

Initial results show 19 Saudi women elected for first time

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Riyadh: At least 19 Saudi women have won seats on local municipal councils a day after women voted and ran in elections for the first time in the country's history, according to initial results released.

The women who won hail from vastly different parts of the country, ranging from Saudi Arabia's largest city to a small village near Islam's holiest sites.

Though not many women were expected to win seats, even limited gains are seen as a step forward for women who had previously been completely shut out of elections.

General Election Commission spokesman Hamad Al-Omar told the Associated Press that out of 130,000 female registered voters, a staggering 106,000 cast ballots, or roughly 82 per cent.

More than 1.35 million men had registered to vote, with 44 percent, or what almost 600,000, casting ballots.

Al-Omar said 19 women won seats in 10 different regions, with results still to be announced in several more regions.

The conservative capital of Riyadh saw the most women candidates win, with four elected. The Eastern Province, where minority Shiites are concentrated, saw three women elected, he said.

The mayor of the city of Mecca, Osama al-Bar, told the AP that a woman won in a village called Madrasah, about 93 miles north of the city which houses the cube-shaped Kaaba to which Muslims around the world pray.

Saudi Arabia's second largest and most cosmopolitan city, Jiddah, elected two women, as did one of the most conservative regions, Qassim.

Around 7,000 candidates, among them 979 women, were competing for 2,100 seats across the country. The councils are the only government body elected by Saudi citizens. The two previous rounds of voting for the councils, in 2005 and 2011, were open to men only.

Other women hailing from the kingdom's northernmost areas won, with two elected in Tabuk, and one in al-Jawf.

Additionally, a woman one in Saudi Arabia's southern border area of Jizan and another won in al-Ahsa.

Many women candidates ran on platforms that promised more nurseries to offer longer daycare hours for working mothers, the creation of youth centers with sports and cultural activities, improved roads, better garbage collection and overall greener cities.

In October, the Saudi Gazette reported that harsh road conditions and long distances to the nearest hospital had forced some women in the village of Madrasah, where one female candidate was elected, to give birth in cars.

The local newspaper reported that the closest hospital and the nearest university were in Mecca, prompting some students to forgo attending classes. The article said residents were also frustrated with the lack of parks in the village.

- AP