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Thursday, April 28, 2005

Item of Interest

Will We Ever Come of Age? Abeer Mishkhas



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EDITOR'S NOTE

The [Saudi-American Forum](#) and its companion site, the [Saudi-US Relations Information Service](#), have provided extensive coverage of the three rounds of municipal council balloting in Saudi Arabia that ended last week in the western and northwestern areas of the Kingdom. Today Abeer Mishkhas, writing in *Arab News*, discusses the results of the voting in Jeddah and the selection of seven candidates who were touted as members of the "Golden List." We thank *Arab News* for permission to share it with you.

Will We Ever Come of Age? Abeer Mishkhas

The curtain has gone down on the elections in Jeddah and for all interested and cynical people, they are over. For those who do not like how things ended, they'll have to keep talking about it. It was no surprise, even if it had a bitter taste, that the result of the elections was so diligently pre-decided and predictable. The seven candidates on the so-called "Golden List" swept to victory. The Golden List appeared a few days before the election, was circulated in text messages and on the Internet and bore the signatures of well-known religious scholars who supported the seven candidates. The difference between those who won and those who did not has provoked plenty of thoughts among people. Someone said that Jeddah people were cynical about the elections. And I cannot help but believe that they were. During the voter registration period, over and over, we heard the comment: "What elections? No thanks, not for me." The comments confirmed a basic skepticism that has sadly become part of our character.



But maybe these people were not skeptics at heart because once the results were announced, their surprise was obvious. With all due respect to their feelings, I have one question for them — Why didn't you register and then vote? The results might not have been different but at least each one would have known that he had had his say and exercised his right.

Looking at the other side, the winners' list brings up some major questions for all of us. Do Saudis like ready-made choices? Are Saudis not ready or unwilling to think for themselves? Did the Golden List being approved make it easy for those who do not want to bother to think? A

young man interviewed in a local paper last week said that he gave his vote to the Golden List because “I am leaving the responsibility of choosing to the compilers of the list. Whatever happens will be on their conscience, not mine.” In other words, he simply does not want to bother to think or choose and he certainly does not want to take any responsibility, even when he does choose something. Strange, you may think — but no, it isn’t. In what might be called “a no-question culture,” we are always told what to do and given rules to follow; at home children are expected to obey and listen. In school, students are not allowed to think or discuss issues with their teachers, let alone hold a different opinion. They learn by rote whatever they are told and if they go on to college or university, the pattern is set and it continues. So when do they ever learn that they must choose and bear responsibility for their choices and actions? In most cases they do not. Even in matters of religion, they are told not to think; just follow and listen to the learned ones and if they are mistaken, the responsibility for error is theirs. A columnist at Al-Sharq Al Awsat asked if we ever reached the age of discretion. No matter how we like to think we do, it seems that we in fact do not.

What about those who compiled the list? They knew very well whom they were dealing with and also who supported them. A voter told me: “I voted for 5 of those on the list; I know they are good men and I think people should give them a chance to prove they can do the job.” Fair enough, but does that make their winning any less controversial? There will be always be a question mark hanging over all of them, even if they detached themselves completely from the compilers of the list— as some have already done. Some here have condemned the categorization of voters into Islamists and liberals. But that came about because of the list made by the scholars.

To look at the whole thing from another angle, we’ll find that there were two kinds of candidates with their supporters: Those who knew what they wanted and worked hard to get it and those who did not. The winners had many supporters who were organized, diligent and serious whereas the losers cast their money and efforts to the winds. Was it that they did not know how to reach people or was it that they did not realize what the game was and how to play it?

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