Website on Shura poll to boost interaction

The new website which was launched yesterday, **is an interactive portal to engage the public in parliamentary affairs**



TECH SUPPORT: Tawasul and Sablat Oman members at the launch of the website. - Jun Estrada/TIMES OF OMAN

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MUSCAT: To provide a fillip to the process of the seventh Majlis Al Shura election scheduled for October, an interactive website containing relevant information about the candidates, basic statutes, election regulations and the importance of civic participation was launched at the Tawasul headquarters here, yesterday.

The website, http://www.shura.s-oman.net/, which is in Arabic, is a joint effort of the independent and private think tank Tawasul and the popular Internet public forum, Sablat Oman. Introducing the objectives of the website, Khalid Al Haribi, managing director of Tawasul, said, "The website is an interactive portal to engage the public in parliamentary affairs. It is a tool through which the candidates can access and interact with voters."

Featuring relevant social media tools and applications, the website also has a platform where voters can interact and debate with candidates, post video and audio, raise questions, and participate in the process of agenda-making.

"The idea behind the website is to encourage the public to take an active interest in national matters," said Moosa Al Farei, general manager of Sablat Oman.

Hatim Al Taie, chief editor of Al Royal Press and Publishing, who was present at the launch, said the initiative was a partnership for progress.

"It promotes common values in advancing the nation forward," he said.

The website has a special section dedicated to Majlis Al Shura candidates. It contains information about the candidates of each wilayat and their CVs, campaign information, programme and campaign activities. It also provides information on who they are, their slogans, their campaigns, and their vision on education, economy and the power of Majlis Al Shura.

"It has pictures and names of all the 1,000 candidates contesting the elections. However, only 150 candidates have been submitted their details. We expect more candidates to come forward with their details," said Khalid Al Balushi of Sablat Oman.

Khalid Al Haribi said, "This is the time to be proactive. If the citizens elect strong members they will be assured of parliamentary powers."

There is an exclusive section for women candidates highlighting the importance and value of a truly representative and balanced legislative parliament.

Women's role

"We want to emphasise through this election and this website that women are principal partners in the progress of the nation. That's why special attention is being accorded to them," said Khalid Al Haribi.

Moosa said he hopes that the website will push the citizens to participate in the process of elections.

"We want the portal to play a role in dispelling any negative vibes that are floating around. We are witnessing a new era and it is common for negative ideas to be spread. Calling for change is fine but calling for boycotting of elections is not right. That is why we want to engage the youth in the process as far as possible," added Moosa.

He explained that a 'polling section', which is part of the website, had asked the question: "Will you participate in the election?"

"To our surprise, out of 3,000 people who visited the site, only 300 voted and out of that 51 per cent said they won't vote while 49 per cent said they would. This attitude must change. This is our chance to bring about a change," he said.

A team consisting of members from both Tawasul and Sablat Oman is monitoring the functioning and the content of the website round the clock. Updates and news about the elections is also being posted in the main page.

The website will continue to function even after the elections. "The elected members can use it to engage with the citizens of their constituency. It will focus on the accountability of the Majlis, through following up the members, legislations, hearing sessions, and public opinion," said Khalid Al Haribi.

Haribi, who is also a candidate said, "The Sultanate of Oman's destiny is to regain its rich and leading role through its success in achieving stability and knowledge. We need to regain our focus on our shared values of positive attitude and hard work to turn ambitious plans to tangible projects with positive impact in each and every community."

ELECTION FEVER

- The Majlis Al Shura election is scheduled for October. All Omanis above the age of 21 years, who have registered, can vote
- Around 1,000 candidates are in the race, out of whom 70 are women
- 500,000 voters have registered, which is a significant increase from 380,000 voters in 2007
- New legislative and regulatory powers have generated keen interest among voters and the general public
- The election website is a platform where voters can interact and debate with candidates, post videos and audios, raise questions, and participate in agenda