

From Saudi Arabia

Saudi Women Score Twice in First Run at Polls

JEDDAH, Saudi Arabia, November 30, 2005 (AFP) - Two Saudi businesswomen swept to a surprise victory in Chamber of Commerce elections Wednesday in the first polls in which women stood as candidates in the conservative Muslim kingdom. "I'm happy, but I'm still in shock," Lama al-Suleiman, one of the two winners, told AFP.

She was summing up the feelings of many election activists and watchers who had expected, at best, one woman to be elected to the Board of Directors of the Jeddah Chamber of Commerce and Industry. "It's a big leap for Saudi women, an answer to what people want," said Suleiman, a 39-year-old mother of four. Suleiman and fellow female winner Nashwa Taher ran on a list of heavyweight business people and industrialists which clinched the 12 board seats up for grabs.

With only 100 women among the some 3880 Chamber members who cast ballots, the pair's victory was effectively handed to them by men. "This means there is trust [in women]. Professionalism is very important... And this is my message to Saudi women: Take your work seriously, without forgetting your role as a mother and wife," said Taher, who helps run a group of family companies with interests ranging from foodstuffs to contracting. "We should give them [women] a chance because they have little representation in society," one male voter said Tuesday, adding that he had voted for four women. Taher, 44, attributed her success to the support of her parents and husband, as well as her own perseverance.

The two women's victory came several months after landmark municipal elections across oil-rich Saudi Arabia, from which women were barred. That was credited by many for heightening public interest in the Chamber polls in the Red Sea city and turning them into a hotly contested race.

The fact that women, who previously were entitled only to vote for the Jeddah Chamber's Board, stood as candidates "was also an unusual event which contributed to making this election unusual," said Othman Basaqr, a member of a task force which assisted the elections

committee. "This is what everybody seems to be telling me," Suleiman said when asked if she felt she had made history.

Seventeen women were among the 71 candidates in the elections, which took place from Saturday through Tuesday. Businesswomen cast their ballots on the first two days and businessmen on the following days, in line with traditions whereby Saudi women do not mix in public with men other than relatives. But Taher said she meets with businessmen at the Chamber and there is nothing wrong with that so long as she is covered from head to toe in line with shari'a, or Islamic law, and discusses professional matters. Shari'a gives women full rights, Taher said. "Actually, it was Islamic shari'a which started democracy. We simply call it shura (consultation)," she told AFP.

Some 21,000 members of the Jeddah Chamber, or about half the total membership, were eligible to take part in the polls. Election officials said both the turnout and the number of candidates were a record in the Chamber's 60-year history.

In their campaigns, both Suleiman and Taher vowed to back a center that assists businesswomen and to help women working from home. Victory "means we will have more work... There's a lot for us to learn, but I'm sure we will manage," said Suleiman, who holds a doctorate in nutrition from Kings College, London.

Trade and Industry Minister Hashem Yamani is due to appoint six additional members to the Jeddah Chamber Board. Yamani rescheduled the vote from late September specifically to enable women to stand after the elections committee linked to his ministry had rejected the candidacies of seven women.

Hisham Khoja, a merchant who said he voted for one female hopeful, noted that the Saudi government was giving women more job opportunities. But one businesswoman, who asked not to be named, said she did not think US pressure for reform was helping Saudi women. "In fact, it may be delaying progress... We are moving forward in our own, low-profile way," she said.

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