

Title: Bahrain OKs Municipal Election Law

Date: February 14, 2002 **Publication:** AP Online **Author:** SAM F. GHATTAS, Associated Press Writer

00-00-0000

Dateline: MANAMA, Bahrain A year after Bahrainis backed a national charter for democratic reform, Bahrain's ruler on Wednesday took a key step toward representative government by approving a law on municipal elections.

The highlight of the law is that women will for the first time have the right to run for public office.

An official announcement that Sheik Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa assented to the law came several hours after the Cabinet approved the law in an extraordinary session. According to the announcement made on Bahrain's state-run television and the official Bahrain News Agency, the emir's decree allows men and women aged 21 and over to vote.

Gulf Cooperation Council nationals who are permanent Bahraini residents and others who own property in Bahrain are also eligible to vote in municipal polls. The GCC is a grouping of Arab Gulf states _ Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman and the United Arab Emirates _ that coordinates political and economic policies.

Earlier Wednesday, Bahrain's Cabinet decided on the municipal election draft law on the eve of the first anniversary of a historic referendum in which Bahrainis overwhelmingly voted for a national charter that promised an elected parliament, independent judiciary, and greater freedoms and equality.

The charter set in motion a process that may put this tiny Gulf nation, which is ruled by a royal family, on the road to democratic rule in this conservative region where political freedoms are limited.

No date was set for the first municipal elections. The royal decree said the decision rests with the prime minister.

Until now, municipal officials have been government-appointed.

Sheik Hamad became ruler in 1999 and has pledged to gradually install a fully elected parliament and hold municipal elections, but with him remaining the final authority.

The country's last national assembly was dissolved in 1975. An appointed Shura consultative council has women among its members but municipal elections promise to be the first time women will be able to run for public office in Bahrain.

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