

Stage is set for the big show

World will be watching country's landmark election

THE UAE'S biggest ever national elections this week will be closely watched with some controversial issues being tackled.

The 460 candidates vying for 20 places on the National Federal Council (FNC) have held the main speaking parts so far, using social media networks and cold-calling to address subjects with the 129,000 selected voters.

Among the most important issues that have cropped up for Emiratis, say candidates, are women's rights, financial concerns, lack of employment among private firms, and nationalisation – or, as one candidate said: "how to take back control of our country without relying on expats".

On Saturday the largest number ever of UAE nationals will be going to the polls, and election organisers expect a turnout of 70 per cent of the 129,000 eligible voters.

However, even those who haven't been selected to vote, expats and Emiratis alike, have been paying attention. UAE national Hussain Al Balooshi, 30, said the eyes of the world would be on the UAE come polling day. "International countries and governments

By Michelle Sutton

are now looking very closely through a microscope," said the 30-year-old.

"I think that given the Arab political unrest recently they want to see what's happening in this part of the Arab world," he said, referring to the upheaval in countries such as Egypt, Syria, Yemen and Tunisia.

"We want to prove ourselves in this election, that we do have democracy and equal rights for men and women," Al Balooshi said.

Even though, many Emiratis will not be entitled to vote, the issue of equality has still been a strong theme in the election.

"The UAE has always been keen to empower

women and women represent 59 per cent of the total workforce in the government. In the previous FNC, 22.5 per cent of the members were women and there are now four women as ministers in the federal government," said Dr Anwar Gargash, the Minister of State for FNC Affairs and National Election Committee chairman. He also pointed out that "females have the perfect chance to win", making up 46 per cent of voters this year and 85 candidates.

Among the female candidates is Maitha Al Dosari, from Dubai. She wants to tackle sexual inequality, which she says still exists in some areas of the UAE, such as employment, and marriage.

Al Dosari told 7DAYS that divorced women in particular felt the brunt of the issue.

She said women are treated differently when their marriage falls apart.

"They feel ashamed and treated like a second-class citizen. But, it doesn't matter if they are divorced or not," said Al Dosari.

And she said that the issue of women's rights in Emirati culture is still met with mixed reactions.

"The ladies in the community love it, but some of the men want to ignore it," said Al

THE VOTE:
Women's rights and employment are key issues among voters



Dosari. Popular social media sites, such as facebook and twitter, have been a useful tool for those

trying to decide how to vote, as pages have been used to run scripts of election dialogue among candidates.

And the organisers hope the day itself will be a finely tuned show.

Last week they told 7DAYS that the army and police would play a part in the process, standing outside each of the 13 voting centres across the country to ensure there were no problems.

Before then, though, the show must go on. And come Saturday the final act will be played out to an unprecedented 129,274 Emiratis, who will decide which candidates get a speaking role on the FNC.

michelle.sutton@7days.ae

"GIVEN THE ARAB POLITICAL UNREST, THE WORLD WANTS TO SEE WHAT IS HAPPENING"

HUSSAIN AL BALOOSHI, 30, ON THE FNC ELECTIONS

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