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From: Abedin, Huma <AbedinH@state.gov>
Sent: Saturday, September 24, 2011 10:57 AM
To: H
Subject: Fw: Bahrain holds vote to fill seats vacated during unrest (Reuters)

From: OpsNewsTicker
Sent: Saturday, September 24, 2011 10:23 AM
To: NEWS-Mahogany
Cc: SES-O
Subject: Bahrain holds vote to fill seats vacated during unrest (Reuters)

MANAMA, Sept 24 (Reuters) - The main opposition boycotted elections in Bahrain on Saturday held to fill parliamentary seats that were vacated by its members during a crackdown on a mostly Muslim Shi'ite protest movement in the Sunni-ruled monarchy.

The low turn-out of voters would appear to favour pro-government candidates in the Gulf island state, home to the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet.

Jalil al-Alli, one of two candidates running for a seat in the Shi'ite town of Saar, said he was standing because it was "better to work with the system than not".

"I felt that running would be in the interests of the people," Alli said. "We need to monitor ministers and tackle issues like unemployment."

Shi'ites, who form Bahrain's majority community, took to the streets in February to demand more representation and access to jobs and benefits.

At least 30 people were killed, hundreds wounded and more than 1,000 detained in a government crackdown backed by troops brought in from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

The Wefaq opposition reacted by quitting 18 of the 20 seats in parliament and was boycotting Saturday's election to fill them, saying that government efforts at reconciliation failed to address the Shi'ites' grievances.

Four candidates out of the 18 were uncontested so Saturday's vote is for 14 seats in a parliament with limited powers.

"I don't think Bahrain is ready for a stronger parliament," said candidate Jamal Saleh, a Sunni Muslim, who was at a polling station in a shopping mall in a pro-opposition district.

The presiding judge at the polling station, Amal Ahmed Abdul, said voter turnout was lower than usual but those who had turned out were enthusiastic.

"People are insisting on their right to vote even if they don't find their name on the list," Abdul said. "They are going back to officials and investigating to make sure there is a place they can vote."

Despite its Shi'ite majority, Bahrain is governed by the Sunni al-Khalifa dynasty, which allies Saudi Arabia and the United States see as a bulwark against the regional influence of Shi'ite power Iran.

On the eve of the election, police blocked protesters trying to march to the capital Manama, witnesses said.

More radical elements of the opposition have tried several times to march back into the city in recent weeks and Friday's attempt appeared to be the largest since the crackdown.

But police barred their way, including roads to the Sanabis area and Bahrain Financial Harbour, which flank the central roundabout that was the centre of the protests seven months ago.

ARAB SPRING LINKS

At one polling station, graffiti had been painted over and posters of King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa and banners encouraging people to vote, with slogans such as 'With your vote we complete the picture', adorned the walls.

A short distance away, the graffiti had more provocative slogans -- 'Down with Hamad' and 'The people want to bring down the regime'.

In a speech on Friday, Wefaq leader Sheikh Ali Salman likened the protest movement to those that have swept other Arab countries this year.

"The conflict in Bahrain is between those who want freedom and democracy and those who support dictatorship, as is the case in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Libya and Syria," he said.

"Our demands are for freedom and justice, and if we achieve that, it will be for the better of citizens -- Sunnis and Shia."

Since the height of the unrest the government has struggled to restore its image as a business-friendly Gulf hub, launching a national dialogue in July to discuss reforms.

Wefaq also pulled out of that forum, calling it a charade after the opposition bloc was accorded only 35 seats out of 300 at the table.

Based on the talks, King Hamad agreed to expand the elected lower house's powers of scrutiny. But the appointed upper council, the Shura, was left untouched.

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