



**NATIONAL
DEMOCRATIC
INSTITUTE**

INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS

1717 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Fifth Floor
Washington, DC 20036
(202) 328-3136
fax: (202) 939-3166
email: demos@ndi.org
<http://www.ndi.org>

Working to strengthen
and expand
democracy worldwide

THE QATARI CENTRAL MUNICIPAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS A STUDY MISSION REPORT

MARCH 4-9, 1999

JOSHUA RUEBNER AND LES CAMPBELL

I INTRODUCTION

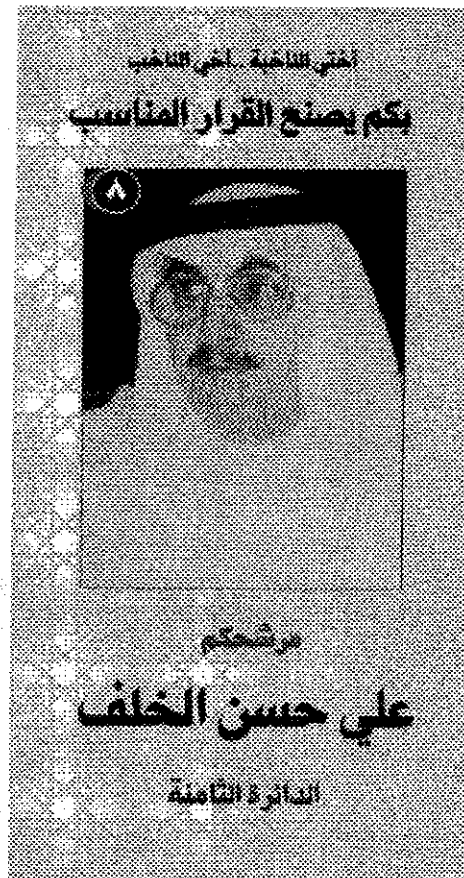
The National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) conducted a six-day study mission in Qatar between March 4-9, 1999 in order to learn more about Qatar's democratization process and to gain a first-hand impression of the elections for the Central Municipal Council which occurred during the mission. While in Qatar, NDI's two-person team, Les Campbell, Regional Director for the Middle East and North Africa, and Joshua Ruebner, Qatar Program Manager, met with Qatari government officials, candidates for the Central Municipal Council, officials on the Electoral Commission, prominent Qatari citizens in academia and the media, and members of foreign delegations observing the elections.

Qatar's Central Municipal Council election represents a small, but potentially significant, step towards increasing popular participation in government. This election was the first time that Qatar held nation-wide elections with universal suffrage to a representative institution. However, there exists a discrepancy between the level of excitement Qataris evinced for voting in the Central Municipal Council election and the actual amount of power that this council will wield. According to the law stipulating the jurisdictions of the Central Municipal Council, the council will only have consultative powers.

On March 8, 1999, the State of Qatar held elections for a Central Municipal Council. All Qatari citizens, both men and women, aged eighteen and above, were eligible to register to vote and stand as candidates. Voter registration took place in October 1998, with approximately 22,000 Qatari citizens registering to vote. Assessing the percentage of voter registration is difficult since no reliable census data on the number of Qatari citizens exists. However, credible estimates suggest that there are between 120,000 and 180,000 Qatari citizens. Since, approximately 30 to 40 percent of Qataris are below the legal voting age, the potential electoral base is between 72,000 and 126,000 voters. Also, the electoral law which established the Central Municipal Council stipulated that members of the police and armed forces, in addition to those



employed by the Ministry of Interior, could not participate in the election. Since foreign nationals and Qataris are employed in these professions, it is difficult to estimate how many Qataris were excluded from participating in the election. As a rough estimate, it appears that voter registration was low, probably encompassing between 20 to 30 percent of eligible voters.



An example of a candidate's leaflet which reads: My sister the voter...My brother the voter. You can make the appropriate decision. Your candidate Ali Hassan al-Khalaf--Electoral District #8

Due to Qatar's small population and its concentration in Doha, the capital city, one Central Municipal Council was created to serve the entire country. The Central Municipal Council has 29 members, elected from 29 single-seat electoral districts. Doha and its immediate environs account for 20 electoral districts, with the remaining nine electoral districts representing the remainder of the country. The number of registered voters in each electoral district varied significantly, ranging from a low of 164 registered voters (Electoral District #11--Messai'eed) to a

high of 2436 registered voters (Electoral District #8--Al-Hilal). The number of candidates competing in each electoral district varied widely, ranging from a low of two candidates (Electoral District #24--Al-Shahajyyah) to a high of fourteen candidates (Electoral District #5--Khalifa al-Janoubiyyah and Electoral District #14--Al-Murrah). In each district, the winning candidate was determined by a first-past-the-post system, in which the candidate with a plurality of votes won.

II ELECTION CAMPAIGNING

Despite the fact that the election to the Central Municipal Council was the first nationwide election ever held in Qatar, the in-depth media coverage and the sophisticated campaigning surrounding the election appeared to provide Qataris with information upon which to make informed choices. During the week prior to the elections, Qatar's three major Arabic daily newspapers--*Al-Rayah*, *Al-Watan*, and *Al-Sharq*--usually devoted complete sections to election coverage. In addition, Qatari television broadcast several election-related programs, including a voter education program, a listing of the candidates from each electoral district along with their *curriculum vitae* and electoral platform, and nightly live debates between candidates. During these debates, audience members and viewers who phoned the station questioned the candidates on their views and platform, often leading to heated discussion between the participants.

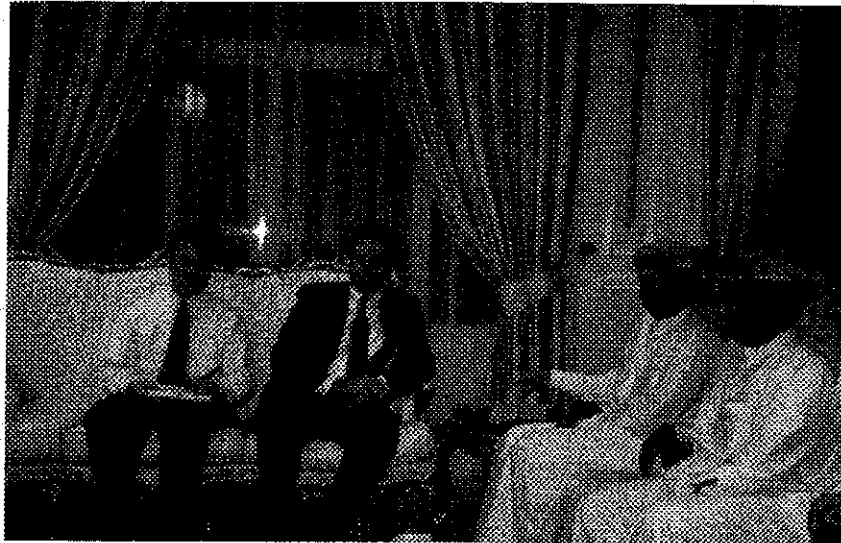
In addition, the candidates themselves supplied the voters with significant amounts of information. Posters adorned major intersections throughout Doha. Many candidates printed leaflets which outlined their platforms and qualifications. These leaflets were distributed to potential voters at social gatherings and at mosques. Many candidates undertook serious efforts to meet with potential voters. Methods the candidates used to communicate with their constituencies included placing newspaper advertisements inviting voters to open-houses, setting up tents in public places which were staffed by the candidates or their campaign managers, and, in some cases, campaigning door-to-door.

NDI visited candidates in their homes in order to gain a first-hand impression of the election campaign process. NDI met with Dr. Wadha al-Sweidi, one of six female candidates, who ran for office in Electoral District #16--Mreikh. Dr. al-Sweidi, who was accompanied by a campaign team of approximately 15 young women, described her methods of campaigning. Dr. al-Sweidi's campaign team was divided into various functional committees responsible for areas such as press relations, polling research, platform development, and information distribution. Dr. al-Sweidi also described her feelings, as a women, running for public office. She felt that her candidacy not only represented an individual accomplishment, but signified a step forward for all Qatari women in their efforts to take part in Qatari public life.

NDI also visited Mr. Jassim al-Mansoori--a candidate who ran for office in Electoral District #13--Al-Ghanem al-Jadid--in his home prior to the election. Mr. al-Mansoori was accompanied by approximately 20 of his supporters who gathered at his home to watch the candidate debates on television and to discuss the latest news surrounding the election. After registering as a candidate, Mr. al-Mansoori scoured Amazon.com for books on how to run a local

election campaign. One issue which divided his supporters was whether or not door-to-door campaigning was considered appropriate for Qatari society. In the end, Mr. al-Mansoori decided to campaign door-to-door. He felt that through this process, he was serving the interests of the country and grew to be empathetic with the needs of his constituents.

Lacking any campaign finance laws, wealthier candidates were able to afford a more prominent public profile in their campaigns. Unofficial reports suggested that some candidates spent between 100,000-200,000 Qatari riyals (roughly \$30,000-\$60,000) on their campaigns.



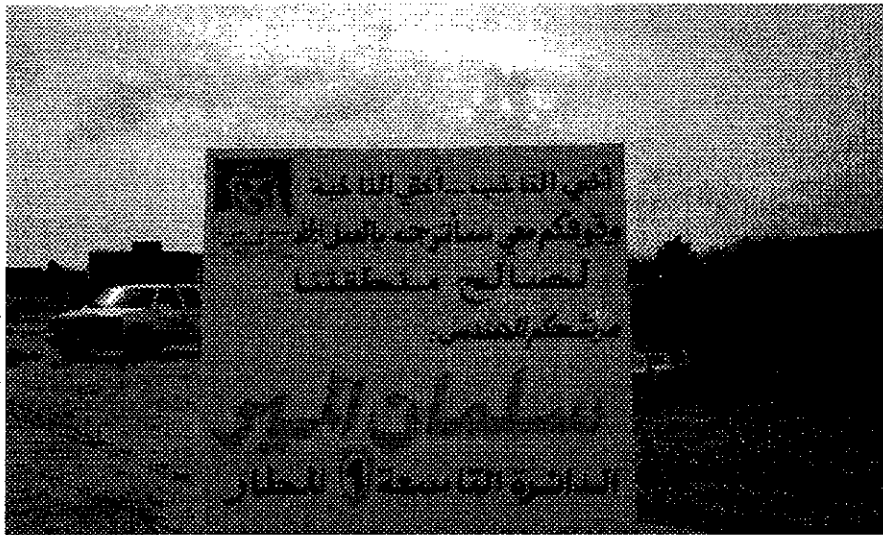
NDI team meets with Mr. Jassim al-Mansoori, a candidate in Electoral District #13--Al-Ghanem al-Jadid.

It is important to note that the Ministry of Interior exercised a degree of control over the electoral campaigning process. Candidates were required to submit their electoral platforms to the ministry for its "approval" in order to obtain the necessary papers for running. In addition, candidates were required to obtain clearance from the ministry in order to hang posters or distribute printed information. While it is unclear whether the ministry censored the content of any material, this requirement might have imposed a degree of self-censorship on the candidates and narrowed the scope of the issues that were debated.

III ELECTION DAY

NDI's two-person team visited 5 of the 29 polling places on election day (Electoral District #9--Al-Matar, Electoral District #16--Mreikh, Electoral District #13--Ghanem al-Jadid, Electoral District #8--Al-Hilal, and Electoral District #10--Al-Wakrah) and gained an impression of the electoral procedures in those districts.

On election day, Qatar was enveloped in a festive atmosphere. A national holiday was declared, ensuring that Qataris would be able to exercise their right to vote. Polling places served



A candidate's tent outside Electoral District #9--Al-Matar. The poster reads "My brother the voter...my sister the voter. Your support for me, I will translate into serious work for the benefit of our region. Your candidate Sulman al-Meir."

not only as places to vote, but also as public areas for socializing. Among the electoral districts which the NDI delegation visited, Electoral District #9-Al-Matar and Electoral District #8-Al-Hilal were the most active places for voters to interact with each other and with representatives of the candidates. At both districts, several candidates set up rug-lined tents which enticed potential voters with a cool place to rest while waiting to vote. Many candidates also provided voters with food and drink, in addition to the latest newspaper editions and informational brochures on the candidates. While some candidates planned to set up a tent weeks in advance, other candidates thought of this idea at the last minute and scrambled to assemble an attractive tent and refreshments. The tents formed convenient places for members of campaign staffs to explain their candidate's platform to voters and for supporters of candidates to discuss last-minute electoral strategies.

Polling places opened at 8:00 AM and closed at 5:00 PM. All 29 polling places were headquartered in public schools and clearly designated from the outside as polling places. Each polling place that the NDI delegation visited had separate entrances for men and women and was divided in half by a wooden partition. Each polling place had two ballot boxes—one for men and one for women—and were marked with the number of the electoral district. A member of the Electoral Commission oversaw the voting in each polling place and was aided by three or four government officials.

The electoral process at the polling places visited by the NDI team appeared to be well-organized with little obvious opportunity for the commission of electoral fraud. Empty ballot boxes were shown to the candidates prior to their closure with a lock and sealing wax. In all electoral districts, the candidates or their designated representatives were allowed to observe the voting throughout the day. Male candidates could appoint a female observer to monitor the voting process on the other side of the partition, and vice versa.

Upon entering the polling place, the voter was required to present a voter identification



A truck of an enthusiastic supporter of a candidate in Electoral District #8--Al-Hilal.

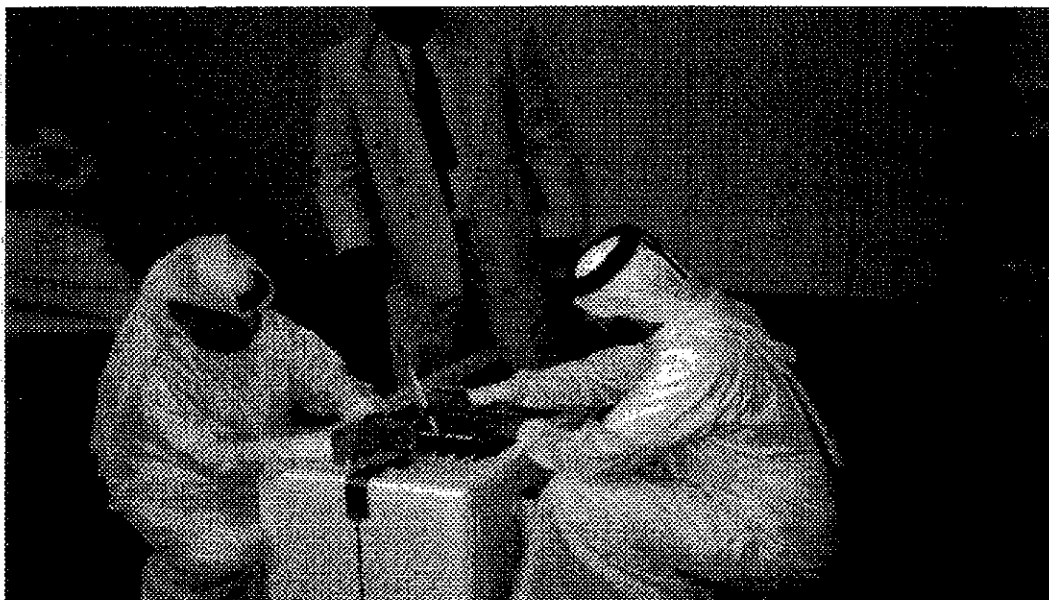
card. This identification card was checked against the Electoral Commission's list of registered voters. Voters without the appropriate identification card were not allowed to receive a ballot even if their name appeared on the list of registered voters. Only after an official checked off the voter's name on the list did the voter receive a ballot. Voters then proceeded to a partitioned area which ensured privacy and marked their ballots. Voters then placed their vote in the ballot box which was located next to the table of the Electoral Commission.

The ballots were counted in the polling place in the presence of the candidates or the candidates' representatives. The NDI team observed the counting of the ballots at Electoral District #10--Al-Wakrah. Voters who remained in the area of the polling place were allowed to remain on the premises in order to observe the counting of the ballots at a distance of approximately 20 meters. Candidates, or their representatives, were able to observe the counting of the ballots at a distance of approximately one meter. First, members of the Electoral Commission determined the number of registered voters who did not cast a ballot through the list of registered voters. Second, the women's ballot box was unlocked and ballots were sorted into piles of twenty by the members of the Electoral Commission. Through this process, the Electoral Commission determined that 482 women voted--an unofficial turnout rate of 77.4 percent. Third, the women's ballots were counted and sorted with the results tallied on a scoreboard by an election official. Fourth, this process was repeated for the men's ballot box. Through this process, the Electoral Commission determined that 642 men voted--an unofficial turnout rate of 83.2 percent. When all votes were counted, Mr. Jassem Abdulrahman Muftah was declared the winner by the members of the Electoral Commission.

IV ANALYSIS

Despite evident voter interest in the election, the percentage of Qataris who registered to vote was low. Several explanations partially account for the low voter registration for the Central Municipal Council elections. First, voter registration took place five months before the elections and prior to the large-scale voter education programs that the Ministry of Interior conducted on Qatari television. According to some Qataris, some citizens did not realize that they had to register in order to vote. Second, the level of interest in the elections during the registration period was significantly less than the excitement that surrounded the active campaigning period. Many Qataris who chose not to register were evidently unconvinced about the efficacy of participating in the election. However, as election day drew near, many Qataris who did not register to vote expressed regret at missing the opportunity to participate in the election. Many Qataris expressed the opinion that if the Ministry of Interior permitted a second period of voter registration, the number of Qataris registered to vote would substantially increase.

Qatar's Central Municipal Council election of March 8, 1999 represents a small, but potentially significant, step towards increasing popular participation in government not only in



Election officials seal the ballot box with sealing wax in Electoral District #9-Al-Matar.

Qatar, but throughout the Gulf region. This election was the first time that Qatar, or any other Gulf country, held nation-wide elections with universal suffrage to a representative institution. Qataris were well-aware of the historical significance of this election and seemed proud to inaugurate this transition to a more representative form of government. The Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin-Khalifah Al-Thani, has promised to convene a Constitutional Committee to draft a permanent constitution for Qatar. According to the Emir, this constitution will contain a provision to establish a nationally elected parliament. Many Qataris with whom NDI spoke are

anticipating parliamentary elections within three to four years and view the election of the Central Municipal Council as a stepping-stone to wider democratization.

However, there exists a discrepancy between the level of excitement Qataris evinced for voting in the Central Municipal Council election and the actual amount of power that this council will wield. According to the law stipulating the jurisdictions of the Central Municipal Council, the council will only have consultative powers. Law-making powers are reserved for the Ministry for Municipal and Agricultural Affairs. Most Qataris are aware of the limited jurisdictional nature of the council but feel that the council will be able to expand its powers and become a legislative institution. The evolution to a Central Municipal Council with legislative powers could occur either through the council itself attempting to amend its jurisdictions or through a revised law issued by the Emir in advance of the next election to the council.

However, even if the Central Municipal Council eventually has legislative powers, Qatar is only at the beginning of a long process if it is to successfully transform itself into a functioning democracy. As noted above, the Emir has declared that the drafting of a permanent constitution will be the next step in Qatar's democratization process. This constitution could play a positive role in regularizing the relationship between citizen and state, which has been defined by a provisional constitution since independence. In addition, the Emir's call for a nationally-elected parliament, if implemented, could have far-reaching consequences for the development of democracy in Qatar. However, to date, it is unclear whether the envisioned parliament will be consultative like the Central Municipal Council, or legislative in nature.

The top-down character of the democratization process is a significant aspect of political reform in Qatar. While prominent citizens circulated petitions calling for democratization in the aftermath of the Gulf War, the impetus for the current reforms has come directly from the Emir. Perhaps this fact is not surprising, considering the absence of political parties or an organized civil society in Qatar. Yet, the top-down nature of the democratization process has its drawbacks no matter how sincere the Emir's motives may be for initiating it. The continuation of reform from above could lead to the establishment of procedures and institutions which do not meet the expectations of Qataris regarding the democratic development of their country. It will be interesting to note whether, in the coming months and years, the Central Municipal Council will function as an institution for Qataris to exert influence upon the course of the democratization process.

To date, the Emir has emphasized that both the pace and scope of political reforms will be influenced by what is appropriate for Qatar. In establishing the Central Municipal Council, the government studied various models of local government from different regions in order to determine which system would function best in a Qatari context. However, initial plans to stage these elections were formulated in 1996 and the question arises whether the pace of reform suitable for Qatar necessitates a three-year deliberation. One candidate told the NDI team that the high-level of education and wealth attained by most Qataris means that they already comprehend the principles behind democracy and that, therefore, the pace of reforms should be quickened.

While unofficial estimates suggest that parliamentary elections will occur within three to four years, perhaps Qatar's first experiment with elections will convince Qataris that they are ready for more far-reaching reforms in the short-term.

The Qatari model of universal suffrage for male and female citizens may influence notions of political participation throughout the Gulf region. It is interesting to note that two of the largest foreign delegations to observe the election were the delegations of Kuwaiti and Omani parliamentarians. For Kuwait, Qatar's enfranchisement of women could provide the necessary spark for granting women the right to vote. Undoubtedly, Kuwait's refusal to allow women to participate in politics represents one of the country's biggest challenges in furthering its democratization process. For Oman, the Qatari model of political participation could serve as an impetus for expanding the vote to include all citizens. Currently, both Omani men and women elect a Consultative Council; however, voting is limited to citizens deemed by the government to be "highly educated and respectable." Moreover, the Qatari elections, possessing a certain degree of symbolic value for the entire Gulf region, could influence the development of political participation in such countries as Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.

APPENDIX A

LIST OF NDI TEAM MEETINGS

March 5, 1999

Mr. Steven Butler, Political Officer, United States Embassy to Qatar

March 6, 1999

Mr. Khalid al-Mansouri, Assistant Director of Information and Research Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Mr. Bader Omar al-Daffa, Director, European and American Affairs Department, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Mr. Abdalla Ibrahim al-Hamar, Director, Department of Information and Research, Ministry of Foreign Affairs

Mr. Nasser Muhammad al-Othman, Editor in Chief, *Al-Rayah*

Dr. Wadha al-Sweidi, Candidate in Electoral District #16--Mriekh

Mr. Jassim al-Mansoori, Candidate in Electoral District #13--Al-Ghanem al-Jadid

March 7, 1999

Dr. Majid Abudallah al-Malki, Director General, Qatar Chamber of Commerce and Industry

Ms. Moza al-Malki, Candidate in Electoral District #2--Doha al-Haditha

Representative Carolyn Maloney (D-NY), United States House of Representatives

Representative Sue Kelly (R-NY), United States House of Representatives

March 8, 1999

Election observation, discussions with candidates, election officials, and voters

Mr. Khaled al-Khater, Board Member, Qatari Center for Futuristic Studies

APPENDIX B

JURISDICTIONS OF THE CENTRAL MUNICIPAL COUNCIL

(The following is an unofficial translation from "A Voter's Guide to the Central Municipal Council Elections", published by the Qatari Ministry of Interior.)

The Council will strive to use the methods available to advance the country in the sphere of municipal affairs. In order to achieving its goals, the Council will exercise, in particular, the following jurisdictions, authorities, and responsibilities:

First-- overseeing the implementation of laws, resolutions, and ordinances pertaining to the authorities and jurisdictions of the Ministry and the Council, including the laws, resolutions, and ordinances pertaining to issues of building organization, land planning, public industrial and trade routes and places, among others issues, from the ordinance which stipulates transferring the authority for overseeing implementation to the Council.

Second--discussing the administrative, financial, social, economic, programmatic, and preparatory aspects of municipal and agricultural issues, especially including:

1. Studying the wishes or proposals which members of the Council present regarding any issue which enters into the fields of municipal or agricultural affairs.
2. Considering and expressing an opinion on the issues and subjects which concern municipal affairs and which reach the Council from a Ministry or from other governmental agencies.
3. Presenting recommendations regarding the publication of laws or taking any measures or regulations which the Council sees as necessary or advantageous to the public interest.
4. Requesting any statements, studies, or reports concerning the administration of a Ministry or the municipalities and their proposals, in order to discuss them and express an opinion on them.
5. Discussing proposals and complaints concerning municipal and agricultural affairs. The Council may request the required and necessary statements from those responsible in a Ministry and others in specialized governmental agencies in order to discuss them.
6. Overseeing the implementation of laws and special ordinances concerning foodstuffs intended for the poor consumer.
7. Proposing the founding of public gardens and maintaining their upkeep.
8. Overseeing the implementation of laws and special ordinances for cleaning the streets and roads of all waste and filth and disposing of it.
9. Supervising public transportation for commuters.
10. Overseeing the implementation of the laws of commercial licensing, hotels, places of entertainment, parks, unskilled professions, and the transactions of the migrant workers.

11. Overseeing the implementation of the laws for licensing public demonstrations and preventing public disturbances.
12. Overseeing the special ordinance for administering cemeteries and defining their locations.
13. Proposing the naming of cities, villages, neighborhoods, streets, squares, markets, public gardens, and promenades.
14. Proposing the imposition of municipal taxes, fees, and benefits.
15. Monitoring the effectiveness of the campaign of combating begging, administering homes for invalids and assisting the destitute.
16. Overseeing the adequacy of aid workers for victims of fires or natural disasters.
17. Proposing suitable steps for fighting fires and for preventing them.
18. Presenting yearly budget proposals for the Council.
19. Overseeing the special ordinance regarding markets and places of commerce and their organization.
20. Proposing suitable methods for improving the process of facilitating the special wishes of a Ministry.
21. Establishing the necessary rules and conditions for sheltering animals in populated residencies within the population and overseeing the implementation of the special law on abandoned animals.
22. Enlightening citizens and responding to complaints relating to municipal and agricultural affairs.
23. Overseeing the implementation of ordinances and other measures relating to municipal and agricultural affairs.
24. Agreeing on the necessary acquisitions for the operations of the Council.
25. Preparing the internal statutes for the Council.
26. Preparing a draft budget for the Council for the new fiscal year and also a draft on the final accounts for the end of the fiscal year.
27. Any other authorities, jurisdictions, or responsibilities which the law decides upon for the Council.

The Council will express its opinions in the form of recommendations and resolutions authorized by the Minister.

APPENDIX C

**RESULTS OF QATAR'S MUNICIPAL COUNCIL ELECTIONS
MARCH 8, 1999**

District	Winning Candidate	Number of Male Candidates	Number of Female Candidates	Number of Registered Voters	Number of Registered Male Voters	Number of Registered Female Voters
#1 Al-Jasra	Nasser Mehsin Mohammed Bu- Ksheisha	11	0	954	506	448
#2 Doha al- Haditha	Ahmad Abdullah Sultan al-Suleiti	9	1	975	550	425
#3 Al- Markhiya	Ibrahim Abdullah Hassanal- Ibrahim	10	1	1034	529	505
#4 Khalifa al- Shamaliya	Nasser Muhammed Issa Faris al-Ka'abi	7	0	797	474	323
#5 Khalifa al- Janoubiyah	Issa Khalifa Umran al-Bakr al-Kuwari	14	0	1248	705	543
#6 Bin Umran	Muhammed Saif Ali al-Kuwari	7	0	1002	524	478
#7 Al- Salata Al- Jadidah	Ahmad Khalifa Muhammed al- Aseri	12	0	1504	817	687
#8 Al-Hilal	Ibrahim Abdul Rahim Mahmoud Ahmad al- Hidoos	10	3	2436	1309	1127

#9 Al-Matar	Abdulrahman Muhammed Abdulrahman al-Jufeiri	4	0	1239	653	586
#10 Al-Wakrah	Jassem Abdulrahman Muftah	10	0	1473	418???	659
#11 Messai'eed	Muhammed Hamad Ali al-Shawi al-Merri	5	0	164	111	53
#12 Abu Hamour	Hamad Mubarak Noura al-Marri	12	0	825	487	338
#13 Ghanem al-Jadid	Ghanem Abdul Rahman Ghanem al-Ghanem	9	0	847	510	337
#14 Al-Murrah	Faleh Saeed Muhammed Saeed Malhiyyah	14	0	1000	597	403
#15 Muaizer	Hamad Abdullah Muhammed al-Musheira al-Marri	6	0	780	492	288
#16 Mreikh	Nasser Falah Abdullah al-Dosari	9	1	609	304	305
#17 Muaizer Al-Shamaliyah	Masoud Abdullah Hamad Hanzab al-Azba	7	0	437	234	203
#18 Al-Rayyan Al-Jadid	Muhammed Hamoud Shaafi al-Shaafi	13	0	941	530	411

#19 Al-Rayyan Al-Qadeem	Muhammed Saleh Hamad al-Hol al-Marri	6	0	570	311	259
#20 Al-Nasseriyyah	Muhammed Mansour al-Khalil al-Shahwani	5	0	376	204	172
#21 Al-Gharafa	Ahmad Hussein Rashid Hussein al-Kubeisi	9	0	644	422	222
#22 Umm Salal Ali	Muhammed Khalaf Mansour al-Kha'abi	5	0	345	154	191
#23 Al-Kharaitiyat	Abdullah Abdulrahman Issa al-Mannai	11	0	914	514	400
#24 Al-Shahajyyah	Faleh Mubarak al-Ajlan al-Hajjiri	2	0	361	167	194
#25 Dukhan	Hassan Misfer Muhammed al-Eyadi al-Hajeri	5	0	362	246	116
#26 Al-Khor	Rasheed Hassem Darwish al-Mreikhi	7	0	553	360	193
#27 Al-Dhakira	Ali Hassan Juma'a al-Muhannadi	7	0	249	161	88
#28 Al-Shamal	Sa'ad Ali Hassan al-Nueimi	8	0	236	167	69
#29 Al-Ghueiryyah	Nasser Abdullah al-Ka'abi	3	0	218	106	112

Sources: *Al-Rayah*, March 7, 1999; *Gulf Times*, March 9, 1999

