Bahrain: Elections and Managing Sectarianism

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Shiite and Sunni Islamist candidates dominated Bahrain’s late November parliamentary elections—winning a combined total of 29 out of 40 seats—leading some observers to warn of a polarized parliament where civility and legislative action fall victim to sectarian mudslinging. Others predict a tenuous détente, where the two sides avoid divisive issues such as anti-Shiite discrimination and constitutional amendments and collaborate instead on social conservatism.

In either case the ultimate victor seems to be the monarchy, which continues to portray itself as an indispensable mediator over a fractious body politic. “Without the monarchy,” a ministry official asserted, “Bahrain would go the way of Iraq and Lebanon.” Echoing this assertion, a member of the king’s appointed consultative council, which has effective veto authority over the parliament, described his institution as a “buffer” to prevent the country from being “hijacked by religious extremists.” For the government, therefore, the elections appeared to be part of a broader strategy of managing the problem of sectarian inequity rather than a step toward resolving it.

Yet for Shiite oppositionists, the subordination of the elected parliament to the appointed consultative council lies at the very heart of this inequity. Graffiti in a polluted Shiite suburb of Manama illustrates a widely-held sentiment: “Our demands are clear; there is no alternative except a parliament with full oversight and legislative power.” Suspicion that the parliamentary cards were stacked against Shiites fueled their boycott of the 2002 elections.

In 2006, however, believing that it was important to have a voice inside government, the main Shiite political society Al Wefaq mounted an electoral campaign marked by coalition building with liberal candidates from the National Democratic Action Society. The two groups temporarily shelved their disagreement over a draft family law that would circumscribe the
influence of Islamic law courts. Shiite Islamists from Al Wefaq secured 17 of 40 seats, an impressive gain that was tempered by the defeat of all but one of its liberal allies. In the election run-up, these liberal candidates were denounced as “traitors” by some opponents; one text message accused them of working to implement Iran’s agenda to “make the Sunnis of Bahrain just like the Sunnis of Iraq.”

Although the full details remain to be seen, at least two liberals blame their defeat on fraudulent votes cast in at-large polling stations. These controversial centers, unattached to a particular district, were perceived by critics as a government tactic for injecting loyalist votes from the Bahraini military and security services. Had they been elected en masse, the liberal candidates intended to moderate the parliament’s sectarian discourse and to spearhead reform proposals, which in the past have been discredited as being pro-Shiite.

The liberals’ loss was the gain of pro-government Muslim Brotherhood and Salafi candidates, who emerged with a 12-seat parliamentary bloc. Previously competitors, these two groups did well despite criticism of their poor performance in the last parliament and failure to send delegates to a series of pre-election debates covering civil liberties, the economy, and other issues. In the new parliament, they will probably focus their energies on Islamic morality, education, and social welfare.

If the monarchy is the default winner of the elections, the ultimate losers could be middle and lower-class Bahrainis, who face a serious housing crisis, unemployment, corruption, and a declining standard of living. Many Bahrainis feel alienated from the government and the opposition, believing that sectarianism is a regime strategy for dividing the populace as well as an elite game waged at the parliamentary level for personal gain.

Patience, especially in predominately Shiite areas, may be finite. Al Wefaq leader Sheikh Ali Salman has acknowledged the difficulty of enacting reforms in the face of constitutional restrictions on the parliament’s power. But if Shiite parliamentarians focus on sectarian battles or social conservatism and fail to deliver concrete benefits, Shiite support could shift toward more confrontational groups such as Al Haq. Activists from Al Haq have warned of possible unrest within six months after the new parliament convenes, citing the growing radicalization of Shiite youth. Echoing this, a clerical intermediary for Iraqi Grand Ayatollah Ali Al Sistani warned that Shiite religious authorities could mollify young people on constitutional grievances but not on poverty.

The ultimate test of Bahrain’s elections will therefore come in a series of choices yet to be made. Elected delegates may choose sectarian posturing or press for serious action on economic and other grievances for the sake of their constituents, and the monarchy may choose to use the parliament to manage sectarianism or to empower it in order to begin resolving the causes of communal resentment.

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