

## Talking things over to be heard and seen

Debating seems to be regaining importance. Apart form public speaking, it helps students conduct themselves rationally

## Praseeda Nair

DUBAI — As an increasing number of debate clubs crop up in schools and universities across the UAE, it would be safe to say that youth interest in voicing opinions and exchanging ideas outside the cyber realm of retweets and hashtags is starting to pick up speed again.

Popular blogger, Khulsom Marei, has been debating since high school, but quit pursuing her interest in voicing her opinions through debate when she discovered the power her words have online. "Online, you're free and anonymous even if your viewers see your face. There's a feeling of security when you're speaking behind a camera," she said. "That's why a lot of debates that take place are online through video tags. They lack the formality and structure of proper debates, which take away the fear factor. Everyone's equal online. I like the formality of debating, though. It teaches people how to phrase their ideas and how to conduct themselves even if tempers flare and things take on a personal element. In a tame place like Dubai, we need more public forums like last week's (Dubai Debates forum)," the 21-year-old law student said.

The American University of Sharjah Debate club secured intellectual bragging rights after winning competitions against other university debate heavyweights in the UAE. Spearheaded by the club president, Jashan Jot Singh, AUS



I submitted my video to Dubai Debates because the topic is very personal to me



The winning team from AUD at the Jashn Inter-university debate

ty, organising over 14 workshops in the past semester alone. "I've been in the club for the past three years. Now I'm in a position where I can be a catalyst for change. Our goal is to eliminate the fear of public speaking among students. Debating on important issues provides students a platform to be heard and taken seriously," Jashan said.

Compared to the university's wellestablished Model United Nations club, the debate club is still in its infancy, picking up pace with the executive committee meeting three times a week to finalise the logistics and planning of next large-scale event is a Regional Deneed to be addressed. bate Championship for universities student added. In terms on inter-Uni-

Debate Club reinvented its team identi- Claiming to debate about "everything and anything relating to our world today," the club aims to create an active and aware society of youth who are in touch with the socio-political climate

Aside from public speaking, debating allows students to organise their thoughts, learn how to conduct themselves in a formal and emotionallydetached rational way, which is helpful when sensitive topics like the Arab uprising are on the table.

Mohammed Saleh, an avid debater and respondent at the recently held edition of Dubai Debates, sees debating their many workshops and events. "Our as a forum to bring out social issues that

The second edition of this city-wide in the Gulf that we're planning to host debate programme focused on the afnext semester," the third-year Finance termath of the 'Arab awakening' and the new challenges and opportunities versity debates the reigning champi- available to the people in the region. ons have been the debaters from AUD. Owing to the popularity of social media

in the Arab world, Dubai Debates advertised the event on Facebook, taking only online

registrations for the debate last Tuesday. Participants and speakers are encouraged to upload video responses before, during, and even in response to the debate. "I submitted my video to Dubai Debates because the topic is very personal to me. I think people outside the region are getting the wrong idea of what is going on with the 'Arab springs.' What developed in Egypt and Tunisia can be seen as a wake-up call for some states to realise that they must reform and adopt changes that address the needs of the public," Mohammed said. The video responses have garnered a lot of public attention on cyberspace as they continue to make their rounds on Youtube.

In response to claims of restricted freedom of expression in the UAE, students mostly expressed vehement disagreement. "I don't think we need to toe the line when it comes to certain issues. Like any other sovereign state, if you abide by the rules and behave with respect, your views cannot be ignored," Mohammed said. He pointed out how every governmental office in Dubai welcomes feedback and suggestions, indicating a clear interest in learning from public opinion.

As the President and founder of AUD's Hashemite Jordanian Club, Mohammed frequently expresses his views on the policies and practices in his native country, employing the skills he learned through debating.

"The reason why I started this club was to share my culture and identity with students at my university. If you point out weak things in an intelligent, rational way through a properly moderated debate, it does not mean you hate your country it means that you love it and you love your leader."

## DEBATE SCENE SET TO FLOURISH

UBLIC forums and active online debates are only the beginning, according to Belabbès Benkredda, the founder of a novel initiative called Dubai Debates. "I've always seen debate as an important element of public discourse. It may be in its nascent stage in Dubai right now, but I'm hoping my project will contribute to this emerging scene," he told Khaleej Times.

According to Belabbès, "debating finds a natural home in universities," which has prompted him to encourage youth debaters to participate in public dialogue. Dubai Debates focuses on English language discussions on current affairs that affect our region the most.

"Arabic language debating is a distinct niche here. In the new Arab world, there is a definite need for Arabic language debating on a larger scale, but Dubai Debates are a contribution to global discourse on current affairs," he said.

What sparks off these debates

are usually opinions shared and rebutted on Twitter, taking a life of its own in the real world.

"The UAE has an amazing level of internet penetration. In fact, it's one of the top 10 in the world. Dubai Debates elevates the power of social media with real-time discussions that can return to the internet in the form of videos that elicit responses of their own," he said, explaining the cyclical nature of open debates in Dubai. The first session of Dubai Debates took place in February with about 10 people in attendance. Within hours of the debate, the videos documenting the session went viral on Youtube.

The recent second edition of Dubai Debates saw a full house with over 200 people fighting for legroom in the crowded conference hall at Kempinski Hotel.

The next edition of Dubai Debates is already in its planning stages, with the topic of women's rights possibly on



news@khaleejtimes.com The seventh Inter Collegiate Debate organised by AUS in progress