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Sheikh Ali Salman: The soft-spoken charismatic strategist who steers Al-Wefaq

As Bahrainis take stock after their general election, Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society leader Sheikh Ali Salman appears determined not to be sucked into direct confrontation with government or parliament's Sunni members. GSN profiles one of the Gulf's new generation of significant non-royal leaders.

He may not command a parliamentary majority, but Sheikh Ali Salman will be a pivotal figure in the politics of the new Bahraini parliament.

Thanks to his role in leading *Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society* and its former boycott campaign allies into the constitutional election process, this 41-year old Saudi- and Iranian-educated cleric will enjoy influence beyond the numerical strength of his 18-strong bloc of opposition MPs.

He will be helped by his personal reputation. Ask almost any Bahraini Shia and they will usually, with approval, cite his gentleness and moderate style. The voters know that Salman plays the long game, working through low-key pressure and persuasion, rather than public confrontation.

In person, the Wefaq leader is softly spoken, patient and almost unnaturally quiet in tone as he explains and argues.

Salman has never hidden his stance as a leading dove within Al-Wefaq. In 2002, he initially favoured participation in the first parliamentary elections under the new constitution, but ultimately ceded to the majority on the Wefaq society board who insisted that the new parliament's powers were too weak to justify taking part. He later told GSN they had been right.

But as the 2006 election approached, and government pressured opposition groups to register under its new political societies law, several other board members – notably **Jawad Fairooz** and Manama municipal council leader **Murtadha Mohammed Bader** – gradually came around to Salman's underlying view that the value of the boycott had run its course. Now was the time to get into the parliament and use it as the new base from which to campaign for change.

Even then, Salman was careful not to overplay his hand. In late 2005 he was still insisting that only Wefaq's grassroots members could take the final decision on whether the society should join the electoral process.

Some critics paint Salman as no more than a cipher for Al-Wefaq's spiritual leader Sheikh **Issa Qassim**, suggesting electoral participation was a *quid pro quo* for the government's suspension of a new liberalising personal status law, to which the Shia Islamist society was opposed.

But Salman plays a wider political game than that. He

knows that failure to deliver across the broad agenda for social and economic change would risk a crumbling in voter support, proving his critics in *Haq* to be correct in many wavering supporters' eyes.

Long road to the political mainstream

Ali Salman has been working for more than a decade for this moment, when the opposition can really make itself heard through the formal political process.

In January 1995, leadership of a campaign to demand the reinstatement of Bahrain's short-lived 1973 democratic parliamentary constitution saw him driven into exile, in London.

Salman came to politics after studying theology in Iran (in 1987-92), after an earlier three-year spell studying maths at university in Riyadh. But he knows well the dangers of allowing Al-Wefaq to be painted as a vehicle for Iranian influence and now accepts that it was a mistake to allow protesters on one opposition march to carry portraits of the late Ayatollah **Ruuhollah Khomeini**. He has pointed out that many Bahraini Shia look to **Iraqi** rather than Iranian figureheads for spiritual leadership and is also keen to differentiate Al-Wefaq from *Hizbollah* (GSN 795/2).

Fitch upgrades GIB's ratings

While political developments occupy many Gulfis, the region's oil-driven economic prosperity continue to impress foreign observers. In a typical move, international ratings agency **Fitch** has notched the grades accorded to **Gulf International Bank (GIB)** upwards to A and F1 respectively, from A- and F2, because of the oil boom improvement in economic conditions in the markets where the Manama-based bank operates.

The agency noted the enhanced capacity of GIB's Gulf government shareholders to provide financial support – not that there is any obvious need for this in the current bullish circumstances. Chief executive Dr **Khaled Al-Fayez** attributes GIB's successive upgrades to its strong financial performance and the widening of its business franchise with a strong push into merchant banking in the region.