



The Municipal Elections in Saudi Arabia 2005: First Steps on a Democratic Path

*Pascal Ménoret **

For the first time in Saudi Arabia, municipal elections were held, and half of the municipal representatives were chosen by vote. The Council of Ministers in Saudi Arabia took this decision in 2003, and the elections were held in 2005. Members of the military forces and women were excluded from the process, and the voting age was fixed at 21. The elections did not raise great enthusiasm among Saudi voters, an attitude that can be explained by the weak prerogatives that municipal councils hold, but also by the non-participation of women. Yet even with little mobilization and weak participation, these elections are seen as a positive development since tribal and financial considerations did not dominate people's votes. Both the government and citizens see the municipal elections as a first step in a long process of necessary reforms in which the society accepted to participate. Many obstacles still need to be overcome, mainly the existing duality between elections and appointments, increasing the prerogatives of municipal councils, allowing women's participation, and reducing the voting age. Finally expectations are raised as to the prospect of broadening the process to include regional and legislative elections.

Introduction

In October 2003, the Council of Ministers of Saudi Arabia decided "to broaden the participation of citizens in administering local affairs by means of elections, and to revitalize Saudi Arabia's municipal councils in conformity with the ruling concerning municipalities and villages issued by Royal Decree in 1977, and to ensure that one half of the members of all municipal councils would henceforth be elected."

***Research Fellow, King Faisal Foundation
for Research and Islamic Studies**

Consequently, municipal elections took place in three stages, beginning on February 10, 2005 and concluding on April 21, 2005, in the 13 regions of Saudi Arabia. The number of registered voters had risen to 793,432 citizens out of 16,529,302 (the total population of Saudi Arabia according to the census of 2004). Of the 9330 hopefuls who ran, 608 were chosen as candidates for 178 municipal councils. Women and military personnel, as well as minors under the age of 21 were excluded from registration and voting.

The announcement that municipal elections would take place came in the wake of domestic and regional developments that pushed the Saudi Government to begin

implementing reform measures. Yet, the primary catalyst for the elections was not simply unprecedented and large-scale regional and international developments, but rather, the interplay between these factors and emerging new social realities and dynamics within Saudi Arabia, many of which endangered the social, economic, and cultural relations between state and society. Clearly, these new internal realities must be seen in relation to external military and political developments, which increased pressures on the government to implement vast reforms.

Significant public demands for reform first emerged shortly after Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and were distinguished by the appearance of opposition movements with which the Saudi government had not been confronted before. In 1991, a group of Saudi liberal and Islamist intellectuals as well as social and religious activists proposed reforms to the higher authorities. Their proposals were partially accepted, as evidenced by the promulgation of the Fundamental Law of Authority (power), new rules concerning provinces, and the founding of a Consultative (Shura) Council appointed by the King.

After the events of September 11, 2001, new reformist demands proliferated, ranging from full separation of authorities to requests for more public participation. The government undertook a variety of reforms and amended a number of laws, as well as formulating new ones. These actions opened the door for a national dialogue, enabling, among other things, the establishment of a journalists' association and a public organization for human rights. It was in the context of these reformist developments that the new system of electing half of the members of municipal councils was announced.

Poor Registration and Participation in Municipal Elections

Given the limited authority and prerogatives of future municipal councils, as well as the exclusion of women (whom the electoral law

of 1977 did not exclude from political participation), as well as the scheme of electing half of the municipal council members while the other half would still be appointed, many Saudi citizens took a sceptical or apathetic view of the elections. People were reluctant to register and vote, as was clear in Riyadh (the Saudi capital and home to 2,692,780 citizens), where the number of registered voters did not exceed 18% of those eligible to vote, i.e., 86,462 voters out of a potential electorate of approximately 470,000 persons – representing just two percent of the total population of the city.

The small number of registered voters was expected to lead to a relatively high rate of participation on election day (February 10, 2005). The rate of participation in the capital, however, barely reached 65 percent (i.e. a little bit more than one percent of the total population of Riyadh). Among registered voters in the governorates of the Riyadh area, the strong influence of local family networks and tribal connections, which usually play a decisive role in electoral campaigns, produced registration rates of approximately 30 percent. The rate of participation in voting reached 85% of those registered in these governorates.

In the eastern area of the country, the confessional factor clearly influenced electoral results. If the number of registered voters reached 46,600 in Al-Qateef, a small city inhabited by a Shi'a majority and enjoying an independent municipal council, the number of registered voters in the large city of Dammam in eastern Saudi Arabia, which has a majority Sunni population, was noticeably lower: only 45,400. These statistics bespeak the strong overall mobilization and participation of Saudi Shi'ites in the electoral process. The Shi'ites in Qateef represent about 94 percent of the registered votes, while they represent 73 percent in Al-Ahsaa oasis. In Damman, on the other hand, Shi'ites did not have such a decisive voice, since they constitute only 4,600 of all registered voters (i.e., 11 percent). The pronounced mobilization of the Shi'ite minority did, however, elevate the number of registered voters in the eastern areas to approximately 40 percent of those eligible.

It is true that the first elections to take place

after many long years of governmental authority are not, in general, occasions for strong political mobilization since electoral habits are not yet firmly rooted in political practice. In addition, potential voters were deflected from voting by the short time period for registration – just one month between November and December 2004. The time period between registration and the elections did not encourage a large voter turnout, either.

Trends of Electoral Mobilization

Despite the poor showing described above, most observers hailed Saudi Arabia's municipal elections as an important political step forward. Taking Riyadh as a model for appraising this mobilization, we see that in just 10 days (from January 30 until February 8, 2005), election campaign tents were erected throughout the capital and the roads were lined with colourful electoral posters for each candidate. The overall electoral campaign was a good opportunity for a fierce competition among the candidates, given that 645 individuals were competing for only seven seats (i.e., 92 candidates for each seat).

The large number of candidates was most likely a reflection of the novelty of the experiment, as well as the political and economic gains anticipated by each of the candidates, or even the social prestige obtained by running as candidates in these elections. The considerable intellectual achievements of the candidates support this hypothesis: 60 percent of them hold university degrees and of these, 80 percent have attained doctoral degrees.

With some exceptions, we can divide the candidates in the capital of Riyadh into three categories: the first represents the Islamists who were present in all seven electoral districts of Riyadh. Their electoral power base centred on the southern areas of the city, home to a very socially diverse population. Islamist candidates were particularly popular among youth, and they also received important support from public figures associated with Saudi Arabia's religious revival movements.

Tribal candidates constitute the second category. These candidates secured numerous votes as a result of the cumulative processes of urbanization and modernization that have made Riyadh home to representatives from every tribe in Saudi Arabia. Tribal candidates gained a majority in the east of the capital, and were strongly represented on ballots in all electoral districts of Riyadh.

The third category represents businessmen, who had a particularly good showing in the fourth district, al-Ulayya, in the north of Riyadh). This area is the economic engine of the city, the lungs through which the capital's commerce and investment breathe.

Despite an analytical model of three clearly demarcated categories, the elections witnessed considerable overlap between the aforementioned tendencies. Administrative and commercial experience, particularly marketing and management, i.e., the talents and skills of the business class, aided both the Islamist and the tribal candidates. At the same time, tribal affiliations augmented the key constituencies of the business-oriented candidates. Furthermore, Islamic principles constituted an important common dominator among most candidates. These venerable and traditional principles buttressed the platforms of religious leaders in the political competition as they mobilized their followers to participate in electoral meetings. The means and methods of mobilization were numerous and diverse. Tradition cultural values and practices were deployed (e.g., hospitality, generosity and poetry recitations), as were modern means (e.g., debates and discussions, presentations emphasizing technocratic capabilities, and marketing candidates through the internet television, and SMS messages). Candidates utilized electoral campaign tents no less than telephone marketing techniques to maximize voters' support. In broad outline, the electoral campaign experience in Riyadh was repeated in other cities and towns throughout the country.

Although law forbids electoral alliances, they did in fact emerge. The voting system itself allowed this, as voters were permitted to cast ballots in their district as well as choosing the candidate they most preferred from of a list of

hopefuls competing in all of Riyadh's electoral districts. This arrangement automatically marginalized purely local interests and helped foster an "ideologization" of the electoral campaign and public discourse.

Some candidates kept on formulating and reformulating their lists in order to persuade uncertain voters to make up their minds and choose specific candidates. So, although electoral alliances were formally banned, the electoral campaign itself, as a socio-political process, gave rise to alliances and thus helped orient every political group to vote in a certain manner in all districts. Consequently, the Islamist candidates and their supporters held meetings in Riyadh just as the liberal candidates did, forging a compact just before election day to prevent competition among the Islamic currents.

The Islamist candidates reached their agreement three days before the balloting. The resulting Islamist list was disseminated as an SMS message to thousands of voters to persuade them to support certain candidates in each district, thus avoiding fragmentation of Islamist votes. The subsequent amendments to the list have demonstrated that the Islamist movement has now truly entered the political game. As one Islamist voter said: "What we finally decided upon, as a result of the Sheikhs' recommendations, was to vote for particular candidates because they are the best people to represent us. It is not as if the Sheikhs said, "either vote for these seven candidates, or be disobedient to God and risk going to hell! We have based our votes on our own perceptions of our interests."

A number of Islamist voters said that the Sheikhs who recommended this list are among the leaders of the Islamic religious revival in Saudi Arabia. These Sheikhs have distanced themselves from the "official" Saudi religious establishment, and were key participants in the unprecedented reformist advocacy efforts of 1992-1993. In Riyadh, as opposed to Hijaz, the identity of these Sheikhs has not been revealed. Yet, their recommendations aided Islamist candidates, as well as those who were close to the Islamists, to rally a wide segment of voters and thereby win the municipal elections in Riyadh.

The Victory of Moderate Islamists

In Riyadh, the organizational capabilities of the seven Islamist candidates were key to their victory over their competitors among the aforementioned tribal and business candidates. The principal difference here between the number of votes going to the winning candidate, when compared to those obtained by the runner-ups (between 6,271 and 17,217 votes according to electoral district), illustrates the importance of list mobilization through SMS messaging, a technique thought to have influenced the choices of approximately a quarter of Riyadh's voters, represented by 15,237 ballots. In fact, this number represents the lowest amount of votes obtained by Islamist candidates. One can assume, bearing in mind the differences between electoral districts, that 38 percent of the electorate (i.e., 21,405 votes) were mobilized, in part, by the list they received.

Given the diversity of Islamist candidates, it is impossible to estimate decisively the mobilization power of this movement. Yet, because each voter cast only one ballot per district, voting behaviour in any given electoral district can serve as a social and political "laboratory" for analyzing public support for various campaign platforms. In the first district, after adding the number of votes obtained by the first candidate (38 percent) to the second (10 percent) – both of whom are Islamists - and taking into account the level of support given to other Islamist candidates in the same district, one can calculate the lowest rate of Islamic mobilization (i.e., 48 percent, by adding 38 and 10). This means that nearly half of the voters in the capital voted for either of these two candidates.

Another indicator of voting behaviour is the political affiliation of the 17 candidates who won more than 5% of the votes: among these candidates, ten are Islamists.

The classification of the winning candidates was a matter of intense debate the day after the announcement of voting results. Many commentators and analysts used the term "Islamist technocrats" to characterize the winners. The Minister of Interior, Prince Nayef Bin Abdul-Aziz, underestimated the

impact and meaning of the electoral results when he said: “We are all representing an Islamic current. We are all Muslims in this country”. Although there is no doubt about the technocratic experience of the seven winners (five of whom hold a Ph.D. degree and two of whom are businessmen or professionals holding posts in the higher administration), the ideological affiliation of those candidates was debatable. All, however, were considered to be moderate Islamists.

Election results other key cities did not contradict the tendencies seen in Riyadh. Moderate Islamists won in the cities of Jeddah, Mecca, Madinah, Tabuk, and Al-Taif, and in Dammam as in Shi'i majority cities. Throughout Saudi Arabia, the winners in the municipal elections were those on the “recommended” or “golden” lists supported by the Sheikhs of the Islamic revival. (Unlike in Riyadh, however, most of the revivalist/reformist Sheikhs in the these towns and cities revealed their names and identity.)

What comes next?

The government and the citizens of Saudi Arabia viewed this experiment as the first step on a long reformist path. The elections also provided Saudis with a number of lessons.

The campaigning and balloting process amply demonstrated that Saudi Arabian society is ready and able to undertake such experiments in public political participation, and to utilize electoral mechanisms with facility and efficiency. Candidates and voters alike displayed a great deal of awareness of and avid involvement with this process, and practiced their political and civil rights in a civil and highly competent manner. The overall process proved that Saudis are quite comfortable with elections as a means of achieving participation in the decision-making and as a mean for expressing their political will. These elections also illustrated – as the results indicate - that Saudi society’s political consciousness is highly developed, as their electoral turn out was not hindered by the anticipated obstacles that some predicted would prevent people

from full involvement in the electoral process and the democratic experience (i.e., tribalism and monetary inducements to vote for particular candidates).

Although the tribal vote played a noticeable role in rural areas, its imprint was much less visible in urban areas, where tribal candidates placed well behind their Islamist competitors. We can thus hypothesize that Saudi urban society has abandoned tribal trends and became more imbued with individualistic values and behaviours, as well as more capable of making choices according to modern political criteria (i.e., the ideologies and the political programs of candidates).

Yet we should not assume that tribal influences were completely absent from the Saudi political map. It is clear, however, that tribal ideologies and practices were intimately related to forging alliances in a strategic manner indicative of supra-tribal interests. Tribalism was by no means the only, or the primary, motivation for most voters to go to the polls. A vast and growing middle class comprised of employees, professionals, and educated people are now a key component of Saudi Arabia’s major cities. This emerging class wants to be part of the political game and to place their own representatives in the political arena to push for reformist demands and projects.

Similarly, monetary inducements and campaign expenditures played a small role in deciding the candidates’ success. Although some hopefuls spent significant sums on their campaigns, they still did not win. This is yet further evidence of voters’ maturity, and proof that the financial class of Saudi society (which commonly exploits, or is seen as exploiting, the other classes) did not enjoy much popularity or wield undue influence. Most Saudis are aware that the representatives of this class have gained their wealth and influence thanks to close connections with the official ruling circles. This does not mean, however, that the defeat of businessmen and contractors meant that money could no longer influence electoral campaigns, or limit the success of the Islamists. A considerable number of winners in Riyadh and Jeddah were businessmen, but they owed their to their good

reputations and the explicit ideological line they advances, rather than their wealth or their connections.

The municipal elections also illuminated the weakness of the liberal trend in the Saudi society. Historical factors might help to explain this. Although the liberals were often the leaders of and advocates of reform - especially between 1991 and 2003 - they now seem unable inability to reach all sectors of Saudi society because of their elitist positions. Conversely, Islamists who emerged from the margins of the official religious institutions now dominate the religious and educational spheres. Saudi liberals could not successfully compete with the Islamists outside of educational institutions, but only achieved visibility and a degree of influence in their capacity as distinguished members of Saudi Arabia's media sector. Thus, no one can claim that the defeat of the liberals was due a new "conservative trend" in Saudi society. Rather, the liberals' poor showing stemmed from their weak organizational capabilities and fragmentation, as well as their growing distance from the daily concerns of the other classes of Saudi society.

Finally, the municipal elections cannot easily be described as "democratic" if we understand the word "democracy" to signify citizens' freedom to choose their own representatives in the political arena by means of elections. Although it seems impossible - from a strictly legal point of view - to describe these municipal elections as heralding a new democratic order, this first step should be

followed by more efforts to complete the reformist process and involve citizens more meaningfully in local and national decision-making processes. Among the crucial steps towards enhancing democratic practices and values in Saudi Arabia are the following:

1. Ending the contradictions and tensions between bureaucracy and democracy in Saudi Arabia by ensuring that direct or indirect elections are key to filling all municipal posts, thereby placing municipal administration under the control and supervision of the voters.
2. Expanding authority of municipal councils to include all pertinent issues related to municipal budgets, while also transferring authority for the provision of infrastructure, services, and land allocation to municipal bodies.
3. Reforming the electoral system by effecting a "one person, one vote" system that will render local political representation truly reflective of the will of the voters in their electoral jurisdictions only.
4. Increasing the number of voters by enfranchising women and lowering the minimum age of voting eligibility.
5. Expanding the sphere of elections to encompass the free election of not only all members of Saudi Arabia's municipal councils, but also the regional councils, and the Shura Council as well.
6. Granting local, regional, and Shura councils more legislative and supervisory authority.

Recent ARI Publications

- *Bewildering Parliamentary Elections in Egypt*, Dr. Mohamad Abdel Salam
- *Peace and Constitution in Sudan*, Dr. Haidar Ibrahim
- *Egypt's Presidential Elections*, Dr. Amr el Shoubaki
- *Municipal Elections in Saudi Arabia*, Dr. Pascal Ménoret

For further information, visit our website