

AMERICA'S ALLIES

Life Is Better In Bahrain

(NAPSA)—Democracy is on the rise in the Middle East. For example, Bahrain, a small island state in the Persian Gulf, recently gave the elected chamber of Parliament much greater control over the government.

The move came as a result of a National Dialogue called by Bahrain's head of state King Hamad, who believes reform and democratization are the way forward. The National Dialogue recommended that the country's prime minister and his government should be accountable to the elected chamber of Parliament.

Already, Bahrain has what's considered the most democratic system of government of all the states in the Gulf. Women have been able to vote in national elections since 2002. Overall, the position of women is the most advanced in the region, with legal protections in cases of divorce and child custody—an issue of considerable controversy in the region. Women also have better job opportunities in Bahrain than in most of its neighbors, with one-third of women in paid employment. When Bahrain was elected to head the United Nations General Assembly in 2006, the country chose the first female president from the Middle East as president of the General Assembly.

Bahrain has one of the best education systems in the Gulf. On average, children stay at school for 14 years. Upon graduating from high school, more than half of the students go on to college—one of the highest levels anywhere in the Middle East.

There's also a high level of government spending on doctors, nurses and hospitals. Overall,



Photo Credit: Bahrain News Agency

The Bahraini government recently completed the National Dialogue to ensure continued political, economic, social and human rights reforms for all its people.

Bahrain spends 5 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP) on government-funded health care.

When oil was discovered in Bahrain in the 1930s, it was decided to plow a third of oil revenues into spending on roads, clean water, schooling and health care. Oil revenues currently contribute only 10 percent of GDP, but Bahrain has become one of the most diversified economies of the Gulf, with banking and financial services, the largest sector of the economy, accounting for 30 percent of GDP.

A business-friendly economy and low taxes may account for much of Bahrain's success in attracting overseas companies—65 U.S. firms are located there, though The Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom, which placed Bahrain ahead of 17 countries in the Middle East, may also have had something to do with it.

The move to make the government more accountable to the people is the latest example of Bahrain's commitment to reform and continued prosperity.