Fact-checking ahead of elections: summary and findings of capacity building activities held in Lebanon as part of the OECD Citizens' Voice Project

In collaboration with the Maharat Foundation

This document builds on the partnership between Maharat and OECD in the framework of the project "Citizens' Voice: Empowering civil society and the media to enhance open government" funded by the Federal Foreign Office of Germany and held in the context of the MENA-OECD Governance Programme.

It summarizes the rationale behind and key findings that resulted from a capacity building activity organised ahead of the Lebanese 2022 parliamentary elections that strengthened the capacities of journalists in alternative media platforms to conduct fact-checking during electoral processes. This article also emphasizes how the fact-checks produced within the framework of this project significantly contributed to increasing transparency, integrity and accountability in the public debate surrounding the elections. Finally, a set of lessons learnt derived from the activity are drawn, offering valuable insights for future elections.

This activity complements Maharat's work on the Lebanese 2022 parliamentary elections. The fact-checks produced within its framework were published on the Fact-O-meter section of the Maharat-news website, a fact-checking platform that is part of the International Fact-checking Network.

Fact-checking: an essential tool to guarantee the transparency and integrity of the electoral process

Media outlets play an essential role in democracies. Free, fair and inclusive elections cannot be fulfilled if voters do not have access to relevant and accurate information about parties, policies and candidates in order to make informed decisions. Furthermore, the integrity of information is crucial, particularly in a polarized and divided society such as Lebanon which constitutes a fertile ground for disinformation campaigns.

Additionally, the information environment in which elections take place has been transformed today as social media has changed the way people consume and spread political information. Digital platforms have contributed to the proliferation and amplification of mis and disinformation, thereby interfering with elections and undermining this democratic process.

The analysis of the monitoring data on the activities of Lebanese candidates and politicians on Twitter and Facebook between the months of February and March 2022 revealed that more than 80% of their political discourse took the form of political propaganda and promotional speech appealing to voters' emotions and throwing vague accusations at political opponents.

It also revealed that discourses of political actors including candidates, politicians and influencers contained an important share of information aiming at misleading the public through the promotion of conspiracy theories as well as unfounded accusations, rather than building on facts and evidence.

Moreover, traditional media in Lebanon has often limited its role to covering the statements, promises, and positions of politicians without conducting thorough fact-checking.

Building the fact-checking capacities of Lebanese journalists in alternative media platforms

To remedy this, Maharat shared its fact-checking methodology with alternative media platforms in the framework of the "OECD Citizen's Voice" Project ahead of the 2022 Lebanese parliamentary elections, empowering them to integrate it into their work in order to provide accurate information to citizens, and equip citizens with the necessary information to make informed choices, empowering them to engage effectively in the democratic process.

The target group was carefully identified, given that they often reflect the views of marginalized groups and emerging movements as opposed to traditional media which mainly amplify mainstream voices.

Furthermore, Maharat chose to direct its fact-checks produced within the framework of this project toward the legal aspect of elections in order to increase the culture of accountability and transparency in public debate.

As such, journalists underwent a 3-day training focused on fact-checking tools and techniques that they could use to ensure the accuracy of information. The training also provide insights into Maharat's fact-checking methodology which firstly makes a distinction between various types of political statements. This involved categorizing, on one hand, statements that are verifiable, such as statements relying on economic figures, statistical claims, laws, and quotations from other politicians, and on the other hand, opinions and statements appealing to emotions that cannot be verified. Furthermore, the methodology stressed the importance of verifying the source of the information. The significance of putting facts in context and providing background information was also emphasized as a crucial step of the fact-checking process. Additionally, avoiding bias and maintaining impartiality was highlighted as a key requirement to conduct thorough fact-checking. During the training, journalists were also introduced to fact-checking tools capable of detecting manipulated images and videos, with the aim of tackling the spread of various forms of mis and disinformation.

As part of this project, the 8 alternative media platforms were provided with small production fees in order to support them in producing fact-checks. Furthermore, alternative media platforms' journalists were closely mentored by Maharat staff throughout the project. Around 44 Fact-checks were published on both [Maharat-News website](#) and alternative media platforms pages, 2 months ahead of the elections.

The role of fact-checks in increasing accountability, transparency and integrity of the electoral process

The fact-checks conducted as part of this activity centered around a variety of topics related to elections including candidates' electoral promises.

A number of fact-checks strived to address transparency issues by bringing to light violations of the electoral law. Articles aimed, for example, to determine if some parties exceeded the maximum electoral spending limits according to the law. Violations committed by media outlets during the electoral period were also exposed. This involved, for example, verifying the compliance of opinion polls published by media outlets with Article 79 of the electoral law. This article specifies the information that should be included in the announcement, publication, transmission or distribution of opinion poll results, encompassing details such the name of the institution that conducted the poll, the name of the institution that requested and financed the poll, in addition to the poll sample size and method of selection.

Some fact-checks also served to enhance voter education as they provided useful information on the voting process, by verifying, for instance, the conditions that would cancel a ballot paper. It is worth noting that the contribution of media to voter education through fact-checking is crucial given that the state has not been playing a role in this regard. Furthermore, and according to the [media monitoring](#) conducted by Maharat Foundation around the 2022 parliamentary elections during the period ranging from the 1st of February 2022 until the 15th of May 2022, only 0.13% of the TV coverage of political actors and issues related to the elections was devoted to voter education.

Most importantly, the fact-checks bridged the information gap for ill-served audiences such as persons with disabilities, empowering them with knowledge about their right to receive assistance throughout the voting process from another voter. The fact-checking process also aimed to determine if the current election law adequately safeguards the right to vote for people with special needs, highlighting the existing gaps.

Additionally, a part of the fact-checks focused on peripheral regions which are often neglected by traditional media. One fact-check aimed to determine the legality of a party banner that was hanged by Bint Jbeil's municipality, located in the south of Lebanon, while another one sought to establish the legality of polls predicting elections outcome conducted in the Akkar region.

Initial lessons learned:

- It is critical for alternative media platforms to collaborate in order to obtain more data about circulating rumors or falsehoods and to benefit from networking as they can learn from one another about strategies utilized in different parts of Lebanon to tackle mis and disinformation.

- A fundamental challenge in fact-checking in Lebanon lies in determining the most suitable approach for verifying information. Given that a significant portion of political statements falls into the category of opinions and propaganda, the emphasis should be on enhancing the public understanding of these topics. This involves prioritizing the provision of comprehensive context as the reliance of these statements on emotions as well as their subjective nature can exacerbate the complexity related to the fact-checking process.

- Keeping track of candidates' promises both before and after elections is imperative for ensuring accountability and transparency. This practice contributes to holding candidates accountable by verifying the fulfillment of their promises, thereby enhancing electoral integrity.

- CSOs and media have a crucial role to play as watchdogs in the absence of a fully functioning electoral management body to safeguard the integrity and transparency of the electoral process. Hence, fact-checking can contribute to monitoring candidates' compliance with campaign financing as well as electoral media and advertising regulations.

- CSOs and media should contribute to enhancing voter education in order to provide citizens with simplified and accessible explanations of the electoral law and process, thereby countering rumors based on misunderstandings and misinterpretation of the law.

CONTACT

Karine Badr |karine.badr@oecd.org

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