

THE ELECTORAL MEDIA PERFORMANCE DURING THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS 2022






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Executive Summary

This study has kept pace with Lebanese media coverage throughout the parliamentary elections process and during election day, on May 15. It aimed to discover the different roles that these channels have played during this period, as well as the extent to which these roles comply with the applicable laws, mainly the electoral law and the provisions of electoral media and advertising. It also examined the media's commitment to covering the elections from every single angle and fulfilling its role during this process of political reform, by encouraging voters to fulfill their duty as citizens and making room for new potential reform projects, so as to compare them with other projects.

The general context of the Lebanese parliamentary elections:

Months before the elections, skepticism dominated the scene. Based on previous experience, people had doubts about whether the elections would take place or not, and whether the political class in power was even willing to hold the elections. This was buttressed by the delay in deciding on the course of the elections, as well as the delay in appointing and funding the Supervisory Commission for Elections (Electoral Reform Coalition statement)

Electoral campaigns took off early this year, specifically on January 10, 2022. Minister of Interior Bassam El Mawla issued Circular no. 1/2022/م. dated 05/01/2022, opening the door for all candidates to submit their candidacy applications. As such, electoral campaigns, subject to the provisions of the Code of Elections, extended over 4 months before May 15.

Call for candidature was made before appointing a new Supervisory Commission for Elections by the government. Decision on whether to appoint a new Commission or extend for the old one was not made until the Council of Ministers was convened on February 25, 2022, that is, more than 75 days after the beginning of electoral campaigns.

The elections were held amidst a tragic economic and social environment triggered by the unprecedented economic collapse that Lebanon has been progressively falling into since the beginning of 2020, and which has plunged the country into a number of crises. The local currency depreciated by 90%, leading to an unequalled inflation and a decrease in the purchasing power of Lebanese citizens, over 80% of whom lie today under the poverty line. This dire atmosphere has paved the way for selling votes in return of cash and in-kind assistance.

Study methodology and monitoring sample:

The study examined how local television channels (7 channels) were covering the elections since February 1, 2022. The coverage of political activists who were monitored through these channels extended over 3066643 seconds (around 850 hours), excluding programs that were rerun. The coverage comprised all programs aired between 10am and midnight, from February 1 to May 15, including live statements delivered by political activists, in addition to information related to the elections, awareness raising, education and electoral advertisement.

The study further worked on monitoring news bulletins, interviews and programs broadcasted by Lebanese local channels. Research findings were based on an analysis of the content covered by all these programs. The programs monitored during the elections period for over three months and a half were collected and documented in one database, in order to make the systematic analysis and examination process easier. The monitoring covered all political actors, including political groups and parties, not only candidates.

The Lebanese Media Scene and the Current Electoral Law:



Despite the financial crisis faced by all media outlets, the media system in Lebanon is characterized by a wide freedom and various broadcasting tools, including TV channels, which depict the sectarian and political division in Lebanon. However, the Audiovisual Media Law has turned the TV broadcasting sector into private property owned by individuals and political parties, restricting thus the appearance of political actors on such channels.

The applicable electoral law issued by virtue of Law no. 44/2017 follows a proportional system based on the closed list. The 128 parliamentary seats are divided equally between Christians and Muslims, and electoral lists are formed accordingly based on sectarian distribution of seats in each of the 15 constituencies. The electoral law granted each voter the right to make a preferential vote, giving advantage to these candidates over others upon distribution of electoral threshold among rival lists.

The current electoral law is impeded by a number of flaws, such as division of constituencies without referring to demographic findings, which leads to discrimination among candidates and voters in all constituencies.

Moreover, the high non-unified electoral threshold among constituencies leads to the marginalization of some political powers and a large segment of voters. The closed list system and taking into account electoral thresholds that allow candidates with a few number of votes to win a seat in the Chamber of Deputies are among the loopholes that this electoral law is yet to solve.

Media and Electoral Advertising: Obligations of the Media and the Role of the Supervisory commission for elections:

Despite the constant recommendations for establishing an independent commission to manage the electoral process, political reform did not come to light (Fouad Boutros draft law of 2006). The duty of organizing and supervising the elections remained in the hands of the Lebanese Ministry of Interior and Municipalities, without any regulation for ensuring integrity in the electoral process, especially when the power elite is supporting specific candidates. At the same time, the new electoral law has excluded the Ministry of Interior from monitoring the electoral process, mainly with regard to candidates' election expenses, electoral lists, and the use of media for political advertisement. Instead, the law has conferred this responsibility upon the "Supervisory Commission for Elections".

The current law confers upon the said Commission the powers to monitor candidates' electoral campaigns and lists, with relevance to expenses, candidates' appearance on the media and paid electoral advertisement. This Commission, however, does not possess a legal status and is not administratively and financially independent, but rather it remains affiliated to the Minister of Interior pursuant to the provisions of Article 9 of the electoral law. In light of the current electoral law and the politically biased media reality, election expenses and media campaigns led by political parties and candidates play a major role in election integrity and equal opportunities among competitors. Moreover, the Commission lacks human and financial resources, as well as decisive authority to complete the assigned tasks.

Actions taken by the Government and the Ministry of Interior indicate that there are intentions to undermine the powers of the Supervisory Commission and its crucial role in monitoring media, advertisement and election expenses. The ongoing parliamentary elections have also proved that the political power does not take the Commission seriously, despite its crucial role stipulated in the electoral law. This explains the delay by the government to designate a new Supervisory Commission for Elections, although electoral campaigns had kicked off since the call for submission of candidacy was made on January 10, 2022.

The new electoral law stipulated that live streaming of electoral campaigns, talk shows, interviews, meetings and round tables shall be free of charge. It also restrained media outlets from supporting any candidate and ordered them to ensure justice, balance, as well as to maintain neutrality as much as possible in treating candidates. Nonetheless, there were several issues in implementing the law and the media proved to be noncompliant therewith, mainly with regard to the control of advertisement, paid electoral campaigns, programs with implicit propaganda, as well as equal advertisement among candidates and other issues.

The Supervisory Board for Elections proved to be incompetent. It failed to set out the specific criteria that differentiate between electoral media and electoral advertisement prior to the election process, in accordance with the provisions of clause 7 included in Article 72 of the electoral law. The Commission did not either specify, in accordance with paragraph B of Article 71 thereof, the maximum space that those media outlets are allowed to use in broadcasting promotional and advertising material related to the candidates, electoral lists and airing time. It also failed to issue mandatory recommendations addressed to the media, aimed at ensuring maintenance of justice, equality and neutrality in treating candidates and electoral lists, and it did not take urgent measures by resorting to the Publication Court and referring media outlets that violate the obligations of media coverage during the electoral campaign period.

According to Article 20 of the electoral law, entitled “monitoring the elections”, competent civil society groups shall have the right to keep pace with and monitor the election process under the supervision of the Supervisory Board of Elections. Yet, the Commission misinterpreted this article, imposing restrictions on civil society in keeping pace with the election process. The incident that Maharat Foundation faced confirms this statement and proves violation of the electoral law.

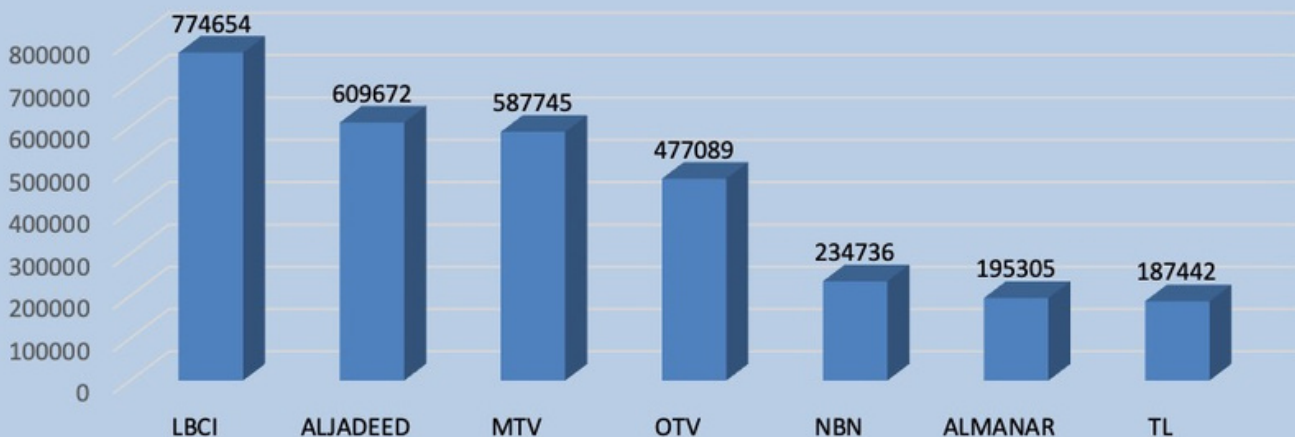
The law further requires the adoption of the principle of equal opportunities in media appearance, granting all parties access to voters in order to explain their electoral programs. However, this principle was not adhered to and significant discrepancies appeared among candidates and political parties with regard to appearance in talk shows.

Study Results:

In the volume of electoral coverage: LBCI ranked first while Al-Manar and Lebanon TV had the lowest percentages

Media coverage of the elections was not equal among television channels. LBCI came in the first place, representing 25% of the total public coverage on all the channels, followed by Al Jadeed (20%), MTV (19%) and OTV (15.5%). Al Manar and NBN had a smaller share of coverage of around 6.5% each, followed by the state-run TL with around 6%.

Distribution of television coverage for political actors and electoral issues
The numbers indicate the coverage period of 3066643 seconds
From February 1 to May 15, 2022
Table No. 1



The study captured the appearance of political parties on local news from February 1 up until Election Day. Their appearance on local news during this period equaled 177619 seconds (around 49.33 hours), distributed among 66 political parties or coalitions that were captured during coverage, as indicated in the detailed tables in this study.



177619 seconds

**of media appearance for political parties on
local news from February 1 up
until Election Day**

Public space granted to candidates between February 1 and May 15 through talk shows equaled 1484510 seconds of broadcast (around 412 hours), distributed among TV channels as follows: LBCI, MTV and Al Jadeed ranked first in terms of the time allocated to candidate appearance on talk shows, and the rates came respectively as follows: 30%, 25% and 23%. OTV recorded a medium rate of 12%, whereas Al Manar, NBN and TL had a very small share, respectively 2%, 3% and 5%.

TV channels live streamed candidates' activities, mainly during the announcement of electoral lists and upon delivery of public speech. Candidates' appearance on live television between February 1 and May 15 amounted to 287831 seconds (around 80 hours), which equals 9.4% of the total public coverage.

The engagement of Almanar, funded by Hezbollah, in the elections was weak compared to other channels. Its overall coverage of the whole process was minimal, almost equal to Tele Liban's coverage, that is, around 6% of the overall coverage throughout the monitored period. This rate dropped down to 3.7% in the last two weeks preceding the elections. Almanar also recorded the lowest rate in talk shows, representing only 2%.

The Lebanese media scene and the current electoral law:

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The current electoral law is impeded by a number of flaws, such as division of constituencies without referring to demographic findings, which leads to discrimination among candidates and voters in all constituencies. Moreover, the high non-unified electoral threshold among constituencies leads to the marginalization of some political powers and a large segment of voters. The closed list system and taking into account electoral thresholds that allow candidates with a few number of votes to win a seat in the Chamber of Deputies are among the loopholes that this electoral law is yet to solve.

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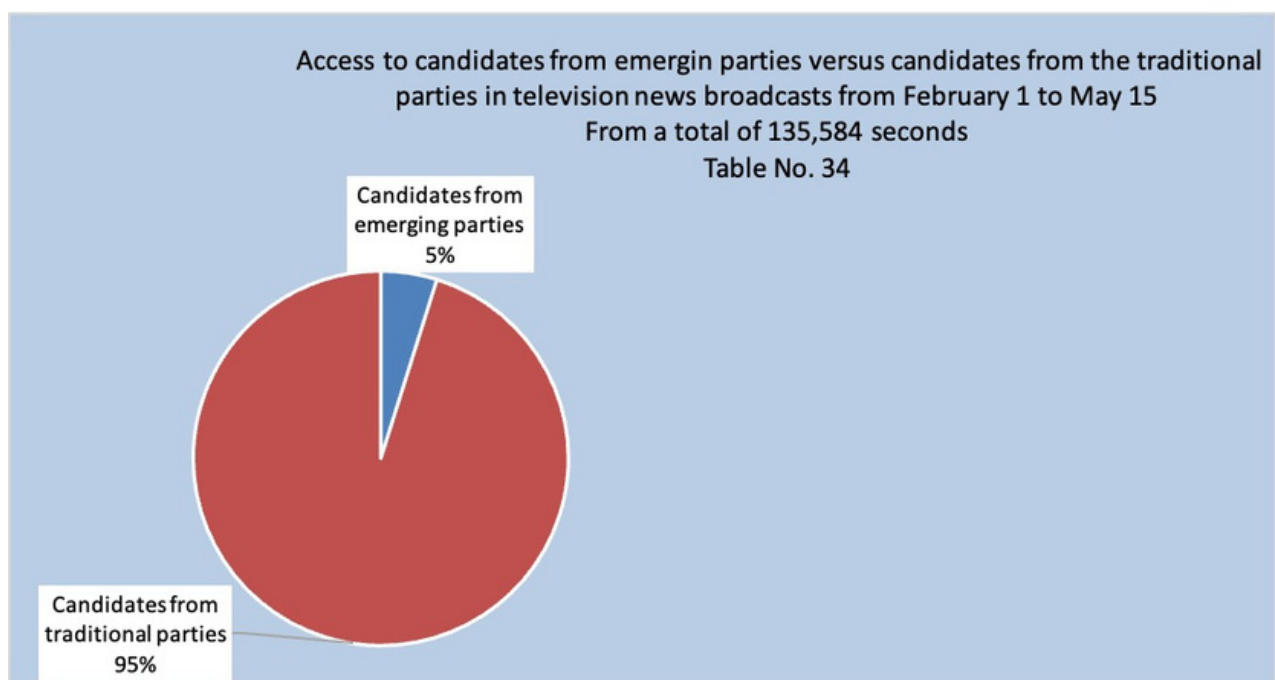
The law further requires the adoption of the principle of equal opportunities in media appearance, granting all parties access to voters in order to explain their electoral programs. However, this principle was not adhered to and significant discrepancies appeared among candidates and political parties with regard to appearance in talk shows.

Quotas of candidates, parties and coalitions in TV coverage: Dominance of traditional parties

The study captured the share of candidates, political parties and coalitions from TV coverage on local channels, including news, talk shows, comedy shows and interviews. Their appearance was distributed according to timeframes that vary depending on the period of time remaining before the election day, especially during “peak times”, which are of a high importance. Detailed tables illustrating the rate of appearance of each candidate in each of these programs and according to these timeframes were included studies.

Channel monitoring has shown that traditional political parties still dominate the media scene and acquire the largest share of coverage in news and talk shows. This draws the question of how emerging political parties and change movements could introduce themselves and offer their vision of change to the public.

Candidates from emerging parties, which make up to 60% of the total number of candidates, did not have an equal share of TV appearance in comparison with traditional parties. Monitoring the direct access to candidates from emerging parties through local news between February 1 and May 15 has proved that these parties have only had a 5% of coverage, compared to 95% for traditional parties. As for talk shows aired between February 1 and May 15, the emerging parties recorded a high share of appearance equals to 37%, while traditional parties recorded 63% of this coverage.



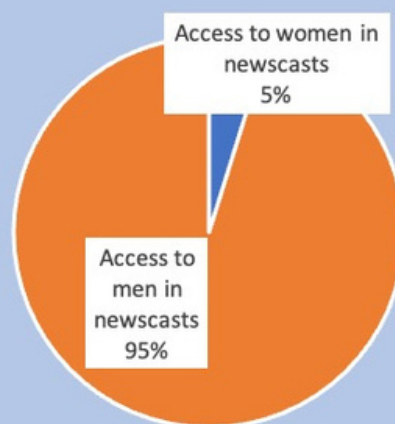
LBCI and MTV topped the channels that gave space to candidates from the “change movement” on talk shows, with a rate of over 30%, followed by Al Jadeed, which recorded 25%. Almanar did not host any of these candidates, while NBN recorded only 0.14%, OTV 3.80% and TL 7.41%.



Women's share of TV coverage: reaching only 5% in the news

The number of electoral lists was 103, distributed over 718 candidates in total (600 males vs. 118 females), whereby females represented 16.3% of the total number of candidates. Yet, female candidates did not have an equal share of TV appearance compared to male candidates. In fact, women’s appearance on news bulletins monitored between February 1 until election day was only 5% compared to 95% for men. Participation of female activists in political programs and talk shows was higher, reaching 18%, compared to 82% for male activists.

Appearance of women in TV news
From February 1 to May 15
The sample is from 181625 seconds
Table No. 46



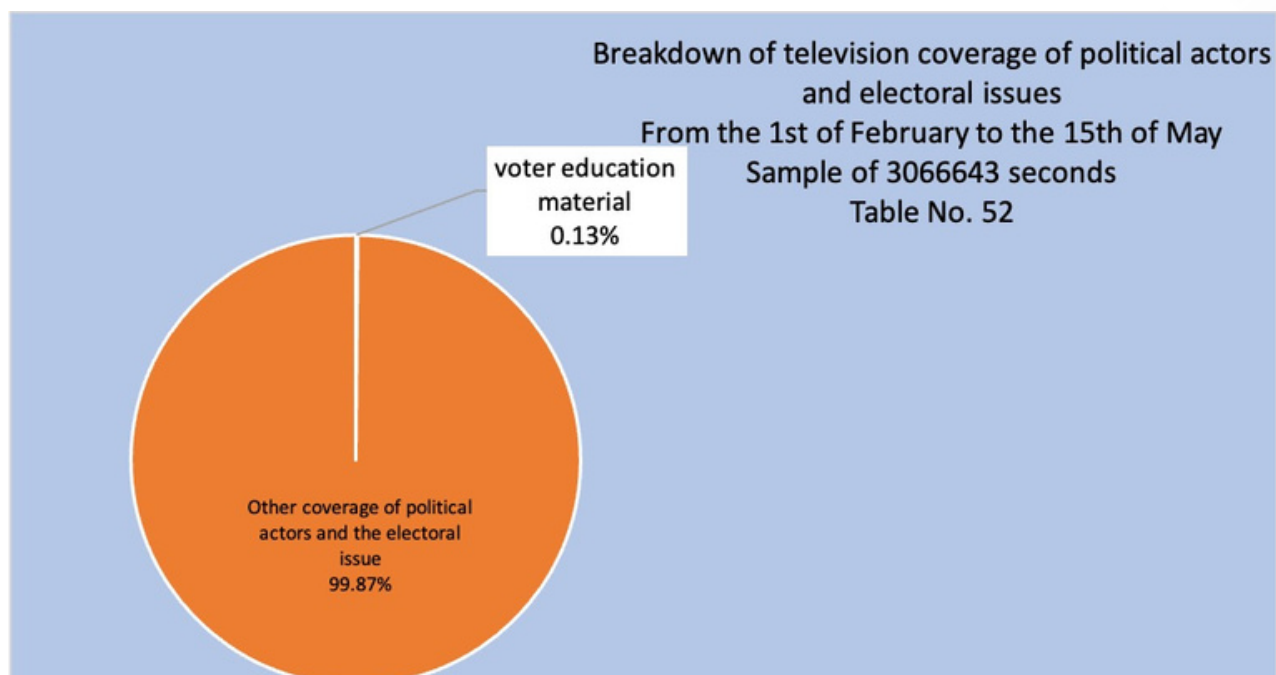
Electoral campaigning without mentioning that it is in exchange for money

The electoral law dictated that televised advertisements related to elections would be paid. Thus, any electoral advertisement or propaganda published through televised media should be part of election expenses, and candidates, electoral lists and the media should inform the competent authorities of these expenses. The media should also clearly label any paid electoral advertisement or propaganda, yet several channels have broadcasted electoral propaganda without mentioning that it was paid.

Voter's education: only 0.13% for voter's electoral education

Voter education recorded only 0.13% of the total TV coverage related to political actors, activists and electoral issues, between February 1 and May 15. However, the Supervisory Commission for Elections did not issue any content related to voter education. No media production included electoral media material targeted to people with disabilities.

TV channels have broadcasted voter's education content in news reports and different programs, which included awareness-raising content and information that can be classified as voter education. Nonetheless, the rates remained low, especially with some channels neglecting this important aspect of their role. LBCI recorded the highest rate, with 47% of the total rate of coverage related to voter education, followed by Al Jadeed (18%), whereas TL only recorded 1%, despite being a state-run channel that should be raising awareness around this issue.

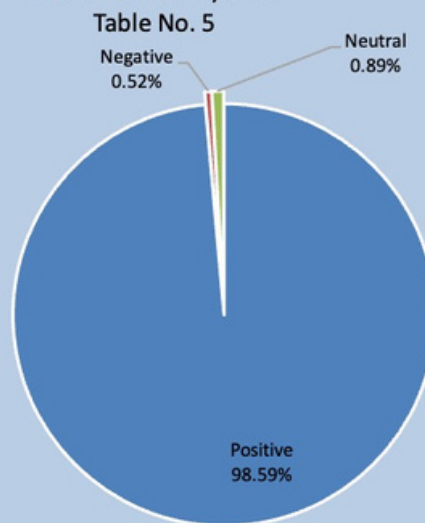


Positive media tone is dominant even in the news

Positive media tone dominated media coverage, at a rate of 95%, including in news bulletins, talk shows, live streams and political comedy shows. Although a negative media tone was detected at a small scale, it underlined a limited critical discourse broadcasted by some channels targeting political actors, varying according to the channels.

Overall, the media tone was positive in news bulletins (77%) vs. 3% of negative tone. It is important to note that 20% of media tone was neutral in news reports, which indicates that those reports have been used as a platform by political actors to cover their activities and express their ideas, highlighting also the channel's political orientation.

The general media tone of the monitored television coverage of political actors
During election campaigns, on talk shows, satirical programs, news bulletins, and live coverage
From 1 to 15 May 2022



Inciting violent discourse was also detected in TV coverage, reaching its highest level by accusing rivals on a personal level of insanity, betrayal and treachery, as well as on a national level by accusing them of working for the Israelis.

Opinion polls as violations:

Many violations were detected in the provisions of the rules regulating the dissemination of surveys. In fact, forecasts were made with no compliance with transparency criteria set out by the electoral law concerning the broadcast of information on funding surveys, the parties benefiting from those surveys, the questions used and the targeted sample, among other criteria that ensure transparency of those surveys.

Television stations break the electoral silence:

The majority of channels did not adhere to the principle of pre-election silence stipulated by the law. The study has detected continuous breaches made by TV channels throughout the period of silence, especially during live coverage of the electoral process, through the guests that they hosted on their programs and the talk shows that they broadcasted

TV channels also highlighted spiritual leaders' stances during the elections. The number of hours allocated to the numerous speeches delivered by religious figures between February 1 and May 15 reached 3.5 hours, of which the Maronite Patriarch had the biggest share (60%).

The engagement of Almanar, funded by Hezbollah, in the elections was weak compared to other channels. Its overall coverage of the whole process was minimal, almost equal to Tele Liban's coverage, that is, around 6% of the overall coverage throughout the monitored period. This rate dropped down to 3.7% in the last two weeks preceding the elections. Almanar also recorded the lowest rate in talk shows, representing only 2%.

Summary and Recommendations

In democratic systems, the integrity of the elections and its success in achieving its goals require, alongside electoral laws, good media practices that ensure the fulfillment of the media role in the election process. The Lebanese parliamentary elections have revealed, once again, incompetency in the role of the media, which calls for questioning the whole process. Therefore, the following summary and recommendations that this study suggests are based on the results monitored, as a means to address the gaps in the media role according to the laws, as well as in terms of field press.

I – On the Scale of Legal Provisions

- Many breaches and gaps were recorded in the implementation of the electoral media and advertising laws. These should be borne by law enforcement authorities.
- The electoral law stipulated that live streaming of electoral campaigns, political talk shows, interviews, meetings, discussions and round tables shall be free of charge. It also required the media to restrain from supporting any of the candidates, to adhere to equality and neutrality in treating candidates. Yet, the actual implementation of the law did not comply with legal texts and many breaches were recorded.
- The law stipulated the importance of adhering to the principle of equal opportunities in the media, enabling all parties to reach the voters and explain their programs to them. However, this principle was not adopted and huge discrepancies were recorded among candidates and parties in terms of TV appearance, which favored traditional parties. Candidates did not also have equal opportunities in talk shows and huge discrepancies were recorded as well.

- Election expenses and electoral campaigns led by political parties and candidates are major factors that influence the integrity of the election process and equal opportunities among competitors. The electoral law has set out a number of restrictions related to the maximum amount allowed to be spent on the elections, paid advertisements and propaganda. Yet, the results of candidates' TV appearance monitoring have revealed non-compliance with these laws, with many paid electoral media content that were not declared.

- Many violations were detected in the provisions of the rules regulating the dissemination of surveys. In fact, forecasts were made with no compliance with transparency criteria set out by the electoral law concerning the broadcast of information on funding surveys, the parties benefiting from those surveys and the approach used.

- The majority of channels did not adhere to the principle of pre-election silence stipulated by the law. The study has detected continuous breaches by TV channels, especially during live coverage of the electoral process, the guests that they hosted on their programs and the talk shows that they broadcasted.

Lebanese media is divided into private ownerships belonging to individuals and political parties, including TV channels. This makes it harder for activists to benefit from TV appearance and it makes many of the published content part of political propaganda. Therefore, it is important to ensure the implementation of the media and advertising laws, as well as to promote the role of Tele Liban, the only channel run by the State, which would allow it to compete with other private channels in serving candidates.

II – On the Scale of the Supervisory Commission for Elections

Many shortcomings were detected in the role of the Supervisory Commission. Its performance did not meet the requirements of the assigned tasks, which also influenced the role of the media that should be monitored by the Commission.

- Prior to the electoral process, the Commission failed to set out the specific criteria that differentiate between electoral media and electoral advertisement in accordance with the provisions of the electoral law. The Commission did not either specify the maximum space that those media outlets are allowed to use in broadcasting promotional and advertising material related to the candidates, electoral lists and airing time.

- Although the Commission has revealed several violations made by the media during the period of electoral campaign, it did not take any urgent measures in resorting to the Publication Court and referring media outlets that violate the obligations of media coverage as set out by the law.

- Apart from failing to implement the laws that regulate its role, many restrictions constraint the Commission's work due to its affiliation to the Ministry of Interior and the lack of human and financial resources that are necessary for completing the assigned tasks.

- Engaging the media and civil society in the electoral process ensures the transparency of the process and the activation of the role of society's vital elements. Therefore, the interpretation of Article 20 of the electoral law on the participation of civil society in monitoring the election process and the restrictions imposed on Maharat Foundation by the Commission that prevent it from issuing statements pertaining to the media performance would also restrict civil society. It is important to note that Maharat Foundation does not participate in the supervision of the elections but rather monitors the media through research and desk reviews. Thus, preventing it from issuing monitoring reports is a violation of the freedom of information, freedom of expression and of flow of information.

III- On the Scale of Ethical and Professional Media Principles

- Ethical and professional principles require the media to become, during national parliamentary elections, a tool that serves public affairs and helps in the success of the electoral process. This would serve the public interest, preserve the democratic system, and support citizens to carry out their role effectively. It requires the media to rise above the interests of candidates and parties, as well as to strive for the neutrality of the media outlets and respect professional and ethical principles during coverage.
- Ethical principles dictate the adherence to a national discourse away from violence and spreading rumors, and which avoids indignation and hatred. As for professional principles, they require the media to double check the information that they spread, to host people of knowledge, competence and integrity, and to refrain from promoting information, statistics and referendums that are not based on scientific foundations that are necessary for the credibility of information.
- Some channels have completely neglected the issue of voter education, which should be an important aspect of their educational and awareness-raising role.
- Inciting violent discourse was detected in TV coverage, reaching its highest level by accusing rivals on both personal and public levels. The negative tone increased and replaced the neutral tone in the last two weeks preceding the elections, which proves the involvement of political activists and TV channels in the electoral battle and the adoption of more intense positions.

- Abiding by the laws is an integral part of the ethical and professional media principles. It enhances the media's performance and allows them to be independent from political forces. These laws, which shall be respected by the media, include the media and electoral advertisement laws.
- Female candidates did not have an equal share of TV appearance compared to male candidates, which asserts the continued marginalization of women in the media and the difficulties they face in making their voices heard and confirming their participation in managing public affairs. However, the media should enable women to fulfill their role in society, and ensure access to the media by society groups to express themselves.
- The media's commitment to their national role entails full application of the principle of equality during coverage. It also requires them to encourage the voters in carrying out their electoral duty, as well as to make room for candidates to present proposed reform projects, allowing the voter to compare among them.
- The Lebanese media is facing a profound financial crisis and a lack of resources, placing media outlets at the mercy of their funders. This comes as a result to the absence of public authorities support. Nonetheless, ethical principles require the media to announce any broadcasted program that they use for promoting a party, candidate, or any program that involves favoritism of the guest.

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