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**THE VICTORY OF AL WEFAQ:  
THE RISE OF SHIITE POLITICS IN BAHRAIN**

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Since the 1990s, a number of pressures have contributed to the need for political reform in the Gulf. These pressures have been domestic, (i.e. demographic changes, collapse of rentierism, civil protests) regional (i.e. Israeli/Palestinian conflict, 1991 Gulf War) and international (Globalisation, Democratization in Latin America and Eastern Europe)<sup>1</sup>. In order to deal with these pressures reforming tendencies were apparent in the Gulf countries ranging from Saudi Arabia to Kuwait but this only lasted a short period of time, leading to a political deadlock. However, the picture changed post 9/11, with Gulf countries once again delving into the process of political reform. Reforming tendencies were apparent in Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Bahrain albeit slow and gradual. In particular the process of political reform in Bahrain has

been looked upon with interest by the West and also concern by neighboring Gulf countries. The West has looked in interest to the reforming tendencies of the Bahraini state to see if a transition is made in Bahrain to a fully fledged constitutional Monarchy and whether this could set into process a cascading effect in the region. On the other hand, neighboring Gulf countries have been alarmed by Bahrain's process of political reform and how such a process could inevitably lead to an empowerment of the Shiite in Bahrain, leading to a Shiite knock on effect in the rest of the Gulf. This concern has been heightened by regional developments such as the taking over of power in Iraq by the Shiite and the growing concerns over Iran's nuclear programme.

Given this level of interest and concern, there was much focus on the 25 November, 2006 third parliamentary elections in Bahrain due to its potential internal and external implications. This paper will look into the third Bahraini parliamentary elections and the rise of Shiite politics in Bahrain through the Al Wefaq National Islamic Society. I will take into consideration, the political aims of Al Wefaq and the implications of the elections for the future process of political reform in Bahrain and the wider Gulf.

### **Bahrain's Third Parliamentary Elections- Overview**

In Bahrain, the bicameral parliamentary elections (al-Majlis al-Watani) for 40 seats, and municipal elections for 5 municipal councils, took place on 25 November 2006<sup>2</sup>. In total 217 candidates, including 18 female candidates stood for the elections. In Muharraq Governorate 40 candidates competed for the 2006 elections, compared with only 38 in 2002, 48 compared with 46 in the Northern Governorate, 55 compared with 41 in the Central Governorate, and 23 compared with 26 in the Southern Governorate<sup>3</sup>. These elections in Bahrain were of particular importance as, following the elections held in 2002; they represented another important step towards political reform by the Bahraini state. However, the political reform process in 2002 was scarred as one of the major Shiite political Blocs; the Al Wefaq boycotted the elections<sup>4</sup>. In 2002, there was widespread protest and political opposition by Al Wefaq to the legislative rights granted to the 40 royally appointed members forming the upper house (Majlis al Shura) that constituted a distinctly un-representative majority loyal to the King<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, all 31 female candidates who contested the elections failed to be elected<sup>6</sup>.

Yet, despite these previous setbacks, the 2006 parliamentary election was regarded as a major test of Bahraini commitment and acknowledgement to the process of political reform. A diverse range of participants contested the elections, each representing different constituencies, platforms, social classes, genders and ideologies, which clearly demonstrated the inevitable tensions and conflicts between the participants, and this, would be a key feature during the campaigning process and a decisive factor in the final outcome of these elections<sup>7</sup>.

In Bahrain, political parties are not recognised by law; as a result a common characteristic of Bahraini politics has been the construction of Assemblies or Blocs, representing different political trends. Bahrain has 16 political Assemblies/Blocks. In addition to Al Wefaq, other Islamists include Asalah, the main Salafist Bloc which holds an orthodox understanding and approach to Islam<sup>8</sup>. Asalah's leader is Ghanim Al Buaneen who took over in 2005 from Sheikh Adel Mouwada, who was sacked because he was perceived to be too close to Shiite Islamists, Al Wefaq<sup>9</sup>. Asalah is most popular in the conservative bastions of Muharraq and Riffa. Asalah has sought to promote a hard line interpretation of Islam which rejects much of Bahrain's modernism as well as encouraging religious observance<sup>10</sup>. It has led opposition in the Kingdom to US military action in Iraq and was at the forefront of demonstrations against military action in Falluja.

Al Menbar Islamic Bloc is a Sunni Islamist Party, which has a rather liberal understanding and approach, which has seen it support women's rights and actively campaign for the introduction of a unified personal status law<sup>11</sup>. It is well organised through a network of mosques and seeks to promote a conservative social agenda while not directly challenging the Kingdom's government. The Bloc won eight seats in Bahrain's 40 seat Parliament in 2002's general election, making it the joint biggest group in parliament. In February 2006, Al Menbar led parliament's refusal to ratify the government's signature of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, with the Bloc's president, Dr Salah Abdul rahman, explaining, "[The Convention] means that Muslims could convert to another religion, something against the Islamic law, since those who do so should be beheaded."<sup>12</sup>

There are grounds of agreement and disagreement between Asalah and Al Menbar Islamists, which came to the surface in the run up to the 2006 parliamentary elections. At times Al Menbar seemed significantly more liberal than the Salafist Asalah, particularly in its opposition to proposed legislation that it argues would restrict freedom of assembly. On the issue of women's political rights in Bahrain, Al Menbar MP Dr Ali Ahmed told the Bahrain Tribune, "Granting women their political rights is not against Islamic precepts. Women should be motivated to achieve their aspirations and contribute to the Kingdom's development. We support women's political empowerment and want to field the best women who can win. We believe that having a female head of state or president is against religious regulations, but any post below that is open to women."<sup>13</sup> In 2006's general election, the Bloc promised to field several female candidates, with eye specialist Dr Haifa Al Mahmood apparently selected. However, after an electoral pact was worked out with Asalah, which opposes women candidates Al Menbar produced an all male list of candidates. Mr Al Buaneen told the Bahrain Tribune that his Bloc disagrees with women participating in the 2006 elections. Mr Buaneen said that this position reflects the Bloc's "honesty" while other parties support women's participation only in their statements<sup>14</sup>. Mr Buaneen stated: "If women make it to parliament, then we would cooperate with them, but our society wouldn't support any woman candidates"<sup>15</sup>. The Al Menbar Bloc has though backed women's rights activists' campaign for the introduction of a unified personal status law, which was vehemently opposed by Shiite Islamists.

The relationship between the Sunni opposition with Bahrain's Shiite Islamists, such as Al Wafaq was ambiguous leading up to the parliamentary elections. Asalah's salafist ideology sees the Shiite as being misguided and heretics, which prevented full cooperation between the 2 parties leading up to the parliamentary elections<sup>16</sup>. However, despite theological differences between the 2, both are opponents of what they consider moral laxity and have been ready to join forces in order to campaign together on morality issues. In fact both have criticized Al Menbar for being too relaxed and flexible in relation to moral issues in Bahrain. Al Menbar has been more willing to work with Al Wafaq but its electoral alliance with Asalah created an obstacle in its path to form a bloc with the Shiite opposition during the parliamentary elections<sup>17</sup>. This alliance of the Sunni opposition raised fears of sectarian politics in Bahrain, which was quickly dismissed by both the Sunni and Shiite. Both wanted to

focus on real political and socio-economic issues rather than being distracted by talk of sectarian politics, which they argued was being pushed to undermine the performance of Islamists in the parliamentary elections.

In regard to secular groups, the National Democratic Action is the largest leftist political bloc, which also boycotted the election in 2002<sup>18</sup>. The Democratic Bloc was previously the Communist Party of Bahrain, and they strongly have supported political liberalization and social freedoms<sup>19</sup>. The current leader of the Bloc is Ibrahim Sharif Al Sayed, who took over in 2005 from Abdul Rahman Al Nuaimi. In 2005 the Bloc renamed itself 'Wa'ad', which translates to 'Promise'. The Economist Bloc represents the right and liberal politics. While generally supportive of the government, it has not been uncritically so. The Bloc has campaigned for compensation for those that suffered past human rights abuses, with the Bloc's President Jassim Abdula'al MP forwarding a motion to parliamentary speaker, Khalifa Al Dhahrani<sup>20</sup>. Mr Abdula'al stated that the national interest required closing the human rights file for good, between the leadership, the government and those affected. The secular nationalist Bloc, The National Justice Movement was founded on 5 March 2006 in Muharraq. It is led by former National Democratic Action lawyer, Abdullah Hashem, with the aim of revitalising the moribund Bahraini Left and to push a strongly nationalist anti-sectarian agenda<sup>21</sup>. The intended constituency of the party is disaffected Leftists, liberals and some would say, Sunni voters, which the Movement seeks to attract away from the Asalah and Al Menbar Blocs through a mixture of progressive policy positions, anti-sectarianism and Arab nationalism. Abdullah Hashem has stated that the Bloc has not included the word 'Islam' in its name because it wants to attract people from every community.

During the 2006 parliamentary elections, each Bloc in Bahrain played a role in reflecting the opinions and views of the Bahraini public, and these elections allowed these Blocs to compete for the votes of the Bahraini public in order to contribute to the process of political reform and to show to the world how Bahrain is reforming and undergoing the process of transformation into a constitutional monarchy. The participation of the above Blocs added sense of vibrancy and optimism surrounding the elections and the political reform process in Bahrain. Leading up to the parliamentary elections, Bahrain was at an important juncture in its process of

political reform, and central to this was the question of the Shiite, in particular the role of Al Wefaq and the implications of a good showing by Al Wefaq for the future process of political reform in Bahrain.

### **Al Wefaq and the Rise of Shiite Politics**

A key, first notable point of divergence between the 2002 and the 2006 elections was the involvement of Al Wefaq<sup>22</sup>. It is the largest Shiite Bloc, it has 1,500 active members<sup>23</sup>. It has based its appeal on the provision of social services and mosque outreach programmes, campaigns on so-called 'morality issues', and supporting the general direction of King Hamad's political reforms since 1999<sup>24</sup>. The Bloc is close to a Shiite clerical body in Bahrain, the Islamic Scholars Council, which describes Al Wefaq as the 'Bloc of Believers'<sup>25</sup>. Al Wefaq political and spiritual leaders called upon their supporters to actively participate on ballot day in the November, 2006 parliamentary elections. The participation of Al Wefaq has shed light on the different aspirations and motivations driving their desire to push the process of political reform on the one hand, and the motivations driving the ruling elite on the other.

Bahrain initiated its reforms in 1999 before any significant domestic or international pressure was exerted urging democratic reforms<sup>26</sup>. Therefore, King Hamad's unprovoked reform process, arguably, stemmed from a generational change fuelled by his realisation that a new post traditional Persian Gulf is emerging, in which tribal affiliations may no longer suffice to legitimize a ruling tribe<sup>27</sup>. Therefore, since the start of his reign, King Hamad has promoted reforms characterised as liberalising, as opposed to democratising, by which he may maintain control of the pace and direction of these reforms, thus avoiding the elite's loss of political and economic privileges. Bahrain's Shiite population led by Al Wefaq, on the other hand, clearly has sought a more fundamental political re-orientation that, if allowed, would undermine the current centralised power base of King Hamad by assuming political and legislative power as the majority indigenous group and bringing to the table the rise of Shiite politics in Bahrain after decades of exclusion from real power<sup>28</sup>.

These different approaches to reform, and what the Bahraini state and Al Wefaq aspire to achieve, is at the core of why the parliamentary elections in November, 2006

have been significant. This is clearly manifested in the political rhetoric and election campaign of Al Wefaq since it named its candidates in early October 2006<sup>29</sup>. In a press conference, Al Wefaq president, Shaikh Ali Salman, promised the Blocs supporters that the association would fiercely work to revoke legislation passed by the outgoing parliament, and specifically mentioned the need to revoke the Law of Associations, Counter- Terrorism Law and the Law of Assembly. According to Bahraini and International Human Rights Groups, these laws have been misappropriated to rein in civil liberties and dissent in the country<sup>30</sup>. Shaikh Salman also promised to work within the parliament to reform election laws criticising the division of electoral constituencies favouring Sunni tribes loyal to the Monarch. In 2002, Al Wefaq identified this division as one of its reasons as to why it boycotted the elections. Al Wefaq did not confine its election campaigns to political questions but also focused on socio-economic issues in Bahrain. For example, Al Wefaq addressed housing, unemployment, corruption and the discriminate allocation of resources were also key issues in Al Wefaq candidates' campaigns<sup>31</sup>. This was important in Al Wefaq's campaign in order to appeal to the Bahraini people who have been dissatisfied with the performance of the Bahraini state in providing socio-economic services. Dr Jasim Husain, who is the University of Bahrain Research Deanship, Economic Research Unit Head, believes socio-economic issues were central in the parliamentary elections as people today have to pay rent, electricity, telephone, internet and water bills, in addition to other fees. They have to buy food, clothing, pay for car installments and even recreation. However, this has been impossible, because many fall short as their salaries are not enough. Dr Husain added that the Bahraini government's complacency was a problem, especially after the latest United Nations Human Development Report 2006 ranks Bahrain 39th out of 177 countries and second only to Kuwait in the Arab world<sup>32</sup>. Dr Husain also stated that the country could do better by looking to the future: "The government should be giving more money to education and training, rather than defense and police. We are not saying that defense and police are not important, but they should be given less attention."<sup>33</sup>

Given these socio-economic problems in Bahrain and the participation of the powerful Al Wefaq Bloc, the soundness of the elections were a concern to observers and participants alike. Allegations of attempts to manipulate election results surfaced, as a controversial report, known as 'Bandergate'<sup>34</sup> was leaked accusing key figures in

the regime of actively using gerrymandering to disrupt the demographic composition and to undermine the performance of the Shiite Blocs<sup>35</sup>. The report was written by Salah al-Bander, a former government adviser, and claims that a government minister and member of Bahrain's ruling al-Khalifa family planned and funded a plot to weaken the country's Shiites, who make up more than 60 percent of the population<sup>36</sup>. The 10-point plan, to be executed over a five-year period, called for paying a stipend to poor Shiites who convert; accelerating the naturalization of foreign Sunnis to alter the country's demographic makeup; and spying on Shiite organizations<sup>37</sup>. In response to this Bander report opposition Blocs, including Al Wefaq and another Shiite Bloc Amal Islami, organised a number of rallies and petitions condemning what they labelled deliberate attempts by the Bahraini state to undermine the Shiite and "political naturalisation," a tool used by the government to "inflate the number of eligible voters from 36000 to 52000". Bahraini officials have acknowledged a need for political balance between the country's sects but said the Bander report was all lies. The government charged Bander, a British citizen of Sudanese origin, with sedition and deported him days after the report's release. However, despite this denial by the Bahraini state, this report clearly indicated the unease of the Bahraini state towards Shiite empowerment in Bahrain.

### **Bahrain Election Outcome**

Islamist societies swept to victory in Bahraini parliamentary elections while leading liberals have to wait until next Saturday's run-off to find a place in the new parliament, according to official results announced on 26 November, 2006. The results from the first round gave the Shiite Al Wefaq 16 of the 40 seats in the Council of Representatives<sup>38</sup>. This was an impressive and powerful showing given that Al Wefaq had put forward 17 candidates to contest the 40 seats in the Bahraini parliament<sup>39</sup>. Four seats went to the Sunni Al Asalah Bloc and four seats to their allies, the Islamic Al Menbar Bloc, which represents the local Muslim Brotherhood branch. The numbers for the Sunni Islamists could receive a boost if more of their candidates win the runoff scheduled to be held on December 2<sup>40</sup>.

In response to the success of the Islamists, the Asalah spiritual leader Shaikh Adel Al Mouawda declared, "We hail the result as an appreciation of our efforts to serve the

nation and we look forward to close cooperation with our peers in parliament"<sup>41</sup>. Shaikh Mouawda is likely to be the incumbent second deputy speaker of the Bahraini parliament and was the winner of the first constituency in Muharraq. Shaikh Al Mouawda added, "I am glad that Islamists have won massively because I strongly believe that they are the ones best placed to uphold ethical values"<sup>42</sup>.

The Shiite, Al Wefaq leader Shaikh Ali Salman, who with 85 per cent received one of the highest vote numbers, is expected to play a major role in the new-look parliament, with many observers tipping him to be the likely speaker of the Council of Representatives. In response to growing speculation over his future role and position, the 42-year-old leader declared that he was not keen on front-line political action and would rather exert his efforts from a different position. A number of Bahraini political analysts have attributed the Shiite Islamists' victory to good organisational skills within Bahraini society and to the impact of their religious message and its strong appeal to the masses with the sectarian developments in Iraq as background. In addition, disappointment and disillusion with the overall performance of the outgoing council, the first in three decades elected in 2002, coupled with a strong desire to influence local governance and politics spurred voters to cast ballots in favour of the Islamist Blocs rather than secular liberals. While Al Asalah is familiar with the parliamentary grounds after its stunning victory in the 2002 polls, the Shiite Al Wefaq is making its debut in the world of legislative action and national politics. As a result Al Wefaq must now make the much-awaited transition from critical outsider to a key and principal player in Bahraini legislation and politics. The opposition liberals, spearheaded by the National Democratic Action Society (Waad) had a weak showing, with no seats won but 4 candidates will contest run-offs against Islamist candidates. The religious sweep in Bahrain mirrored results of elections in Iraq, Egypt and Palestinian territories, where Islamists have made inroads.

### **The Rise of Al Wefaq and Its Political Aims**

The victory of Al Wefaq raised questions concerning what it will aim to work towards and achieve in parliament. Al Wefaq has responded by outlining its political aims, which it hopes to achieve through its representatives in parliament. Al Wefaq, announced that the scrapping of the country's five governorates will be one of the first

goals of MPs representing Al Wefaq. Its leader Shaikh Ali Salman, described the government-run bodies as "unnecessary". There are five governorates - the Capital, Central, Muharraq, Northern and Muharraq - which currently come under the jurisdiction of the Interior Ministry and are headed by government-appointed officials (governors). Shaikh Salman stated the reason for scrapping them would be to grant more power to municipal councils, which would assume greater responsibility for their constituencies. "We will call for the cancellation of the governorates, which we believe are unnecessary,"<sup>43</sup> he declared in a Press conference at Al Wefaq's headquarters, in Ghufool. Shaikh Salman added, "The governors' authority will be then given to the council chairmen, who will have local governance. The councils will be in charge of services rather than them just providing support work."<sup>44</sup> Shaikh Salman stated this would help save money and ensure there is no overlapping of responsibilities - saying the society would be pushing for major amendments to municipal law granting councils more authority.

Shaikh Salman also outlined a key Al Wefaq political aim to turn the country's opposition into the "elected majority" - renewing a pledge that Al Wefaq would support allied candidates who are still in the fray and are facing a second round of voting. Wa'ad's (the National Democratic Action Society's) Ibrahim Shareef, Abdulrahman Al Nuaimi and Salman Seyadi, as well as independent Dr Aziz Abul, will be backed by Al Wefaq as promised until they achieve victory. Shaikh Salman stated, "They carry a lot of the issues we want to present in parliament"<sup>45</sup>. He added "We are currently looking at backing more candidates to ensure that the opposition becomes the majority."<sup>46</sup>

At the heart of Al Wefaq's political aims in providing municipal councils with more power and its support for opposition actors is its endeavour to achieve 2 main objectives. The first objective, through providing municipal councils with more power has been Al Wefaq's desire to introduce the socio-economic pledges, which were at the heart of its electoral campaign. Al Wefaq believes, local councils having more power would allow them more flexibility in dealing with local socio-economic grievances. However, time will tell if Al Wefaq can fulfil its socio-economic promises but there is no doubt Al Wefaq coming good in its promises will be crucial not only to Al Wefaq's political credentials but also to its future support in the Bahraini Shiite

community. Al Wefaq faces competition from other Shiite opposition Blocs such as Amal Islami and the Haq Movement, which are vying to overtake it as the main Shiite political force in Bahrain. Therefore Al Wefaq needs to ensure that its socio-economic promises turn into reality, otherwise it could see a decline in support. The second objective of Al Wefaq has been to bring about changes to the Bahraini constitution, which was amended in 2002 by King Hamad. Al Wefaq, pushing for this on its own so far has failed to achieve the desired result of constitutional reform. Its presence in parliament gives it the best opportunity to raise reform of the constitution at the national level but comes at a price. The Bahraini state could see this as a direct challenge to its position and react by making life difficult for Al Wefaq. In order to pre-empt this outcome, Al Wefaq realises the importance in building political alliances and coalitions with opposition Blocs in order to create a civil movement pushing for constitutional reform. This would make it a Bahraini demand rather than merely an Al Wefaq demand, as a result making any action by the Bahraini state towards Al Wefaq much more difficult.

Al Wefaq does not have much time to enjoy its success and it needs to begin work in order to achieve its objectives, which will contribute to changing the political and socio-economic landscape in Bahrain. Al Wefaq's victory, as a result has major implications for Bahrain and at the same time, its rise has implications for the wider Gulf region.

### **The Rise of Al Wefaq and Its Regional Implications**

The victory of Al Wefaq is representative of a general trend in the Gulf of a rise in Shiite politics. This can be seen through the rise of the Iraqi Shiite in Iraq and the international rise in importance of Iran. These developments have not gone down too well with neighboring Gulf countries, which are predominately Sunni. A Shiite take over in Bahrain, is a fear held by the Gulf countries, in particular Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, which have Shiite populations<sup>47</sup>. Gulf countries can no longer ignore their Shiite populations and sweep their demands under the carpet. In fact, the regional development in Shiite politics has given Shiite populations in the Gulf more power and confidence in order to speak out and demand their rights in order to be recognised as citizens in the Gulf. In response to this rise in Shiite politics, King Abdullah of

Saudi Arabia has been eager to deal with the Shiite question in its Eastern province by meeting with Shiite leaders and giving more political concessions to the Shiite<sup>48</sup>. This is a major policy shift, from the past, when Saudi Arabia was happy to ignore the Shiite and deal with force any Shiite uprising in its Eastern province<sup>49</sup>. The rise in Shiite politics has meant that Gulf countries have been clamouring to deal with their Shiite populations in order to maintain domestic political stability and the victory of Al Wefaq is going to raise more dilemmas for Gulf countries, which are growing more concerned about a potential nuclear Iran and its impact on the Shiite in the Gulf.

Overall, the victory of Al Wefaq is a major turning point in Bahraini politics and has brought Shiite politics to the forefront of national politics after decades of marginalisation. One will have to wait and see the performance of Al Wefaq and if it is able to make a contribution to the process of political reform in Bahrain. However, its large social base and its 16 seats in parliament give it the best opportunity to push forward the parameters of political reform in Bahrain<sup>50</sup>. In addition, the rise of Al Wefaq is another indication in the rise of Shiite politics in the Gulf and this will no doubt provide more confidence to the Shiite in the Gulf to work for empowerment, and this will raise concern amongst the Sunni Monarchs in the region. Therefore it is an interesting time to be looking at Bahraini and Gulf politics; in particular as there is a march in Shiite politics and there is no doubt that it will have an impact on the reform process in Bahrain and the wider Gulf region.

### **Notes:**

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