

# **Women Candidates and Arab Media: Challenging Conservatism in Bahraini Politics**

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## **Abstract**

Women have yet to enter to Bahrain's parliament despite being permitted to run for some years. With its king promoting social and economic change, the media has portrayed positive images of Arab women as professionals against a backdrop of religious conservatism. The communications strategy adopted by some women candidates to attain election to parliament and the response of the local media are analysed utilizing content analysis. Despite some variation of coverage, the media in this Persian Gulf country were found to be fair to all women candidates and generally gender-neutral. Although the women candidates who applied a well thought-out communications strategy did better in media coverage and voting results, ultimately none were elected. This article explores the reasons for this failure in terms of Islamist religious interpretations of the role of women and Arab cultural conventions regarding family life. Finally, the authors speculate briefly about the prospects of political communications by women challenging Arab cultural conservatism in the future.

**Keywords:** Arab culture, Bahrain, Islam, political communication, print media, women candidates

As with other Gulf states, Bahrain has gone through a period of intense political and socio-economic change in the past two decades. It has seen changes in women's enfranchisement as a result of the reforms applied by the Bahraini king, Shaikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, who succeeded his father in March 1999. As part of his plans to renew and reorganize Bahrain's public administration, economy, trade, education, social life and women's progress, the new king promised elections in which women could cast

their votes alongside men (*Gulf News*, 1999). This change in Bahrain's economic and social conditions has led to the enhancement of cultural sensitivity towards women as active members in the society. However, the conservative religious norms that persist, and are possibly intensifying, throughout the Middle East have affected some journalists' agenda in portraying women. Ultimately, the media have responded by developing more positive images reflecting the new role of the modern Arab woman, though this has not translated into women's representation in politics.

Nonetheless, despite being permitted to run for some years, women have yet to enter to Bahrain's parliament. For the second election in which women were allowed to stand, a communications strategy was adopted by some women candidates to attain election to parliament in the hope of increasing their chances of success. This article seeks to analyse the response of local media to these efforts to raise the profile of women candidates by using content analysis and secondary data. The main research question for the larger research project of which this article is a part was: to what extent can an electoral campaign communication model influence voters' decisions in favour of Bahraini women candidates in the parliamentary elections? Since no women were elected, factors affecting women's parliamentary success are evidently a combination of paradoxical elements, primarily cultural context; communication structures, political establishment and social organization. Consequently this article will attempt also to account for the election failure in terms of Islamist religious interpretations about the role of women and Arab cultural conventions about family life.

### **Bahrain Background**

An island state located in the Persian Gulf between Saudi Arabia and Iraq, Bahrain had since the collapse of the Turkish Empire after the First World War been a British protectorate. During the 1960s women made substantial strides in education and employment, which came to fruition in the post-independence 1970s. The younger, more educated urban generation discarded the *abaya* (black body-covering gown), drove cars, took part in political demonstrations, communicated with male colleagues from their student days and from work, joined nationalist and radical leftist groups, and organized themselves in civil, non-governmental organizations such as women's societies, female sections of sports clubs and professional organizations. With such a strong drive to achieve and a nationalist commitment to build, women were enlisted in

establishing Bahrain's modern society during its earlier years of independence. Simultaneously, the government was anxious to build the infrastructure of the state, and women represented an important element in the Bahraini workforce. This fact legitimized the more liberal behaviour of women in seeking education and socializing outside the home, a behaviour not fully condoned by tradition and the conservative society.

Nevertheless, Bahraini women still had few personal or civil rights. Their earliest political experience was a disappointment, as they were excluded from the short-lived liberal experiment with the parliament in 1975, mostly because the radical and liberal men in society did not support women's issues (Haddad and Esposito, 1998). While these men encouraged women to support social change, and contribute to political change, they were traditional and conservative in this area partly 'because the traditional tribal orientation was still very patriarchal in both Sunni and Shi'ite societies' (Haddad and Esposito, 1998, 176). Conversely, the liberalization of the political realm has brought significant achievements for both Sunni and Shia Islamist political societies in elections, giving religious males a legal platform to pursue their policies.

### **Islam and Politics**

The challenge of political Islam to secular modes of government is a recent phenomenon although it is presented by its advocates as a prolongation of an extended tradition in Islamic political thought. Their allegation of the illegitimacy of non-religious rule rests on the assumption that Islam and politics are inseparable historically, and they point to the period of early Islam when the Prophet Muhammad acted as ruler and spiritual leader in Medina, intertwining religious and political roles. This thought has been incorporated in the political philosophy of justice and Islamic government, which provides an ideological framework for political thought (Akbarzadeh and Saeed, 2003).

During the twentieth century, several significant changes occurred in the lives of many Muslim women. Influenced by the West and by Islamic modernism, many issues such as legal reforms, voting rights, education and employment opportunities have impacted on and broadened women's societal role. They were no longer limited to being wives and mothers: women were now at liberty to participate in several arenas of society, ranging from politics to the professions (Haddad and Esposito, 1998, xv).

Nonetheless, women's status has invariably been undermined in the Islamic political arena. The Qur'an, the Sharia law, the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and the lives of his companions, and *fiqh* or Islamic jurisprudence have all contributed to forming the doctrine that has defined women's rights in the modern age. Contemporary scholars of Islamic thought have argued for the most liberal interpretation of Islam possible, while the conservatives have interpreted the same sources to justify imposing greater restrictions on women's roles (Haddad and Esposito, 1998). Within an Islamic framework, both Arab women and men have thus been engaged in public debate on the role of women in a rapidly changing society.

### **Social Change and the Middle East**

In his book *Democracy in the Balance: Culture and Society in the Middle East*, Kamrava (1998, 131) quotes Wilbert Moore as arguing that: 'Social change is the significant alteration of social structures (that is, of patterns of action and interaction), including consequences and manifestations of such structures embodied in norms (rules of conduct), values, and cultural products and symbols.' Thus all societies are subject to social change, which is actually a natural process of transformation, regardless of their evolutionary level or their technological or political sophistication.

Social change in the Middle East has generated much debate on women's parliamentary participation. Although some governments have allowed for women's participation, this has led to some surprising results, especially in the country under study – the Kingdom of Bahrain. A study by the Women Affairs Committee at the Democratic Arab-Islamic Wassat Society, identified several reasons for this, as demonstrated by respondents' perceptions: women are not convinced of other women's ability to run for public office; women lacked political awareness; the influence of religious leaders and conservative figures diminished women's chances of success, as did adherence to rigid social traditions; women lacked the capabilities to administer public affairs, while men were perceived as having an aptitude for solving social problems; and women suffered from the lack of effective women's support forums to facilitate their election.

Over the past five years, women have nearly doubled their representation in Arab country parliaments, albeit from a small base. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) annual global survey revealed that the proportion of women parliamentarians in Arab

countries has risen from 3.5 percent to 6.5 percent since 2000, and further progress was expected following elections in Iraq. Nevertheless, the region is still well below the world average of 15.7 percent representation at the beginning of 2005 and 'will continue to require particular attention', the Geneva-based association of parliaments added (in Middle East Online, 2005). Eleven of the 184 parliaments surveyed, including those in most Gulf states (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates), and Pacific islands, are entirely dominated by men. Where there is some women's representation, it barely exceeds 2 percent: Yemen has one woman among its 301 parliamentarians, while Oman has 2 out of 83, and Lebanon 3 out of 128. In comparison, according to the IPU, 46 countries in the world have parliaments where women constitute over 20 percent of members (Middle East Online, 2005).

### **Political Climate in Bahrain**

Bahrain's constitution was changed in 2002, granting women the right both to vote and to run for political office (Fenn, 2003). Accompanying these rights has also been a major drive to involve women in changing the country's political climate. In the Arab male-dominated culture, a right in itself may not be sufficient, for women need also to be encouraged, even compelled, to exercise that right. To understand why this resistance exists – even from women – one must examine the patriarchal nature of the culture, where women are brought up to accept this constrained way of life. During Bahrain's 2002 elections, the division in society was clear: Islamist societies/parties such as Asalah, Al Wefaq and Al Menbar had no women on their own candidate lists and some were not in favour of voting anyone for a female candidate (Al Otaibi, 2008). Ultimately, 8 women ran for election out of a total of 177 candidates (Fenn, 2003), and only 2 of those 8 reached the second round. Although women's voter participation was 47.7 percent as compared to male voter participation of 52.6 percent, all women candidates lost.

To encourage women's participation in the subsequent 2006 elections, *Tamkeen* – the Women's Empowerment Programme – was instituted in 2004 by the Supreme Council for Women in Bahrain. It aimed to train women candidates for the parliamentary elections over a period of a year and a half, offering courses on parliamentary rules and election regulations. Prior to conducting fieldwork, the first author was immersed in this programme for more than a year and thus was a

participant-observer, gaining invaluable first-hand knowledge of the candidates. The role as insider/outsider in this research context depended on her relationships with the participants and their perceptions of her involvement. As Zhang (2004) argued, the researcher is consequently an inescapable and inseparable part of the environment in which he or she acts.

For the most part, the candidature of the women was publicized using printed media and traditional methods such as billboards, brochures, word of mouth, personal or team canvassing. In addition, handbills and mobile messages were distributed to encourage voters to attend campaign tents. As a sign of the times, mobile messages (SMS) were widely used for advertising and formed an essential interpersonal method of communication. For disseminating a candidate's lectures, dates, subjects and times it proved also to be the most effective and cheapest medium. While such full utilization of SMS was tolerated, the practice backfired on some candidates who sent mobile messages late at night or early in the morning, annoying voters by this bombardment.

A tradition in the Middle East is campaign tents – large physical tents within which candidates meet their constituents to discuss their political platform. Tents are arranged to cater for men and women, sometimes jointly and sometimes single-sex. When both sexes attend the same lecture, they usually sit on opposite sides of the tent, for example women to the right and men to the left. This arrangement is done automatically as women chose their side and men do the same. Women prefer to wear their *abaya* on such occasions, not because they wear them on a daily basis but rather out of deference to the men attending. During the months of the campaign, other lecturers are also invited according to the candidate's agenda and ideology. Activities for children and mothers were organized and house-to-house canvassing took place to talk to families and discuss their agendas. To attract attendance to the lecture events, dinner was catered, either in wrapped packages or more formal buffets.

The election campaigns comprised heated debates on several issues of national interest, such as the fight for greater equality in the fields of employment, housing, health, and education. Attracting foreign investment into the country was another issue for discussion, as well as the chronic problems of foreigners replacing Bahrainis in the labour market, and extending citizenship and voting rights to regional migrants. Campaign styles depended mainly on the constituency's voter ideology and religious sect. Hence, the poorer areas were targeted by candidate speeches on employment

problems, housing and wage increases, while in the mixed constituencies the focus was more on sectarian issues. Women candidates tried to lead debates concerning family problems, adolescent difficulties, sex identification troubles, elderly women crises; while male candidates were mostly concerned with political corruption, and recommendations for constitutional modifications.

### **Revisiting the Politics**

Beliefs regarding the media's political power and influence on voters and election campaigns have almost come full circle during the past 70 years (Trent and Friedenber, 2000). At first, it was thought that the media had full control of individuals, as in the 'hypodermic effect'. Then this power was seen to have a limited and secondary effect which only motivated individuals to vote but did not affect choices. In 1960, when television was used as a medium to promote candidates in political campaigns, the scientists found it difficult to deny that the media some influence even if they did not create massive changes in voting behaviour. Also, the notion of a 'multi-step flow' – a revitalization of the two-step flow – was formed to comprise a source, receiver and the filtering of information through a gatekeeper. The 'diffusion-of-information' perspective demonstrated the media's influence on the acquisition of political knowledge, and more thorough research in the 1970s revealed that it even led to action. Many scholars now consider media important because it has the power to determine what information is to be highlighted to suit a political agenda, that is, 'agenda setting'.

Two issues are critical to understanding the context of women's participation in the Bahraini elections. First, gender stereotyping in the Arab world is considered one of the most controversial problems, as Muslim women continue to strive for senior political positions despite facing the prejudices of their local culture and conservative Islamic ideologies. These ideas, according to Mernissi (1996), originated at a time when access to knowledge was a male privilege and women were confined to the domestic sphere. Male-dominated politics is not unique to Bahrain or the Arab/Muslim world, for most members of the US Congress and Europe's parliaments have historically been male. The difference, however, lies in the degree of acceptance of women in politics (Massis, 1998). Although women in Bahrain have been in the workforce it became necessary for families to have dual incomes, women in political leadership roles are rare.

Second, as first theorized by Downs (1957), there are two major approaches to voting during elections in general. Voters either make their choices based on the desire to improve their economic benefits and status or to support their ideological, economic, and political stance on certain issues. The former falls under the 'self-interest theory', which suggests that individuals choose what maximizes the meeting of their expected needs, whereas the second approach supports the idea that people are socialized into a particular ideological system that moulds their values and attitudes (Deutsch and Kinnvall, 2002). The latter is arguably the case in the Kingdom of Bahrain in relation to the effect of the social context on voters, as people in small-population societies tend to be significantly influenced by religious and cultural ideologies, and are thus affected by social norms, opinion leaders and patriarchal perspectives.

An earlier study of Bahrain's 2002 elections, found that 67 percent of voters did not agree with the idea that women should be politically involved, or that this involvement would change stereotypes of women (Bahrain Centre for Studies and Research, 2005). However, in subsequent research (Al Otaibi, 2008), surprisingly, another matter has risen: that the prejudice was more pronounced among the younger generation of the voter sample. This may be due to their being impressionable and thus easily influenced by religious extremists. It is noteworthy that an Islamic fundamentalist trend in terms of segregation and sectarianism has recently re-emerged in Bahrain. Therefore, the younger generation has been subjected to these extreme religious views – perhaps unaware of their society functioning any other way. This is not the case with the older generation, who had been exposed to the more liberal eras of the 1960s and 1970s in the Middle East.

### **The Case for Case Studies**

While this article concentrates on the media coverage, the aim of the larger study was to determine the effectiveness of a campaign communication strategy plan in predicting and affecting voter decision-making in favour of women candidates. The study investigated the Kingdom of Bahrain over a two-year period of observation, as it was considered one of the most promising Arab countries in its endeavours to attain a democratic existence. The research investigated the triangle of electoral actors: voters (as both the source and the receiver), candidate, and communication. While each of these is important in its own right, their roles and functions are inextricably linked since



all elements affect, and are affected by, the information flow (Fiske, 1990, 73 ff.). Such phenomena are best investigated via the case study, though this method has been largely ignored in social research because, as Davidman and Reinharz (1992, 164 ff.) argue, male academics rarely worked on women's organizations.

Feminist interest in case studies has stemmed from a desire to rectify research shortcomings and compensate for male-dominated theorizing. Theodorson and Theodorson (cited in Davidman and Reinharz, 1992) state that a case study can be conducted on a person, a group, a process, a community or a society, or any other unit of social life if 'the case being studied is typical of cases of a certain type ... through intensive analysis generalizations may be made which will be applicable to other cases of the same type'. They argue that although case studies are basically done to generate and test a theory, they have three additional major purposes: (a) to analyse the change of the phenomenon over time; (b) to analyse the significance of the phenomenon for future events and studies; (c) to analyse the relationship among the elements of a phenomenon. Thus case studies are of significance to research of political phenomena since they analyse the historical development of a particular political struggle.

In the Bahrain research context, a campaign strategy for effective political communication (Figure 1) was adopted by the embedded cases of two women candidates (EC1 and EC2) and was monitored against the control cases of two other candidates (CC1 and CC2). These candidates were selected for research as they had been members of the support group for potential women politicians organised by the Supreme Council for Women. All four participating candidates were educated and professional women in their thirties and forties, all Muslim though of somewhat varying religious practice, and most married with supportive male family - spouses, brothers and/or fathers. Effective application of the strategy by the candidates, which involved analysing the needs and concerns of voters then adopting organizational, strategic and communication plans to address them, was beyond the researchers' control, although one of them was an active participant-observer. This study's approach involved interactive fieldwork, with the use of personal oversight in organizational settings throughout the campaign stages. The flexibility of this design allowed the researchers to investigate various sources of data and carry out surveys that focused on areas that had not been adequately investigated by the quantitative analysis results, or if further clarification on certain attitudes and behaviours affecting the phenomenon under study

was required (Yin, 2003). The entire process was inductive, exploratory as well as descriptive, with the women candidates observed almost on a full-time basis to record their campaign activities.

Election media coverage in Bahrain was provided by both broadcast and print media. The radio and television stations were mainly concerned with motivating eligible voters to vote, in addition to informing voters of voting procedures. Consequently print media were the primary tools used to cover the candidates' campaigns and activities. Thus, Bahrain's five main local newspapers (*Al Ayam*, *Al Watan*, *Al Wasat*, *Akhbar Al Khaleej* and *Al Waqt*) proved the most effective media to promote candidates and motivate election participation. Through agenda-setting, these newspapers help to create a social reality contributing to gender stereotyping or categorization (Al Wadi, 2005). Newspaper coverage uses 'Attention', defined as the frequency of a candidate's media appearance, and 'Emphasis', the prominence of the mentions within the medium used. Although Bahrain's print media are private corporations, they are expected to be neutral with regard to issues such as government versus opposition, and men versus women. It was observed that some newspapers – such as *Al Watan* and *Akhbar Al Khaleej* – were pro-government and hence sympathetic to government agendas, including women's political candidature. Others, such as *Al Wasat*, were generally pro-opposition and therefore in favour of alternative political agendas.

### **Monitoring the Media**

In the months prior to election day the first author reviewed all Bahraini newspapers systematically on a daily basis, in order to identify the issues and social groups that were most prominent. Special attention was given to national and personal events, and to the lives of potential candidates during this period. To corroborate the importance of these events, this researcher monitored television news and current affairs programmes at both the national and local levels daily during this period. This content analysis had to be exhaustive, in order to identify the variables used for the research model and the values considered of salient importance in the study. The information simultaneously served as a cross-reference for precision and transparency of the research. The following sections report the findings of content analysis of media coverage over the three months of election campaigning.

### *Campaign Issues Raised*

In the run-up to the elections many readers' letters and some journalists' articles suggested, either openly or obliquely, that women were not allowed into parliament by Islamic law. Nonetheless, women candidates in Bahrain enjoyed a significant share of the printed news – either through articles or interviews, in addition to a daily report about all candidates' campaigns. The latter was a major guide for voters who were interested in following candidate activities and campaign events.

*Gulf Daily News* (2006) reported that several women candidates faced an orchestrated campaign of political abuse against them through text messages telling them to withdraw from the contest. Anonymous callers warned female candidates to quit the elections, while text messages to the women ridiculed them for venturing into a male domain. Rumours were initiated via SMS and some offensive photos were sent via Bluetooth to tarnish one candidate's image. On 22 October in *Khaleej Times Online* (2006), a correspondent from the capital Manama reported that women candidates were facing threats. In the article, the reporter went on to say: 'Much concern is mounting in political and other circles as female election candidates have reportedly started receiving anonymous threats and blunt mobile messages urging them to back out from next month's parliamentary election in Bahrain.'

One woman candidate (CC1) was in the newspapers on a weekly basis – either because of interviews or coverage of campaign activity, and in the two weeks prior to the elections she was in the print media on a daily basis. CC1 also received good coverage regarding all her activities and was interviewed twice, with great emphasis on her candidacy and platform. Another candidate (ED1) was in the newspapers three days in a row, after her campaign tent was attacked and vandalized and a columnist allocated three unpaid articles to promote her activities, without charging a fee. This columnist, Abdulla Al Abasi of the pro-government *Al Watan* newspaper, was a liberal who believes in women's rights. On 3 December 2006, immediately following the elections, Ismat Almosawi, a prominent Bahraini columnist wrote in her column in *Al Ayam* newspaper about EC1, stating that her above-average voting percentage was a surprise to everyone, and attributed this to the candidate and her family leading a professional campaign. Attention was mainly focused on comparisons of candidates' agenda and issues discussed, while gender was never one of the issues discussed.

### *Political Cartoons*

While not plentiful, political cartoons were a means of analysing the stance of the newspaper towards the state of the political campaign, as illustrated by three examples. In one sympathetic, if somewhat skeptical cartoon (Figure 2) in a pro-government newspaper, *Akhbar Al Khaleej*, a woman candidate is shown squeezed between two men candidates while saying: 'Get me out of here!' Since the newspaper was broadly supportive of women candidates, the cartoon questioned whether the latter were quite ready yet.

A second cartoon (Figure 3) in the pro-opposition *Al Wasat* newspaper had one woman stating: 'I wanted to elect her but she dresses in an old-fashioned style.' The patronising idea conveyed was that women tend to assess women candidates by their general appearances and not by their political merits. It seemed to imply that women are superficial and one-dimensional in their voting decisions, appealing to stereotypes of women, perhaps among the general population.

On the other hand, there was one neutral, if cynical cartoon (Figure 4), in the same newspaper *Al Wasat*, which used illustrations of sign-boards encouraging voters to vote for women candidates, insinuating that women candidates were themselves demonstrating and asking for their voting rights. It remains an open question whether this associates such women with social unrest and upheaval in the mind of the cartoonist, or whether it is meant to be read by audiences as a legitimate appeal for rectification of a social injustice.

### *Space Allocated*

Newspapers were the primary source of information in the 2006 Bahraini election, and played a major role in promoting candidates. Thanks to heightened political interest during the election season, and because of how dependent the public were on newspapers as a source of information, various newspapers gained about a 100 percent increase in income from advertisements. Furthermore some journalists were paid between US \$1200 and US \$2400 to support certain candidates by their parties and supporters, an accepted practice in Bahrain. Television and radio were not as profitable during elections as the printed media, due to the neutrality clause of the Election Law, which prohibited publicly-owned media entities from promoting any candidates. A study by the Bahrain Society for Public Freedom and Democracy Support, in cooperation

with the Arabian Group for Media Monitoring and Denmark-based International Media Support, revealed that Bahrain media coverage was fairly well-distributed across the major print media (Figure 5).

In fact, women candidates received daily print media attention by means of campaign activity coverage, interviews, articles about women's issues, and general or pre-paid advertisements. Independent women candidates received about the same amount of coverage as independent male candidates – if not slightly more. Women candidates' media presence was as clear to the average reader as it was to the researcher, and many articles were written about prominent women candidates. Candidate EC1 received a good share of coverage due to the tent vandal incident as well as the attendance of journalists at her tent, appearing on the front page of *Al Wasat* newspaper. The second tent attack on 26 October 2006 was again front-page news in *Al Wasat* in addition to other newspapers.

#### *Prominence of Items*

The prominence of examined items in the election coverage attempts to measure the amount of coverage given to each of the four women candidates in the two newspapers selected for their market dominance and differing political stance, *Al Wasat* and *Al Watan*. Prominence in this study was defined by two major elements: location and size. In this category, items were identified according to the location of their publication in the newspaper pages. They were categorized into front page; inside page with a main headline; and 'fillers' for other small items in the rest of the pages. The pro-government *Al Wasat* was better than *Al Watan* in terms of the location of the items published about the four women candidates (Table 1). The results shows that 8.7 percent of the items in *Al Wasat* were published on the front page, while there were no appearances for them on the front page of pro-opposition *Al Watan*. The items published on the inside pages with main headlines – normally with photos as well – received the highest percentages in both newspapers; though there were more 'fillers' in *Al Watan* than in *Al Wasat*.

In this study, the total size of the items published in each newspaper is an important element to measure the prominence of each of the four women candidates (Table 2). Therefore, the total area of each item was measured in square centimetres, and then recoded into four main group sizes for easier analysis. This categorization shows an unusual result for pro-government *Al Watan* as 40.7 percent of its items were

larger than 1000 sq. cm – which equals one full page, and sometimes even two full pages. However, pro-opposition *Al Wasat* coverage of the four women candidates was more prominent in terms of the total size of its items, with 87.8 percent of the items in the size range of up to 999 sq. cm. This apparent anomaly needs to be seen in the context of type of content and media stance.

### *Appearance and Type*

Most of the coverage on the four women candidates was in the form of news stories, while only EC1 and CC2 appeared in columns. Control-case candidate CC2 had the highest percentage of ‘edited advertisements’, which all appeared in the pro-opposition *Al Wasat*, while all four women candidates appeared once in such advertisements or paid advertorials in the pro-government *Al Watan*. The analysis of the *Al Wasat* items shows that candidate EC1 had the most appearances with 41.3 percent; followed by EC2 with 39.1 percent; CC2 with 10.9 percent, and finally CC1 with only 8.7 percent. The data shows that candidate EC1 appeared more in news stories – 32.6 percent of the items which mentioned her were news stories – and she also appeared in columns and special features, and she paid for an advertisement in *Al Wasat* only once (2.2 percent). Candidate EC2 appeared prominently in the news stories in *Al Wasat* as well, with 21.7 percent. She had the highest percentage of paid advertisements among the four women candidates, though just 13 percent of all advertisements, paid and unpaid. She appeared least in features and special features, and never appeared in a column. Candidate CC2’s appearance in *Al Wasat* was weak: no advertisements or features, and minimum appearance in columns and special features (2.2 percent); she appeared most in news stories, with 6.5 percent. Candidate CC1 appeared least in news stories (4.3 percent), features and special features (2.2 percent), and had no appearances in advertisements and columns.

The analysis of *Al Watan* showed that all four women candidates appeared once in the so-called ‘edited advertisements’ with 3.7 percent. Candidate CC2 was the most fortunate among them as she had the most appearances of the four women candidates at 40.7 percent; most of the items which mentioned her were in the form of news stories (29.6 percent). However, CC2 never appeared in the *Al Watan* interface corner (the feedback section of the newspaper devoted to delicate issues related to candidates, such as a fight in the campaign headquarters or campaign worker misconduct), and had

minimal appearances in the debate and feature items, with 3.7 percent. Most of items of candidate EC1 also were in the form of news stories (22.2 percent of all women candidates); she had a reasonable percentage of appearances in features (11.1 percent), though no appearance in the interface corner and debate items. Candidate CC2 appeared in 14.8 percent of *Al Watan's* coverage of all with only 7.4 percent in the form of news stories, and 3.7 percent in the interface corner. The other control-case candidate – CC1 – was also weak in terms of her appearances in *Al Watan*, with only 7.4 percent of that for all four women candidates. She never appeared in any news stories in *Al Watan*, nor did she appear in features or the interface corner.

### *Objectivity Towards Candidates*

Measuring media objectivity with regard to the candidates is one of the most important elements of this analysis. It helps to present a broad picture of the portrayal of the four women candidates in both newspapers, and helps identify which newspaper was supportive of which candidate. The results of both newspapers show that both embedded-case candidates EC2 and EC1 were competing for the highest percentage of positive items; while there was a significant difference between them and the two control-case candidates, CC1 and CC2, who received the lowest percentages of positive items. There was only one item of negative coverage in each newspaper: it was against EC2 in *Al Wasat*, and against CC2 in *Al Watan*.

The analysis shows that the pro-government *Al Wasat* was mostly positive towards all four women candidates. However embedded-case candidate EC1 received the most support in 32.6 percent of its items, followed by EC2 with 23.9 percent. While control-case candidates CC1 and CC2 were positively supported in acceptable percentages of coverage, CC2 was the only one to receive negative coverage, in one item in *Al Wasat* (2.2 percent). Similarly, EC2 and EC1 were competing for the highest percentage of positive coverage in *Al Watan*. Candidate EC2 received the highest percentage, with 37 percent of positive items, followed by CC1 with 25.9 percent. Candidates CC2 and CC1 received similar results with only 7.4 percent positive items.

### *Overall Media Stance*

The data analysis shows that the majority of the items published about one or more of the four women candidates were in the form of news stories. Advertisements were a

significant percentage in *Al Wasat*, while there were no 'direct' advertisements in the less sympathetic *Al Watan*. Candidate CC2 had the highest percentage of paid advertisements, which all appeared in *Al Wasat*, while all four women candidates only appeared in a so-called 'edited advertisement' in *Al Watan* once. Only EC1 and CC2 appeared in featured columns.

The pro-opposition *Al Wasat* newspaper provided greater prominence to the women candidates than the pro-government *Al Watan* in terms of the location of the items published about the four women candidates. The items, which were published in the inside pages with main headlines – normally with photos as well – had the highest percentages of coverage in both newspapers, while there were more 'fillers' in *Al Watan* than in *Al Wasat*. Only three items were coded in the five days after polling day in both newspapers and EC1 was mentioned in all three items. Both embedded candidates EC1 and EC2 were more prominent in the coverage of both newspapers in terms of size and location than the control-case candidates.

### **Reflections on Research**

In the researchers' view, the media were fair with all women candidates for they were given the same opportunities as men. The embedded case studies received positive coverage which contradicts with Graber's (1997) view that women candidates were mainly defined in terms of their physical attributes such as clothing, hairstyles or housekeeping and motherly skills, or either ignored entirely or portrayed in a stereotypical fashion in the press. Yet not one of the women candidates was successful in the Bahraini elections of 2006. The final election results showed that although three of the four women candidates had portrayed a conservative religious image, male religious leaders with highly conservative agendas were preferred by voters – especially since one *fatwa* decreed the boycotting of electing women. The increasing use in Bahrain of women's *ma'atim* or gender-segregated religious centres within the Shiite branch of Islam for social, health and legal education holds promise that this space might become of political import as is the case with men's *ma'atim* (Pandya, 2010).

Besides, in recent years Islamic pressure groups have used opinion leaders, information gatekeepers, including the media, and *fatwas* to gain power, and influence legislation and electoral politics. Consequently, religious parties were the real winners of this Bahraini and other Middle Eastern elections in the year 2006. Their political



triumph has been attributed by Bin Sager (2006) to their self-discipline and their ability to unify their supporters. He argues that the Islamists' simple slogan of 'Islam is the solution' appeals to many voters – especially in environments marked by social inequity and economic mismanagement. The weakness of competing parties, such as the liberals and the leftists, also represents a contributing factor. Since the Islamist parties have no history in the political arena, they do not carry the responsibility for past failures that Middle Eastern societies suffer from. In a parallel article, Al Dossary (2006) states that the Islamist political parties were able to win elections and achieve political power because they tap into deeply embedded ethical issues and manipulate voters' emotions – both of which are intrinsic to Arab culture. Hence the research agrees with the findings of Norris and Inglehart (2000): that strong evidence suggests that cultural values constitute a key factor in voters' choices. Al Lamky's (2007) research on a handful of Arab women who have achieved high levels of leadership in business and government in neighbouring Oman, aided by exceptional socialization and personality traits, suggests that work/family role conflicts and societal expectations inhibit most. Simply stated, in traditional conventional religious cultures, women are perceived to be less qualified than men to run for, achieve and hold public office.

### **Commentary on Outcome**

Despite the considerable effort by the women's political campaign and a reasonably high profile in the media, the outcome of the Bahraini election was disappointing for all involved. The embedded woman candidate (EC1), who cooperated with applying the campaign strategy for political communication based on prior research, received far more votes in a highly-contested constituency and against a well-recognized Islamist candidate. On the other hand, the embedded one (EC2), who had not cooperated with the campaign strategy, was in a comparatively easier district with a more favourable constituency, yet received an unexpectedly low number of votes. This demonstrated that being involved in the community and socializing was considered to be important to many voters in small homogeneous communities. Through proactive societal involvement – providing social services, working with NGOs and participation in communal activities – potential women candidates may communicate more effectively with the electorate, and even become small-scale political figures ahead of future

elections. Maybe, thus reinforced, their media presence would be more instrumental in their political fortunes.

Finally, women candidates complained that they faced a difficult situation with regard to finances: their status as independent candidates with limited income exerted a severe strain on their campaigns. Though the Women's Empowerment Programme had covered some of their media and publicity expenses, compared to other candidates, who were sponsored by political societies, the sums involved were minimal. The need to be cautious in utilizing their financial resources influenced their choices with regard to forming campaign teams, advertising spending, printed media propaganda and campaign headquarters. So long as campaigning is hampered by limited finances and perhaps dependency on their male family members for support, Bahraini women's role in politics will remain appreciably constrained. Nonetheless, Fargues (2005) goes so far as to suggest that lower oil revenues, economic restructuring, higher education levels and reduced household incomes have worked to increase workforce participation and reduce fertility in Arab women. This, together with social activism and political lobbying by women and their sympathizers, implies that the prevalent patriarchy in Arab countries will come under further challenge, in his opinion.

Ever since the October 2002 elections, when women were first granted the vote in Bahrain, no woman has served in its parliament. Male-dominated politics is not unique to the Arab world, for the majority of members of the US Congress and Europe's parliaments have historically been male. The difference, however, is in the degree of acceptance of women in politics (Massis, 1998). Although women in Bahrain have been in the workforce since it became necessary for families to have dual incomes, their role in the political arena has been constrained by the traditional Arab/Islamic culture. Therefore, any discussion of women's participation in elections, as either voters or candidates, cannot ignore the centrality of the patriarchal family in Bahrain or the wider Middle East. The family lies at the centre of socio-economic activities in Arab society and thus constitutes an influential unit as political discussions and decisions take place at home. Tribal alliances and loyalty to kinship and religious affiliations remain supreme since they continue to fulfil basic needs embodied in material interests, security and safety, a sense of belonging, and identity fulfilment, which no other structure – including the state – offers (Amawi, 2001). Political socialization takes place at home, and

patriarchy bestows privileges upon males and elders. The mass media then is ancillary to this dynamic and thus needs to be managed creatively.

It is noteworthy that the Bahraini women's movement continues to be characterized by disunity, competitiveness and the lack of any forward-looking strategies, except for the major role undertaken by the Supreme Council for Women, the advisory body to Bahrain's government on women's issues. Hence, unless Bahraini women raise the level of political awareness among all sectors of society, form a lobby for change and communicate a consistent political message via the media, tangible change may not occur. In describing the paradoxical situation of Arab women, Mustapha Higazi (cited by Jweihan, 2005) states: 'they score high as mothers and very low as political participants'. The reasons for women's disempowerment and male dominance are in his view three-fold: economic looting; sexual looting; and ideological looting. With such a paradoxical social situation, how might women be successful in gaining a higher social and media profile, and – independent of male patronage – break the glass ceiling of political and electoral barriers in the Middle East?

This research reconfirms that the mass media generally reflect cultural norms and patterns, and gather information from differently biased sources in society. The Bahraini media generally offered a positive approach towards women candidates or were gender-neutral, focusing rather on the quality of the candidates' campaigns and the issues. Gender bias was not as apparent in the media as the researchers anticipated. Yet the party affiliations with unpaid journalists or the ideology of the newspaper could be a more compelling explanatory factor than gender bias. While Bahrain's media may be considered to be relatively transparent and free, the patriarchal culture still pervades it either directly or indirectly. On the other hand, gender prejudice against women from a religious perspective was expressed in a number of articles, which were not, however, specifically related to a particular newspaper. In Al Wadi's (2005) study of the portrayal of women in the media during the 2002 elections, she emphasized the government as a major supporter of women candidates and as a centre of authority overarching Bahraini civil society. With regard to the 2006 elections, the present research foregrounds the role of the printed media corporations and their political affiliations as major players in endorsing the candidates or otherwise, while the government's role appears secondary.

### **Prospects for the Future**

The jury is still out on whether the subsequent political upheavals across the Arab world of 2011 may or may not presage a radical change of fortunes for women in politics. Although the media has mostly focused on larger countries like Tunisia, Egypt, Syria and Libya, the unresolved situation in Bahrain has not escaped attention altogether. In Bahrain's case, the issue appears to be one of the majority Shia population's disenchantment with the political dominance of the Sunni majority, which could culminate in a conservative turn supported morally by Iran. Equally, the military presence of the other Gulf states in support of the Bahrain government could also spell political regression for women under the conservative Wahhabi-Sunni influence of Saudi Arabia. However, one lesson that might be gleaned from the radicalization of populations across the Arab world, concerns the significance of the role of interactive social media and to a lesser extent transnational broadcast media, rather than local print media. Perhaps the future prospects for women's representation in politics in Bahrain as elsewhere in the Arab world lie with such social media in the masterful hands of a younger politically-astute generation.

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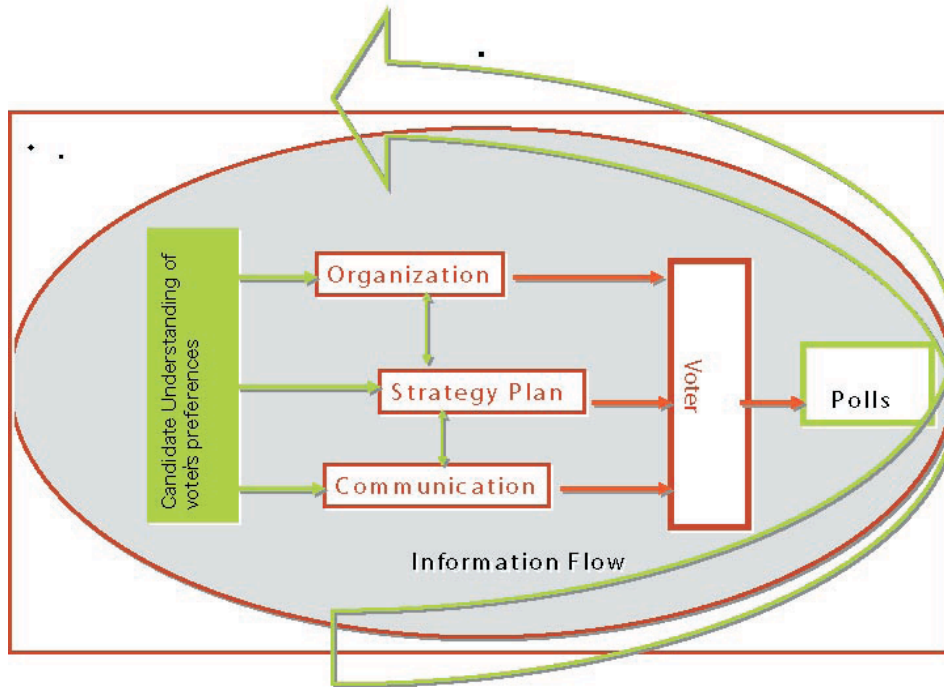
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## Figures and tables

Figure 1



Source: Al Otaibi (2008).

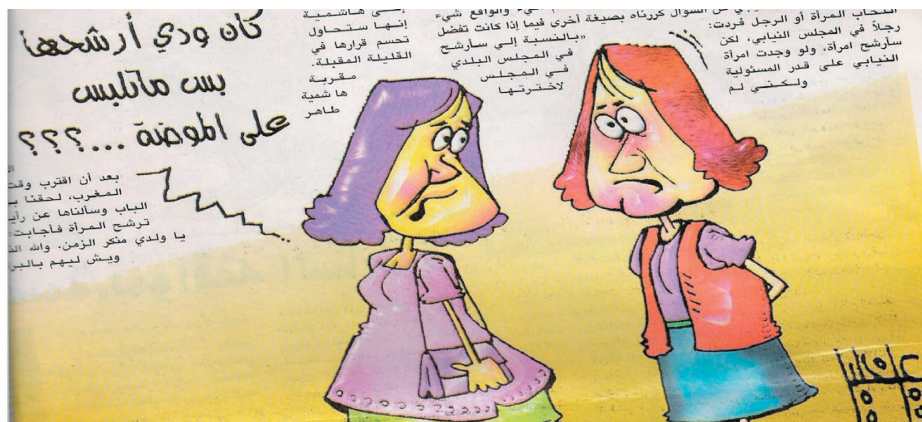
Figure 2: Skeptical-sympathetic cartoon



Source: Akhbar Al Khaleej, 24 October 2006.



Figure 3: Patronizing-stereotyping cartoon



Source: Al Wasat, 24 November 2006, issue 1540.

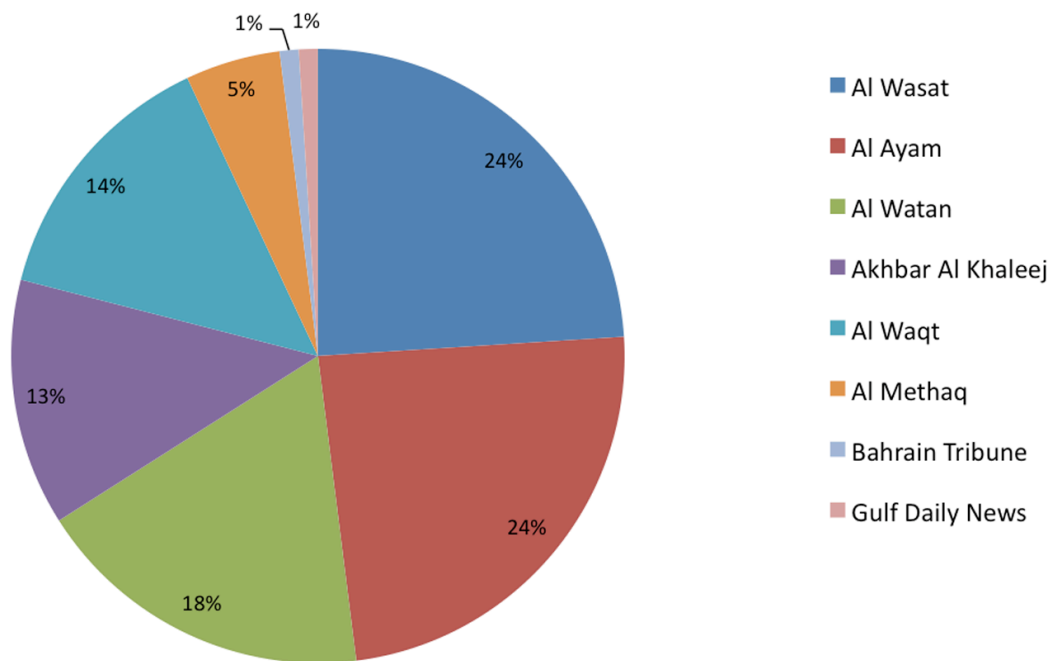
Figure 4: Neutral-cynical cartoon



Source: Al Wasat, 13 November 2006, issue 1529.



Figure 5: The space allocated to parliamentary elections in newspapers, 2006



Source: Bahrain Media Supervision Report 2006.

Table 1: Women candidate news-item location in print media

<i>Location / Medium</i>	<i>Al Wasat (%)</i>	<i>Al Watan (%)</i>
Front page	8.7	0.0
Inside with headline	71.7	51.9
Fillers	19.6	48.1
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100</i>

Table 2: Size of women candidate news-items in print media

<i>Size range</i>	<i>Al Wasat</i>	<i>Al Watan</i>
199 sq. cm and less	15.2	11.1

200-499 sq. cm	63.0	33.3
500-999 sq. cm	19.6	14.8
1000 sq. cm and more	2.2	40.7
<i>Total</i>	<i>100.0</i>	<i>100.0</i>