

*Title: A critical year for Bahrain and its national assembly: the final session of the Bahrain parliament's first term opened at the start of October.*

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One of the most important periods in the history of Bahrain since full independence in August 1971 got under way at the start of this month, with the opening of the fourth and final session of the National Assembly's first term. It sets the scene for an intense period of debate about the direction taken since the accession of King Hamad al-Khalifa in March 1999.

King Hamad has proved to be a reformer. In November 2000, he established a committee to create a plan to transform Bahrain from a hereditary emirate to a form of constitutional monarchy. The resulting National Action Charter was presented to the Bahraini public, and overwhelmingly approved, in a referendum in February 2001. The State Security law and the State Security Court, which had permitted the government to detain individuals without trial for up to three years, were abolished.

On the first anniversary of the referendum on 14 February 2002, a new constitution which had previously not been discussed outside the inner circles of government was unveiled. A decree declared that Bahrain would henceforth be a constitutional monarchy and Shaikh Hamad changed his status from amir to king. Municipal elections, the first for 45 years, were called in May 2002, and it was announced a ballot for parliament would take place in October 2002. King Hamad, however, did not reconstitute the parliament in line with the 1973 constitution. The elected 40-member council of deputies (Majlis al-Nawwab) was balanced by an appointed Majlis al-Shoura (consultative council) with equal rights.

Deciding vote

The powers of the elected council are limited. In the event of the two councils taking opposite views on an issue, the president of the appointed chamber has the power to cast a deciding vote. The elected council can prepare proposals for draft laws, but only the cabinet, appointed by the king, can put draft laws to a vote. Constitutional amendments require a two-thirds majority of the combined houses and the king retains the power to rule by decree, provided he does not violate the constitution. He can suspend the elected council for four months without elections and has the right to postpone elections without time limit.

The four largest Shia political groups boycotted the 2002 municipal and national elections in protest at the failure to restore the 1973 constitution and the decision to give the appointed upper house voting rights equal to the elected lower house. Despite this, the assembly since its first sitting in December 2002 has proven to be lively and it has tested government policies and ministers. The opposition has also had time to review its position.

In September, most leading groups accepted the proposed societies law, which restricts their funding sources and membership through a minimum age limit. The most striking development was the decision of Al-Wefaq, the largest group supported by the majority Shia population, to agree to register under the law. This is being interpreted as a signal that Al-Wefaq's leadership is preparing to participate in the autumn 2006 poll.

#### Major concession

Should Al-Wefaq stand this time next year, Bahrain will have decisively entered a period when the opposition will work within the established institutions of governance for the first time since Bahrain's parliament was closed in 1975. This undoubtedly represents a major concession. It will also create a fresh challenge to the government, in the form of a more confident national assembly

The assembly's status will also be boosted by the debate that will soon begin about new laws that call for employers to pay a fee into a fund for every foreign worker employed at a salary below a certain level. This is as close as any GCC country has yet come to establishing a minimum wage. The objective is to reduce unemployment and underemployment among young Bahrainis, sources of political disaffection in the archipelago. Passing the law will also underpin the populist credentials of Bahrain's parliamentary institutions.

So Bahrain in 2006 will be at the centre of the debate about the rights and obligations of the rulers and the ruled in the Gulf. There are growing reasons to believe that it will emerge in better shape to face the challenges of the future.

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