

## Pre-election Analysis

Gulf Insight No. 46

### **QATAR** **The Qatar Shura Council Elections:** **A Preliminary assessment**

**Luciano Zaccara and Salem Ghurab**

Publication date: 15<sup>th</sup> June 2021

**Jointly published by**

**Observatory on Politics and Elections in the Arab and Muslim world**  
International Mediterranean Studies Workshop, UAM  
Autonomous University of Madrid (UAM)  
[www.opemam.org](http://www.opemam.org)

**Gulf Studies Center**  
Qatar University  
<http://www.qu.edu.qa/research/gulfstudies-center>

## *Introduction*

The long awaited first Qatar Shura Council elections will be held in October 2021, according to the [announcement](#) by HH Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani at the inauguration of the 49<sup>th</sup> session of the appointed Shura Council on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 2020. Article 77 of the [Qatar Constitution](#) of 2003 establishes that the Shura Council will count on 45 members, 30 of them elected by Qatari citizens, and 15 of them appointed by the Emir. Article 76 states that the Shura Council “shall assume legislative authority, approve the general policy of the government and the budget, and shall exercise control over the executive authority,” the contrary of the current council, which is totally appointed and has advisory capacity only.

The formal inception of such a process dated back to October 2019 when a higher committee was formed, following an [Amiri Decision](#), to draft the electoral law. Among other provisions such as who can run for elections, the law should include the representation mechanism, the electoral formula, and districts distribution. On 19<sup>th</sup> May 2021, the electoral law got the [Cabinet's approval](#) in its regular meetings chaired by the Prime Minister, Khalid bin Khalifa Al-Thani. To this date, the law has not been approved yet by the Shura Council and the Emir, neither has the full content of the provisions and conditions been made public.

## *The debate on the electoral law*

The electoral law has been under discussion for several years, according to the sources and interviews conducted, and neither in the several events<sup>1</sup> held nor in opinion pieces published<sup>2</sup> was there clarity about what electoral formula and district distribution would be implemented. What prevails in the public opinion is less certainty than speculation. Due to such an ambiguity, polarization was present regarding essential elements, most importantly, the role of the tribal affiliation as the representation mechanism and the corresponding electoral district definition. A second aspect under debate was the possibility for naturalized Qataris to vote, which according to the [article 16 of the Nationality Law of 2005](#), is limited to original Qataris, following the definition of the same law, article 1. Of no less significance were the existence of political parties or groups and the female representation in the elected seats.

Polarization and opposing opinions took shape shortly after the Amiri announcement last November. Although jubilation for such a historic turning point in Qatar's history is indicative of a common feeling shared by two visible diverse trends, it failed to substitute the skepticism with regard to specific unspecified areas left unanswered. The first trend advocates the series of announcements vis-à-vis the Shura Council, regardless of the fact that a variety of challenges, insurmountable if left

---

<sup>1</sup> These events included: [“Qatari Shura Council Elections: a Future Vision” hosted by Qatar University, 25th November, 2010](#); [“Is the Qatari Woman Qualified For the upcoming Shura Council Elections?”](#) hosted by Haman Bin Khalifa University, 11th February, 2021; [“The Role of Media in Spreading and Promoting Electoral Awareness” A Seminar presented by Abdulaziz Al-Ishaaq, 6th April, 2021.](#)

<sup>2</sup> Hasan Abdulrahim Al-Sayed. [“Will Tribe Determine the Electoral Districts for the Prospective Qatar Shura Council?”](#) An assessment paper presented at Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies, 29<sup>th</sup> March, 2021 ; Abdulaziz bin Mohamed Al-Khatir, [“How to prepare for Shura Council elections: parties and all Citizens must rise above their sectarian and tribal identities.”](#) The Doha Globe, 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 2020. [“Power and Tasks of Elected Shura Council”](#) Clubhouse Talk, 3<sup>rd</sup> May, 2021; [“Shura Council Elections: Constitutional Anchors and Future Visions”](#) Zoom Discussion hosted by Al Jasra Cultural and Social Club, 6<sup>th</sup> May, 2021.

unclear, will nip the process in the bud. For instance, Andreas Krieg wrote that [“...constituency will not be based on tribal affiliation but geography.”](#) This goes in disharmony with many statements by officials that Qatar is, first and foremost, a tribal society where such a feature plays a determining role in the coming electoral law. Given that district boundaries have not been specifically declared, geography as a basis is of secondary importance, let alone being mentioned in draft law approved by the Cabinet. In short, Krieg supports the process an essential step towards authentic representation as well as [real legislative power](#).

The second trend warns against a variety of issues, most prominently the implications of tribal affiliation in impeding authentic representation. Tribal dimension entails two outcomes: inserting tribal loyalty over nation-state and diminishing of male-female equality in terms of representation. To begin with the latter, tribalism as a societal feature involves patriarchy. If tribal dimension is the determining factor in electing the runners for elections, male as a voice will have the upper hand, indicating a big proportional gap between winner based on tribal factor and women vying for legislative seat. Hassan Al-Sayyed, a constitutional law professor at Qatar University, warned against decreasing women presence in election. On the idea that a quota system might be introduced that set the limit for women representation, he believed that setting the quota system for women violates equality principle.<sup>3</sup> Due to the absence of a clause articulating the female-male equation with respect to elections, a stumbling block is to remain in the face of real democracy.

Tribal affiliation merits attention for the effective impact it wields on Qataris. Eisner argued that such a tendency is rooted not in the government policy, but more genuinely [“...they reflect the tensions that already exist in society.”](#) Based on most speculations, waiting until the electoral law to be published, “virtual birthplace” will be introduced. Such a mechanism ensures that each tribe has its own representative. Given that most tribes in Qatar have historically been resident in certain areas, each specific area will have candidates from a tribe being known as the resident there. Nevertheless, such a scenario, if it came into existence, would add burdens and challenges to the democratic experience from its incipient stage. First, tribes in Qatar number more than 30, the elected incumbents. Second, a single tribe might have affiliated people whose numbers are equivalent if not more to 5-6 tribes. This alone present proportional stalemate. Assuming that the previous-mentioned challenges have been dealt with successfully, the process itself places affiliation in tribal hands, not state. Such a process, Abdulaziz al Khater warns Qataris, will add nothing except reiterating [“...that society does not look for the qualified as much as it looks for the loyal son of a tribe who represent unanimity according to the tribe’s perspective.”](#)

## *Conclusions*

Holding Shura Council elections in Qatar is indeed a positive move in a region –Middle East- where democracy has no deep roots nor tradition. These elections followed the gradual involvement of citizens in public affairs and started with the Qatar Central Municipal Council elections held every four years since 1999. However, the

---

<sup>3</sup> “Is the Qatari Woman Qualified For the upcoming Shura Council Elections?” hosted by Haman Bin Khalifa University, 11th February, 2021

lack of clarity regarding the electoral law raises more questions than provides answers, which may add to the challenges arising from the Qatari social structure including the role of tribal affiliation in determining the districts, how to guarantee the female representation in such a patriarchal societal organization, and how to provide equal opportunities to all Qatari citizens regardless the naturalized or original condition.

### **About the authors**

Luciano Zaccara is an Assistant Research Professor in Gulf Politics, Gulf Studies Center, Qatar University.

Salem Ghurab is a Research Assistant at the Gulf Studies Center, Qatar University.

### **About the Gulf Insights series:**

The "Gulf Insights" series is published by the Gulf Studies Center on a weekly base with the aim to promote informed debate with academic depth. The Gulf Insights are commentaries on pressing regional issues written by the GSC/GSP faculty, staff PhD and MA students, as well as guest scholars, and they can be between 1,200 to 1,500 words.

All articles published under "Gulf Insight" series have been discussed internally but they reflect the opinion and views of the authors, and do not reflect the views of the Center, the College of Arts and Sciences or Qatar University.

### **About the OPEMAM analysis:**

The Observatory on Politics and Elections in the Muslim and Arab World is an Spanish Research Project focused on academic electoral observation and analysis of political and institutional developments in the region.