

of change...

● Historic day ... the King waves the national flag at a celebration at Bahrain University's Sakhir campus, during the parliamentary elections in 2002



● The King and Premier watch as the Crown Prince votes in the National Referendum



back to the polls to elect a new 40-member parliament, which opened on December 25 the same year.

Parliament partners the Shura Council, which has 40 appointed members, for form the bi-cameral National Assembly.

Between them, they work with the government, led by His Royal Highness the Prime Minister Prince Khalifa bin Salman Al Khalifa, to formulate legislation and map out plans to safeguard the interests of the people and to take the country forward.

In 2002, people also went to the polls to elect five Municipal Councils - Manama, Muharraq, Central, Northern and Southern - one for each of the country's governorates.

Together, parliament and the municipal councils have given the people a voice from the grassroots up the national government level, with new elections every four years.

The 10 years since King Hamad's accession have brought massive economic success for Bahrain, nationally, regionally and on the world stage.

Now the country is seeking an even brighter future through the Economic Vision 2030, which maps out a brave new Bahrain aimed at guaranteeing equal opportunities for all.

It was drawn up by the Economic Development Board, under the chairmanship of His Royal Highness Crown Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, Deputy Supreme Commander and under the guidance of the King, in co-operation with various bodies representing the government and the business and civil communities.

The masterplan will build on the success already



● Princess Sabeeka honours former Health Minister Dr Nada Hafadh on Bahraini Women's Day

achieved, with record foreign investments into the country running into the billions and the number of new projects and businesses rising each year.

The country's major industries, including Bapco, Alba, Asry and GPIC have all enjoyed growing success, alongside the ever-growing banking and financial services industry and employment of

Bahrainis is at its highest level - along with much-improved average wages.

Economic reforms have included creating a more open market, with easier start-up for foreign investors setting up companies here and the opening of the telecommunications market has given consumers greater choice, with a third mobile telecoms operator now coming in.

Social reforms have seen an emphasis on improving the role of women in society, spearheaded by the Supreme Committee for Woman, chaired by King Hamad's wife Her Royal Highness Princess Sabeeka bint Ibrahim Al Khalifa.

Under King Hamad, zBahrain has appointed the first female ministers, first in Health, then Social

Development and now in Culture and Information, as well as its first female ambassadors, first to France and now to the US.

The country also made history when lawyer and former Ambassador to France Shaikha Haya bint Rashid Al Khalifa became president of the United Nations General Assembly for a year, in June 2006.

Bahraini Women's Day is now an annual event and earlier this month Princess Sabeeka marked it by honouring 39 female health professionals in a ceremony at the College of Health Sciences.

Bahrain now also has a Family Law governing domestic disputes in the Sunni community.

It has also, in the last 10 years, increased the support it gives to the elderly and the disabled, as well as creating a shelter for abused women and giving government homes to divorced women struggling to raise their children.

Last month, the King issued a Royal order setting up the National Human Rights Authority, which will draw up a strategy to consolidate and protect human rights in Bahrain.

A new insurance scheme against unemployment also means that those without work now get improved financial aid, coupled with help in finding jobs and training. There have been far-reaching educational reforms aimed at better preparing the young for the careers market and children are keeping pace with the hi-tech world through the King Hamad Future Schools project, which puts Internet laboratories into the nation's schools.

Massive spending on housing, renovation of villages and a nationwide scheme to rebuild needy families' dilapidated homes is also under way.

King Hamad has always praised the unity and loyalty of the Bahraini nation and has pledged to ensure that they enjoy an ever brighter and better future.