

Qatar not yet ready for parliament polls - PM

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The prime minister of Qatar, which missed a 2007 target for its first parliamentary election, said he did not expect Qataris to cast ballots this year as the state was still preparing the legal framework.

"I don't think this year ... It's the first time we [will] have elections in Qatar and we need to make it right and to international standards," Shaikh Hamad Bin Jasem Bin Jabr Al Thani said in an interview at the weekend.

Shaikh Hamad in 2006 told a forum on democracy hosted by Doha that the legal framework would be ready in mid-2006 and an election would be held early in 2007.

"We need to prepare all the laws," Shaikh Hamad, who became prime minister in April, said.

Qatar's ruler Shaikh Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani changed the constitution and introduced municipal elections to pave the way for a measure of democracy a few years after he toppled his father in the mid-1990s.

Voters, including women, will be able to choose 30 of the 45 members of parliament while the head of state will appoint the rest. Qatar currently has an advisory Shura council whose members are all appointed by the emir.

The elections are stipulated in the country's first constitution since independence from Britain in 1971 and which a majority of Qataris voted for in a 2003 referendum.

"We feel elections are part of a country which looks to enter the international arena ... not just economically, but also legally and constitutionally," said Shaikh Hamad.

Qatar, through its \$ 60 billion (Dh20.2 billion) sovereign wealth fund, has been propelled onto the international scene with stake purchases in the likes of the London Stock Exchange and Credit Suisse. It is also bidding to host the 2016 Olympic Games.

The Opec-member has the world's third largest gas reserves after Russia and Iran and has a booming economy fuelled by high energy prices.

According to the emir's economic advisor Ebrahim Al Ebrahim, Qatar's population is now about 1.5 million. Of those, less than a third are Qataris, according to estimates. The population has been swelled recently by guest workers in the construction boom.

Qatar is the richest Arab country per capita.