

Bahrain: Elections Signal Deep Social Tensions

By [Finian Cunningham](#)

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As Bahrain enters its third election since the beginning of reforms launched 10 years ago by the ruling Al Khalifa, there are disturbing signs that the top-down experiment with democracy is running out of steam, serving to stoke destabilising social tensions on the island kingdom.

This is reflected in a significant decrease in the total number of candidates running for election compared with the last time Bahrainis voted in 2006.

Then, some 207 candidates vied for the 40-seat Chamber of Deputies. This time around there are only 146 contestants lining up for the polls on 23 October – a drop of nearly 30 per cent.

Nearly two-thirds of the candidates are independents, while the rest belong to the main opposition Shia party, Al Wefaq, and the two pro-government groups, Al Menbar Islamic Society and Al Asalah, both of which are Sunni.

Ebrahim Sharif, leader of the left-leaning secular party, the National Democratic Action Society, is blunt in his assessment of the forthcoming elections.

“We are only running three candidates this time instead of six in 2006 because there is no point.

“The system is bulletproof to democratic progress.”

Back in 2000, a year after the succession of King Hamad Ibn Isa, there were hopes that the monarchy would give way to reforms leading to a constitutional democracy, in which the newly formed National Assembly would assume a greater legislative role in running the country.

However, the US-allied state seems to be getting cold feet over its erstwhile moves towards democratic reforms. This hesitancy seems to be due in part to the Sunni leaders’ wariness of giving more democratic power to the Shia majority, who politically and culturally have many affiliations with the northern Gulf neighbouring state of Iran.

This contradictory impasse is fuelling social tensions. Opposition groups who have been calling for democratic change are now highly critical of the government, headed by the royal family, accusing it of renegeing on previous constitutional agreements to accept reforms.

The most salient example of this resistance to reform, say opposition politicians, is the decree by the king to give the unelected Upper House, or Shoura, the power of veto over

any proposed legislation. The 40 members of the Shoura are government appointees, which ensures that any proposed legislation not approved by the government will be axed.

“Those who make the rules have made sure that the rules cannot be changed,” said Mr Sharif, who predicts that there will be big fall in voter turnout next month because of growing disillusionment among Bahrainis with the political process. “The government uses the Shoura to kill anything it does not like,” he added.

Opposition critics and other pro-democracy activists point out that Bahrain’s national income from oil has increased some three-fold over the last 10 years, but that a large section of its less than one million population has not felt any benefit from this wealth. This is particularly the case for the Shia community who are plagued with high unemployment and poor accommodation. There are up to 50,000 families in Bahrain on a waiting list for affordable housing and some of these are believed to be on this list for 20 years.

Given these pressing social needs, combined with long-held grievances of disenfranchisement among Shia, and the evident lack of progress by the parliament to introduce beneficial legislation, there is a growing sense of voter apathy.

This feeling of alienation from the political process has been heightened in recent weeks with the jailing of at least eight human rights advocates, including two clerics, who voiced criticism of the government. This in turn has sparked street disturbances, riots and burning of vehicles, which has led to a further round of security crackdowns by the authorities. It is believed that up to 200 people are now being detained without access to legal counsel. There have also been claims of mistreatment and torture.

Mr Sharif is not optimistic that Bahrain’s deep social tensions can be resolved through political reforms.

“The whole system needs to be overhauled,” he says. “But those who have the power to change are not willing to change.”

Ultimately, the lack of democratic reform will lead to deepening social injustice and unrest, he warns.

“If this is how people feel now after 10 years of oil wealth what will it be like in 10 to 15 years when Bahrain’s oil reserves start to run out.

“Without a fairer distribution of wealth in Bahrain – that can only come from having a more democratic system – we are doomed as a people and as a country.”

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Articles by: **Finian
Cunningham**

About the author:

Finian Cunningham has written extensively on international affairs, with articles published in several languages. Many of his recent articles appear on the renowned Canadian-based news website Globalresearch.ca. He is a Master's graduate in Agricultural Chemistry and worked as a scientific editor for the Royal Society of Chemistry, Cambridge, England, before pursuing a career in journalism. He specialises in Middle East and East Africa issues and has also given several American radio interviews as well as TV interviews on Press TV and Russia Today. Previously, he was based in Bahrain and witnessed the political upheavals in the Persian Gulf kingdom during 2011 as well as the subsequent Saudi-led brutal crackdown against pro-democracy protests.

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