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Saudis vote in historic election

Local issues dominate voter concerns in first election

RIYADH, Saudi Arabia (AP) -- Abdul Rahman al-Hussein voted for the candidate pledging to build playgrounds. Another man picked the candidate pushing affordable housing. Local concerns held sway as Saudi men cast city council ballots Thursday in the first regular election in their country's history.

Saudis gingerly went through the seven-page ballot card, smiling broadly as they cast their votes and made plans to frame their green voter registration cards. Many said the novel experience was a good first step toward democratic reform in this absolute monarchy -- but should be followed by more.

"This is the beginning of a new era. We now know what elections are, and what it means to make your voice heard through proper channels," said Abdul Nasser al-Zahrani, 46, an archaeology professor. "It is the beginning of democracy."

Voting began slowly at 8 a.m., the beginning of the two-day Saudi weekend, but the pace picked up later in the day, especially in lower-income areas. Women were kept away, banned from either running in the elections or voting.

Officials opened the tall, gray ballot boxes to make sure they were empty before sealing them. The smell of incense wafted through some polling stations as voters ticked off the names of their candidates.

Some had to be shepherded through the voting. Others complained to officials about voters chatting on cell phones in violation of voting rules. One enthusiastic voter made a V-for-victory sign as he got his ballot card.

More than 1,800 candidates were contesting 127 seats in the capital and surrounding villages, with 640 of them running for seven seats in Riyadh. Two more phases will cover the rest of the country in March and April.

Only half of almost 1,200 councilmen nationwide will be elected. The rest will be appointed. While many see the vote as a modest step, others see it as a remarkable development in a country where any talk of public participation in decision-making once was taboo.

Asked how he felt about the election, especially since it gave some power to citizens his family has ruled for decades, Prince Mohammed bin Saud said: "We believe in these reforms and we're going in the right direction."

The kingdom came under international pressure to reform after the September 11, 2001, attacks, carried out by 19 Arabs, 15 of them Saudi. Some progressive Saudis have blamed the lack of democracy for the prevalence of a puritanical Islamic ideology in which militants can easily find justification for their actions.

Prince Mansour bin Miteb, head of the election commission, said voter turnout was "very reasonable" shortly before polls closed at 5 p.m. Final results are not expected until Friday or Saturday.

Only 149,000 of 600,000 eligible voters registered to vote.

With so many candidates, it was not clear who would have the advantage: Wealthy businessmen who poured millions into campaigns, or fundamentalist Muslim candidates who enjoy credibility and a reputation for honesty among many Saudis.

Sultan al-Ghunaimi, a 27-year-old cleric, said he voted for seven Islamist candidates because in their campaign they promised

"to serve Muslims with honesty."

Saad Tlass, a 47-year-old merchant, said he favored candidates who promised to work on legislation that would allow citizens to add extra floors to their houses.

"That would bring rents down and make it affordable for men to get married," he said.

Others said they didn't care about the candidates' affiliations so long as they fulfilled promises to improve street lighting, get rid of the stench of sewage in some areas and decrease bureaucracy.

Some voters, like Mansour al-Omar, a 40-year-old businessman, brought their sons with them. Al-Omar said he wanted to teach 6-year-old son Ibrahim about democracy.

Prince Turki, the Saudi ambassador to Britain, predicted late last month that women would be allowed to vote in future elections. Voters on Thursday seemed divided over the issue.

Al-Ghunaimi said he would support women voting on issues that concern them, such as female shopping malls and charities.

"Sewage and lighting are none of their business," he said.

Abdullah al-Muhaidib, 43, an auditor, said he would not have allowed his wife to vote even if the government had permitted it. "She is a queen at home, but I am in charge of what takes place outside the house," he said.

However, many, like Abdul Aziz al-Ghanam, 45, a land surveyor, said they wished women had been given the opportunity to participate.

"I would not have had a problem with my wife voting," he said.


The sight of a female reporter in a polling station confused Suleiman al-Ondus, 70. "Have you changed your mind? Are you allowing women to vote?" he asked an official. "I want to bring my wife."

When told the woman was a journalist, al-Ondus said: "I feel a lot of pain because women cannot participate in the vote."

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