sheikh, launched a broad reform movement in 1938. They demanded that Sheikh Said bin Maktoum place 85 percent of Dubai's

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<sup>2</sup> The history of Bahrain's municipality is analyzed in the excellent Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf*, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 122-47.

<sup>3</sup> The early history of merchant-state interaction is expertly analyzed in Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 46; Hadran al-Jaber, *Kuwait's Municipality: 75 years* (Kuwait: 2007), 23.

<sup>4</sup> Details of the majlis movement are drawn from Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 47-55; and Michael Herb, *All in the Family: Absolutism, Revolution and Democracy in the Middle Eastern Monarchies* (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1999), 72-75.

total revenue at the disposal of a newly formed majlis under the presidency of the ruler but with 15 members chosen by the notables of Dubai.<sup>5</sup> This state revenue was to be managed in the interests of the community to improve social conditions and to boost economic activity.<sup>6</sup> The new majlis did indeed institute a number of social innovations and a new municipal council was established as part of its program of reforms. The majlis proved too sharp a restriction on the ruler's prerogatives, however, and the majlis movement was overturned by force in 1939. The setback for the pro-reform forces was substantial, and unlike in Kuwait, the municipal council was revoked along with the majlis.

Municipalities in Oman and Saudi Arabia were from the start projects of the ruling families. The sultan of Oman, Sheikh Said bin Taimur, appointed his relatives to lead the Muscat and Matrah municipalities, established in 1938.<sup>7</sup> They were administered as one unit, which was a strictly top-down administrative organization. Municipal councils in Saudi Arabia, however, predate the state's formation and were incorporated and expanded regionally as part of Saudi founder Abdulaziz Ibn Saud's strategy to appease the local elites during the conquest of the Hijaz.<sup>8</sup>

Qatar stands alone in this period for not having any municipal administrative organization. This is reflective of both the low overall institutional development of Qatar, which remained a highly mobile tribal society at this time, and the weakness of its trading sector. Consequently a merchant class did not develop in Qatar, and individual merchants in the pearl industry did not challenge the ruling family.<sup>9</sup>

This early period of municipal governance already reveals significant differences in the character of municipal councils. In some city states (for example, Kuwait and Dubai), merchant political organization resulted in greater independence for the councils, although this was always contested by the rulers and usually the British administrators. In other states (such as Saudi Arabia and Oman) the ruling family had greater control over the council's activities from the outset. All councils came under increasing state authority in the following decades, however, as the oil wealth accruing to rulers overwhelmed the independent initiative of the merchants.

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Davidson, *Dubai: The Vulnerability of Success* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 33.

<sup>6</sup> Fatma Al-Sayegh, "Merchants' Role in a Changing Society: The Case of Dubai, 1900-90," *Middle Eastern Studies* 34, no. 1 (January 1998): 95.

<sup>7</sup> Calvin Allen Jr. and W. Lynn Rigsbee II, *Oman Under Qaboos: From Coup to Constitution 1970-1996* (Portland: Frank Cass, 2000), 10.

<sup>8</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Steven Wright, eds. *Reform in the Middle East Oil Monarchies* (Berkshire, UK: Ithaca Press, 2008), 11-12.

<sup>9</sup> Jill Crystal, *Oil and Politics in the Gulf: Rulers and Merchants in Kuwait and Qatar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 112-14.

## The Centralization of Councils Under State Control: 1950s through the 1970s

With the discovery of oil and the inflow of substantial export revenue into the coffers of Gulf ruling families, the era of state-led development began in earnest. All of the ruling families greatly expanded their bureaucratic administration, incorporating the broader population through state employment and the distribution of subsidies and services. Municipal councils became important instruments for managing the rapid urban development experienced across the Gulf. However, state spending overwhelmed the tax and customs base of the existing municipal councils, reflecting the loss of autonomy by the Gulf merchant classes and the shift in power to the ruling family-led state. This often elevated tensions within the monarchy, leading to intrafamily competition in which municipal councils played a part. By the end of this period, however, ruling families had definitively consolidated their political control atop the emerging petro-welfare states.

Consequently, municipal councils lost most of their political independence along with the ability to check the ambitions of the ruling elite and shape the course of the country's development from below. Only Kuwait could boast a (partially) elected council at the period's end, but its independence was lost in the immense fiscal expansion of the state. The political importance of Kuwait's municipalities waned as well due to the establishment of the elected Parliament, which boasts political powers unique in the Gulf region.

## The Era of State-Led Political Reform: Late 1990s-Early 2000s

By the mid-1990s, poorer Gulf governments were haunted by the specter of political revolt. A decade of low oil prices, enormous budget deficits, falling incomes, and rising unemployment brought widespread demonstrations, riots, and attacks on public institutions to Bahrain. The Saudi monarchy faced demonstrations in its ancestral heartland and petitions led by individuals upon whom it had lavished money during the "religious awakening" of the 1980s. Qatar went through yet another contentious succession in the emir's palace, followed by Saudi-backed attempts at a coup. External pressure was increasing as well, with the United States becoming increasingly attentive to the nondemocratic character of Gulf states with its deeper regional commitment following the Gulf War and liberation of Kuwait from Iraqi occupation. This critical engagement would only increase over the following decade as fears of rising extremism would be confirmed in spectacular fashion on September 11, 2001.

In reaction to these domestic and international challenges, Gulf governments began experimenting with limited popular representation. Many turned back to earlier experiments in local governance; it is in this context that municipal councils regained some of their representative character. By the mid-2000s, every Gulf state was holding some form of local or national elections.

## The Political Dynamics of Municipal Councils in the New Reform Era

The political meaning of the elected (or partially-elected) municipal councils introduced in Qatar (1999), Bahrain (2002), and Saudi Arabia (2005) as well as the somewhat dissimilar United Arab Emirates Federal National Council (2006) vary along with the degree of political and economic challenge faced by each government.<sup>10</sup> Still, some themes can be drawn from both the political intent of family-led governments that introduce them, and the actions of society that make them their own.

The recent experience with local elections and governance suggests the political use of municipal elections by governments to improve international perception and alliances and shape the culture and dynamics of a new national order. While political parties are banned in all of the Gulf Arab states, political societies and networks are present. These political groups have seized upon this limited political opening to empower minorities or marginalized groups and demonstrate strength vis-à-vis political rivals.

### International Perception and Alliance Building

Many observers have described the holding of municipal elections as mere optics: a vehicle for attracting positive international media coverage and blunting international criticism of undemocratic monarchies. Yet the significance of this electoral gesture may go beyond a photo opportunity. It may also send an important signal to win favor of Western governments, and improve the conditions for an alliance. The insistence of the United States that Kuwait reinstate its elected Parliament after liberation in 1991 is a clear example of this point.

Qatar, the first country to reintroduce elected municipal governance in this period, illustrates this dynamic well. On June 27, 1995, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani seized power in a bloodless coup against his father. That year he announced an ambitious program of domestic reforms including the holding of general elections for the Central Municipal Council (CMC). Mehran Kamrava, a professor at Georgetown University in Qatar, argues persuasively that these reforms were the result of royal factionalism: a strategic move by the young Sheikh Hamad to gain popular – and more importantly, Western – support in the face of a serious challenge from the conservative backers of his father and their regional supporters, most notably Saudi Arabia.<sup>11</sup>

The proposed reforms were broad, extending to media, education, human rights, and women's rights, and were notable for arriving in the absence of significant popular demand. In addition to the first Municipal Council elections in March 1999, the emir inaugurated a new permanent constitution approved by popular referendum in 2003.

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<sup>10</sup> Oman, as always, took its own path, gradually integrating elections for its Consultative Council. Only after the Arab Spring-inspired protests were municipal elections proposed as part of a package of reforms in 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Mehran Kamrava, "Royal Factionalism and Political Liberalization in Qatar," *Middle East Journal* 63, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 403.

Significantly, the constitution called as well for a legislative body: a 45-member Shura (Consultative) Council, with two-thirds of the members to be elected and the rest appointed by the emir. However, while repeatedly promised, the proposed elections to the Shura Council have never taken place. The CMC remains the only elected body in Qatar.

Indeed, the CMC's symbolic position as "the first house of democracy" in Qatar may be its most important role. The reforms epitomized by the municipality provided Qatar with some very tangible assets in mobilizing international support and goodwill. Two essential aspects of the reform – the process of elections, and the inclusion of women – succeeded in providing concrete and easily touted evidence of Qatar's liberalization. As Auburn University Professor Jill Crystal argues, the reforms were "in keeping with U.S. government public pronouncements about what Middle East democracy should look like."<sup>12</sup> With Qatar building an important alliance with the United States formalized through the presence of the U.S. air base at Udaid, which served as the command center for the Iraq War, this image of Qatar as a modernizing country on the path to democracy was important for both countries.<sup>13</sup>

The CMC elections were also a necessary component of Qatar's international campaign to position itself as a center for debate and democracy promotion in the Gulf. Since 2000, Qatar has sponsored the annual Doha Forum on Democracy and Free Trade, which brings an impressive array of government officials, academics, personalities, and foundations from around the world to the tiny emirate to discuss current issues of economic and political development.<sup>14</sup> The Doha Debates, sponsored by the Qatar Foundation and run in cooperation with the BBC as "Qatar's forum for free speech in the Arab world,"<sup>15</sup> also drew international praise and attention. This forward stance on democracy and speech aligned Qatar with the United States on the Bush-era Broader Middle East and North Africa Initiative (BMENA), a vehicle for democracy promotion that was received coldly by most Arab states. The existence of some form of popular participation and evidence of a reform trajectory thus opened up numerous vehicles for international engagement and Western favor.

## Cultural Engineering and the National Order

The instrumental use of municipal elections to improve international standing has a parallel in a domestic argument: The councils were instituted to answer domestic demands for political participation without ceding significant political accountability. There is truth to this argument, but again, it does not fully capture the work these councils are doing within broader national strategies.

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<sup>12</sup> Jill Crystal, "Political Reform in Qatar," in Tetreault, Okruhlik, Kapiszewski eds, *Political Change in the Arab Gulf States: Stuck in Transition* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2011), 125.

<sup>13</sup> For more on the importance of foreign politics on Qatar's liberalization program, see Elisheva Rasman-Stollman, "Qatar: Liberalization as Foreign Policy," in Teitelbaum, ed, *Political Liberalization in the Persian Gulf* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> Ahmed Abdelkareem Saif, "Deconstruction before Building: Perspectives on Democracy in Qatar," in Ehteshami and Wright, eds, *Reform in the Middle East Oil Monarchies* (U.K.: Ithaca Press, 2008), 109.

<sup>15</sup> "The Doha Debates," May 30, 2011.

This is especially true for the wealthier countries, such as Qatar and the UAE, where political demands for political representation were present, but not decisive. The challenges these states face is multifaceted and linked to the state support for a more diversified and dynamic economy and greater national ambitions, both of which demand more of citizens than the pre-existing welfare state model. National populations in these states are small and geographically concentrated; the councils are thus centralized and, in the case of the UAE, more concerned with encouraging greater unity of the seven emirates. The councils and their popular mandate thus serve more as vehicles for civic education and nation building, and for encouraging broader citizen-state engagement under the patronage and leadership of the ruling families.

The desire to use the councils to shape national identity and promote national integration is evident in the discourse surrounding the councils and elections, and in the careful management of political participation. In Qatar, government officials and those close to power speak in very

explicit (and paternalistic) terms about the time needed to educate Qataris about the democratic process. The former president of Qatar University, Sheikha Abdullah al-Misnad, was open about her lack of enthusiasm for a quick transition to democracy, voicing concern that a free election might bring tribalists or Islamists to power, and they might deny women the opportunity for a free

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education.<sup>16</sup> The royal official serving as Chairman of the Permanent Election Committee, Sheikh Jabir al-Thani, similarly expressed his view that an elected parliament would hinder the progress of the country and obstruct developments.<sup>17</sup>

In its central organization, the Qatar CMC echoes some of the characteristics of the UAE's Federal National Council, which is a federal, not municipal body, but fulfills some of the same goals of carefully managed popular representation and national integration. The idea of a national project is clear in the description of the Federal National Council elections as a "national mission" in the ubiquity of campaign and election posters bearing the UAE flag and colors, and in the healthy representation of former and current military and security personnel among those running for office. While promoting different agendas abroad, the two countries promote the same sense of a national destiny, with service to the state instilled in citizens, and a commitment to regional and Arab affairs a duty for the nation.

The inclusion of women in elections became central to both political goals of international outreach and national development. The 1999 CMC elections marked the first time women were granted equal political rights in the Gulf Arab states. This alone garnered Qatar enormous international attention and praise; to this day, the outcome for women candidates is the lead and hook for most stories on CMC elections, and indeed, all elections across the Gulf. The inclusion of women also allowed Qatar to present itself as at the vanguard for political empowerment in the region, even though the CMC has nowhere near the political authority of Kuwait's Parliament. Still, Qatar's actions had a large impact on regional practice. Bahrain

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<sup>16</sup> Sheikha Abdullah al-Misnad, author interview, July 2, 2007.

<sup>17</sup> Dr. Najib al-Nuaimi, author interview, May 24, 2009.

and Oman followed Qatar's example by including women in elections for their Chamber of Deputies and Shura Council elections announced in 2002. And shamed by the progress of its neighbors, Kuwait finally succeeded in pushing a law granting a woman's right to vote and stand in elections through the Parliament in 2005.

It is also true that women's inclusion is a national priority for Qatar and the UAE and to some degree, Bahrain and Oman as well. The tiny populations of the former, with only a small percentage of nationals, necessitated the participation of all citizens to achieve the national and international ambitions of the country. For the UAE, Oman, and Bahrain, the promotion of women in elections and leadership appointments is also a means of countering the influence of political Islam, extremism, and the Shia clerical leadership.

Saudi policies toward women's political inclusion are much more complicated due to the integration of the literalist *Wahhabi* creed in the power structure and legal institutions of the state. By the mid 2000s, Saudi Arabia's position on women's inclusion was out of step with international expectations and regional norms. The initial return to partially elected municipal councils in 2005 did not allow women to participate. The Saudi ruling family decided to postpone the elections scheduled for 2009, ostensibly to study the inclusion of women voters and to enact changes to the electoral rules. Saudi women activists used their exclusion from the next elections held in 2011 to organize and campaign for their cause through the *Baladi* movement.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the strategic importance of international perception, domestic pressure, as well as King Abdullah's conviction that women's labor participation was needed in the economy all played a role in advancing women's political inclusion in the December 2015 municipal elections.

The Saudi women's campaign follows the example of other marginalized communities that pursued greater resources and political influence through the limited space opened by the municipal ballot box: a good reminder that the story of municipal elections is not written by governments alone.

## The Empowerment of Minorities and Marginalized Groups

Local elections and the promise of self-governance has proved especially attractive for minorities and marginalized groups. The communal grounding of Shia political movements in particular has allowed them to excel in municipal council elections with the aim of using the councils for the advancement of their communities. This dynamic is most visible in Bahrain, but also in Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province, where enthusiasm – and turnout – for the 2005 municipal elections was much higher in Shia-majority districts than in other parts of the kingdom.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> For more on the Baladi movement see "Saudi Women Respond to Exclusion from Voting: Baladi Campaign [My Country Campaign]," *Jadaliyya*, May 16, 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Pascal Ménoret, "The Municipal Elections in Saudi Arabia 2005," *Arab Reform Brief, Carnegie Endowment*, April 27, 2005.

Municipal politics were key to the political rise of the most significant opposition movement in Bahrain, the Shia Islamic National Accord, or *al-Wefaq*. Al-Wefaq represents an alliance of a number of Shia political groups that came together as a party to political negotiations initiated by then Emir Hamad upon coming to power in 1999. In 2001, Hamad announced the National Action charter that eventually established a bicameral legislature and new electoral system for municipal governance. The Shia opposition al-Wefaq boycotted the first parliamentary elections in 2002 due to the control over the elected Chamber of Deputies assigned to the appointed Shura Council. However, al-Wefaq dominated municipal elections in Shia-majority areas, winning 23 of 50 seats and capturing the majority in the capital Manama.

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Relative to the CMC in Qatar, municipalities in Bahrain were given some significant powers: influence over zoning and considerable discretion over the distribution of resources. These powers gave al-Wefaq leverage over important policy issues such as housing allocation,<sup>20</sup> as well as a platform for symbolic measures such as the promotion of public morality and the naming of streets.<sup>21</sup> When al-Wefaq ended its boycott of parliamentary elections in 2006, it used its national platform within the chamber to push for even greater empowerment of the councils, viewing them as important vehicles for local autonomy.<sup>22</sup> The links between the local council members and the national movement increased the organizational capacity of the councils and enhanced coordination between subnational and national political strategies. This national mobilization would later bring the downfall of al-Wefaq councilors in the heat of the Arab Spring.

## Political Competition in Municipal Elections

The advantage to ruling families of opening elections at the relatively unthreatening political level of municipalities is clear. Yet, even at the local level, there is always the potential for political movements to use the opening for broader national mobilization. The symbolic importance of elections is not limited to governments. The political opening, especially in states where it has been previously lacking, provides an attractive venue for political networks to demonstrate their relative strength within society. Even when the authority and political influence of municipal councils are modest, they have attracted political competition.

The first reinstated Saudi municipal elections in 2005 were hotly contested and yielded a number of surprising outcomes. Most significant was the tremendous success of informal Islamic networks. By most informed accounts, these Muslim Brotherhood and competitor

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<sup>20</sup> Staci Haag (resident director of Gulf Office, National Democratic Institute), author interview, June 15, 2011.

<sup>21</sup> Nelida Fuccaro, *Histories of City and State in the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 231.

<sup>22</sup> Mohamed Zahid Mahjoob Zweiri, "The Victory of al-Wefaq: The rise of Shiite Politics in Bahrain," *Research Institute for European and American Studies* (RIEAS), Research Paper No. 108 (April 2007): 13.

Sururi networks captured the majority in all of the metropolitan councils, in some cases taking all of the seats. Shia Islamist candidates did the same in the Shia-majority districts of the Eastern Province.

The electoral system instituted by the Saudi government facilitated their electoral success. The 2005 municipal elections took place under a multivote system in which voters cast ballots not only for their home district, but also for candidates in all of the nomination districts in their municipality. This created a strong disadvantage for expressly “local” candidates, and a strong incentive for informal alliance building.<sup>23</sup> The appearance of electoral lists – though formally forbidden – allowed new voters to make sense of the dizzying number of candidates running in districts that were not familiar to them. Thus, despite explicit rules against campaigning on national issues, the election was swayed by a strongly ideological appeal from Islamists. And despite enforced regulations against formal electoral pacts, the winning coalitions were just that: coalitions, mobilized through electoral “golden” lists communicated by word of mouth and text messaging.

The success of the Islamist movements along with tribal networks forced the ruling family-led government to review its plan of action. Even though numerous political safeguards were in place – national campaigns were strictly prohibited, the councils were only partially elected, and technocrats and the appointed municipal board still held much of the power – the Saudis still encountered a national competition by nascent political parties. This outcome likely played into their decision to postpone the subsequent municipal elections, a decision that was not reconsidered until the heated days of the Arab Spring.

## Municipal Councils Post-Arab Spring: Countering National Mobilization

Until 2011, the revival of municipal councils had been a rather successful experiment from the government perspective. The exercise of holding elections at the local level brought tangible benefits in the reception of the international community, reorientation of political participation, and national integration. There was some concern over the use of the councils for empowerment by Shia minorities and for mobilization by political societies and informal political networks. These fears about political mobilization would grow after the Arab uprisings of 2011.

In four countries, municipal elections post-2011 took place under new (Oman) or amended (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar) electoral laws. The changes were made to respond to political demands for reform and greater powersharing, while simultaneously curbing the influence of contentious tribal networks and independent political societies.

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<sup>23</sup> Hendrik Jan Kraetzschmar, “Electoral rules, voter mobilization and the Islamist landslide in the Saudi municipal elections of 2005,” *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 3, no. 4 (2010): 515-33, 520-22; Pascal Ménoret, “The Municipal Elections in Saudi Arabia 2005,” *Arab Reform Brief, Carnegie Endowment*, April 27, 2005; Stéphane Lacroix, *Awakening Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 261-62.

Oman introduced municipal councils in 2011 in a package of reforms aimed at quelling discontent, including the widest popular protests since the 1970s. These new councils are chaired by the appointed head of the governorate and have only advisory powers. In 2012, municipal elections in which half of the electorate turned out to vote were held. At least 50 candidates who were part of the 2011 protest movement had their candidacies rejected by the election committee “on security grounds.”<sup>24</sup>

In response to the tense regional environment, Saudi Arabia likewise announced plans to restart the postponed municipal elections in 2011. However, the authorities undertook a revision of the electoral rules aimed at undercutting the organizational advantage of the Sunni Islamist networks and Shia Islamist opposition. A special electoral commission reported the introduction of a one vote system, diminishing the efficacy of electoral alliances.<sup>25</sup> Qatar announced redistricting plans in advance of its 2015 municipal elections, citing urban sprawl and the need to account for population movement as well as “the social fabric of the constituencies.”<sup>26</sup> Informal reports, substantiated by a subsequent rule banning slogans that “try to fan sectarian or tribal passions,”<sup>27</sup> suggest that the redistricting was made, at least in part, to counter the influence of oppositional tribes.

The most severe political test of municipal councils, however, took place in Bahrain, providing stark evidence that local politics are dependent on developments at the national level. When these developments reached a crisis, the municipal councilors were mobilized beyond their mundane local mandate, threatening the experiment of popular municipal governance altogether.

While the political impact of the renewed Saudi elections of 2011 was limited, the more empowered municipal councils of Bahrain sought to maximize their political impact in time of crisis. The February 2011 mass protests, inspired by the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, brought hundreds of thousands of Bahrainis to the street. This was met by a brutal crackdown by the state security forces, later supported by the GCC Peninsula Shield Forces led by Saudi Arabia, which justified its intervention by concern for and claims of Iranian subterfuge. It also prompted a countermobilization effort led by Sunni Islamists and supported by the ruling family and state-controlled media.

The municipal councilors from the opposition al-Wefaq sought to support the national mobilization for change. During the sit-in, members showed their support by holding a number of rallies and undertaking a demonstration march from the Municipal Ministry building to the Pearl Roundabout. After the crackdown, the councilors contributed to the effort to garner international support by visiting the United Nations House in Manama to deliver a letter to U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon calling for international intervention to stop state suppression.

<sup>24</sup> Marc Valeri, “Simmering Unrest and Succession in Challenges in Oman,” *Carnegie Endowment*, January 28, 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Abeer al-Suhaimy, “Saudi Arabia announces municipal elections,” *Asharq al-Awsat*, March 23, 2011.

<sup>26</sup> “Mu’tamir suhfy li’l’alān ‘an aldawār al-intikhabya wa al-mahām al-tahdrya wa al-tanzymya li’l-intikhabāt,” *Qatar Ministry of Interior*, November 19, 2014.

<sup>27</sup> Shabina S. Khatri, “130 Qataris to vie for 27 seats in Central Municipal Council election,” *Doha News*, April 11, 2015.

This direct appeal by local officials to an international body prompted an immediate backlash. Five al-Wefaq councilors from the mixed Central and Muharraq governorates were expelled from their councils. The 13 remaining al-Wefaq councilors from the Manama and Northern governorates could not be voted off as they held a majority in these councils, which prompted the Ministry of Municipalities and Rural Affairs to consider the dissolution of those councils as an alternative means of punishing the rebellious members.<sup>28</sup> In the interim, organizational changes were made to weaken the independence of the councils, and bring them under the control of the ministry.<sup>29</sup>

In the ensuing years of political strife, the ministry withheld cooperation with those municipalities led by opposition councilors, undercutting their initiatives.<sup>30</sup> Finally, in June 2014 the Council of Representatives passed legislation eliminating the elected municipal council of Manama, citing the ill effects of the politicization of the council on the public interest. The legislation called for the elected council to be replaced by a board of trustees, selected from civil society organizations and appointed by the king.<sup>31</sup>

In September 2014, the king issued a royal order unilaterally delineating new districts for the upcoming parliamentary and municipal elections. The stated reason for the redistricting was to even the number of voters per governorate, meeting a key demand of the opposition, but doing so unilaterally. The redistricting included the elimination of the Central governorate and the redistribution of its constituents among three of the four remaining governorates. On the municipal level, the transfer of roughly 50,000 overwhelmingly Shia voters to the newly appointed Capital governorate effectively resulted in their disenfranchisement. When added to the already disenfranchised capital residents this meant that some 90,000 constituents, a quarter of the electorate, could no longer vote for its representatives to the local councils.<sup>32</sup> The royal order included another directive weighing settlement disputes between the Ministry of Municipalities and elected councils in favor of the ministry, further cementing central control over the councils.

The municipal elections, which concluded in November 2014, thus represented a significant setback in democratic municipal governance. It also represented a shift in the composition of the electorate. The opposition boycotted the parliamentary and municipal elections in protest to the rule changes and the failure to achieve the significant reforms it is seeking at the national level. At the same time the regionally embattled Muslim Brotherhood chose not to run candidates on the municipal level. This left the Islamist field to its competitors, the Salafist *Asalah*, which took over the chairmanship of two councils. It also opened the municipal councils to new and younger faces.

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<sup>28</sup> "Two Bahrain civil councils face dissolution," *Gulf Daily News*, May 2, 2011.

<sup>29</sup> "Mixed reaction to council shake-up," *Gulf Daily News*, August 5, 2011.

<sup>30</sup> Author Interview with official at Manama municipal council.

<sup>31</sup> Mohammed al-A'ali, "Manama Council's scrapping backed," *Gulf Daily News*, June 17, 2014.

<sup>32</sup> Author interview with the head of the Fatah Youth Coalition, January 2015.

## The Future of Municipal Councils in the Gulf

The inclusion and election of women in the December 2015 elections has been received enthusiastically by the international community and liberal reformers within the Gulf. The potential for social, or even political, change however, must take into account an assessment of participatory municipal governance in the Gulf.

This reveals distinct periods that constitute a cyclical rise and fall of elected municipal governance. The most recent period of revival finds:

- *Municipal councils have become symbolic vehicles for both monarchs and their opposition.* Ruling families have promoted the elections as evidence of their democratic intentions, particularly for international audiences. Women's participation in municipal council elections has also become an important marker in assessing progress by Gulf states in advancing women's rights. Political movements have used these electoral openings to demonstrate to the state and broader public their ability to mobilize their supporters. Symbolic issues, such as the naming of streets, and Islamic public morality, form a prominent part of council agendas, perhaps arising as a consequence of the insufficient authority of the councils to set broader policy issues.
- *Even in states where municipal councils have less objective power, there is a civic benefit from elected councils.* The councilors on Qatar's weak CMC were not content with their circumstances, but worked to gain more power to address the needs of their constituents, appealing to the public in making their case. Consultants working with municipal councils have observed greater public responsiveness of elected members over appointed ones, and have posited that as evidence that popular governance promotes greater "ownership" over government policy. In states where citizen participation in governance is highly limited, such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, this civic component, while far from a full democratic opening, is of greater importance.
- *The link to national politics through political societies increases the effectiveness of the councils, but likewise makes them more vulnerable to a backlash from national authorities.* Political history matters. Municipal councils appear to flourish in states that have already undertaken political reforms, and where political space is open to participation and contestation at the national level. In this sense, then, the democratic provenance of municipal councils appears to follow democratic openings and not lead them. Still, as the experience of Bahrain shows, even where political development allows movements to mobilize through local governance, dependence on developments at the national level remains decisive.

Municipal elections are likely to remain a popular option for governments contending with demands for more popular participation and the needs of nation building. Yet monarchs will remain vigilant to counter any politicization of local governance. The example of Saudi Arabia is indicative. The reinstatement of municipal elections in Saudi Arabia provides a response to political demands for citizenship and participation arising from the Arab Spring. The inclusion of women empowers a group that has previously been excluded. Yet, Saudi authorities have

been careful to minimize the use of the elections for national mobilization, as was seen in the example of Bahrain. National platforms are prohibited in campaigns. One third of the councilors will be appointed, providing yet another level of state control. Even the inclusion of women in the electorate and as candidates may be read as means of countering mobilization by semiautonomous Islamist networks.

Such precautions taken by governments across the Gulf suggest that elected municipal councils – post Bahrain – will be unlikely to be a path to national mobilization in the short term. Yet if the disparate histories of municipal governance sketched here serve as a guide, democratic openings at the local level are likely to play a supporting role in any democratic evolution that may take place. Prior political history, the resources and skills of the ruling monarchs, and the mounting demands of the subject citizens will factor into that history, yet to be written.

