

## Omanis prepare to vote for new consultative council

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Omani voters are to cast their ballots on Saturday to elect a new consultative council after candidates were allowed for the first time to campaign ahead of the polls.

Top officials in Oman have vowed that "strict transparency" will rule the second-ever public ballot for the Majlis al-Shura, since the vote was given to all citizens aged over 21 in 2003.

Only one in four of the population was allowed in 2003 to take part in electing members of the lower chamber, which was founded in 1991 and serves as an advisory body.

"The elections will proceed in full transparency. Whoever attempts to breach the electoral law will be severely punished," Interior Minister Saud bin Ibrahim al-Busaidi has told reporters.

A total of 388,683 men and women over 21 years old are registered to vote out of a population of around two million, of which Omanis account for around 1.7 million. In 2003, registered voters accounted for 262,000, Busaidi said.

Electors will vote at 102 polling stations to choose their 84 representatives from 732 candidates, including 20 women.

The interior minister boasted the increase in the number of potential voters reflects "a growing interest among Omanis" in the advisory body, which has the authority to question ministers over their management.

But it can not interfere in issues related to security, defence, or foreign affairs, and the council does not have any legislative powers.

However, candidate Yunis bin Sabil al-Balushi, who heads the economic commission in the outgoing council, appeared content with the slow process of empowering the council, saying that the country should not rush.

"With time, its perogatives will be widened and reinforced," he said.

Allowing candidates to stage electoral campaigns and meet with their electorate is the "principle innovation this time," he said, pointing out that such meetings are held in places of worship.

"Candidates can also set up electoral tents, but this is very expensive," added the businessman.

Electoral banners with the names, portraits and slogans of candidates have gone up in allocated places. Each candidate has the right to put 10 billboards in his constituency.

Newspapers are also being used to mobilise voters, but campaigning adverts should not exceed a quarter of a page in size.

Many candidates are academics by profession and most of them have studied in the West, but

tribalism remains decisive in Oman where family and tribal links are a dominant factor in people's lives.

"Tribalism and nepotism come ahead of (serving) the nation and competence," in the elections, wrote Saeed al-Kathiri in a commentary in the local daily Oman under the headline of "Tribalism and the Shura council."