THE USE OF POLITICAL PROPAGANDA DURING THE LEBANESE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS OF 2022

INTRODUCTION

This position paper is the result of the media and social media monitoring conducted by Maharat Foundation supported by the Democracy Reporting Institute (DRI) of the discourses and campaigns around the parliamentary elections of 2022 that took place on May 15. As part of the monitoring process, Maharat Foundation tracked and examined misleading discourses as well as manipulation campaigns on Facebook and Twitter.

This paper briefs how political actors and electronic armies used political propaganda to influence voters and affect public opinion during the parliamentary elections 2022.

FINDINGS OF THE MEDIA MONITORING CONDUCTED DURING THE 2022 PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS:

Period ranging from 1 February 2022 to 31 March 2022

The analysis of the monitoring data on the activities of 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 principally aiming at arousing negative feelings and throwing accusations at political opponents[1]. This holds true for both traditional political forces and emerging political movements[2], despite the fact that the latter were expected to promote a reform project and offer a reasoned critique of traditional forces in power. Indeed, the shares of contents and tweets of the emerging powers focusing on their electoral programmes or offering solutions to actual issues were 3% and 2.5%, respectively.

80%

Political discourse took the form of political propaganda and promotional speech

Furthermore, 94.2% of tweets and posts shared by influencers affiliated with traditional parties can be described as "populist", aiming to divert voters' attention away from topics such as necessary reforms, and neglecting issues like societal demands or voter expectations.

In fact, playing on emotions, making false allegations, and using sarcasm were the three main discourse patterns among influencers from traditional forces and emerging forces. It is noteworthy that the percentage of discourse that played on emotions was higher in the discourse of influencers related to emerging groups, where it was 57%, compared to 52% for those associated with traditional groups.

Examining the political communications of monitored "partisan groups and pages" on Facebook, it is clear that these groups either focused on playing on emotions or aimed at defending their leaders and attempting to enhance their reputations.

[1] Maharat Foundation, 2022, "Political propaganda and manipulation campaigns during the Lebanese parliamentary elections of 2022 on social media platforms (February-March 2022)"

[2] Emerging powers is a term used to define the individuals and organizations who supported and participated in the revolution of 17 October 2019.

Period ranging from 1 April 2022 to 15 May 2022

During the period ranging from 1 April 2022 to 15 May 2022, the share of the posts related to the political discourse of candidates and politicians involving political propaganda based on emotional speech was 49.5%, with electoral advertising coming in second at 21.3%[3]. Only 7.5% of the entire political discourse was focused on electoral programs and offered solutions and alternatives. It should also be noted that candidates and politicians adopted a largely negative rhetoric during this timeframe, relying on an incendiary tone which triggers conflicts. Indeed, the share of negative speech amounted to 71% of the analyzed political discourse.

Over the same period, the issue of corruption served as a central theme for politicians and candidates' propaganda, appearing in 15% of the posts; development issues and employment opportunities were discussed in 2.4% of the posts; and topics pertaining to social justice and human rights, as well as energy-related topics, each appeared in 2% of the posts. Furthermore, political parties' propaganda keeps evoking the Lebanese Civil War, which lasted from 1975 to 1990, stirring up sectarian and political turmoil and invoking conspiracies to demonize political rivals and harm their credibility.

[3] Maharat Foundation, 2022, "Political propaganda and information manipulation on social media during the Lebanese parliamentary elections (April-May 2022)"

71%

Negative speech

Political parties' propaganda keeps evoking the Lebanese Civil War

43%

Political discourse aiming to promote a specific political actor

As for partisan groups and pages monitored on Facebook, 43% of their political discourse took the form of political propaganda aiming to promote a specific political actor (by glorifying a leader, enhancing a leader's image and through electoral advertising) while 38% of their political discourse aimed to stir up emotions.

Furthermore, political actors exploited Twitter for complex amplification through targeted campaigns meant to discredit political rivals by disseminating political propaganda. Furthermore, a total of 134 Twitter trends were observed between 1 April 2022 and 31 May 2022, with partisan and politically oriented actors driving 69% of them. It is worth noting that some campaigns started with a hashtag launched by the party leader.

Lebanese Forces activists were the most active political actors in terms of campaign-related hashtags and trends (25 hashtags), followed by FPM supporters (20 hashtags), and Hezbollah (18 hashtags).

Some hashtags also contributed to spreading political propaganda such as the hashtag "their culture is death, ours is life" launched by the Lebanese Forces activists in response to the circulation of a manipulated video featuring a Shia cleric claiming to be a member of Hezbollah, in which he presents the Lebanese forces party, which is a Christian party, as a threat for the other religious groups.

Period ranging from 15 May 2022 until 31 October 2022

Following their victory in the parliamentary elections of 2022, MPs from the forces of Change [4] were subjected to smear campaigns, aiming to portray them as dishonest, deceitful, and exploiting the revolution for personal interests. Indeed, "electronic armies" of traditional parties spread political propaganda targeting Change forces MPs in an effort to discredit and defame them.[5] 7 of the 20 campaigns whose hashtags trended on Twitter between 18 May 2022 and 18 June 2022 were against MPs from the forces of Change. These campaigns covered a variety of political situations involving political postures, parliamentary activities, or the reactions of MPs from the forces of Change during the election victory celebration. For instance, activists from pro-resistance parties, namely Hezbollah, and the Free Patriotic Movement as well as journalists led a Twitter campaign against Change MP Mark Daou, calling for the waiver of his parliamentary immunity and his prosecution for calling on more United States sanctions on Lebanon. However, it was found that the words of the MP were distorted and the information was consequently untrue. Political propaganda also targeted the legal system, namely the Lebanese Constitutional Council, which can rule on appeals to invalidate the results of the elections. In fact, rumors circulated that pressures on members of the Lebanese Constitutional Council were aiming at overturning the results of the elections by ruling in favor of candidates affiliated with the ruling class and removing Change MPs from their seats. However, this was subsequently denied by the President of the Constitutional Council.

[4] Maharat Foundation, 2022, " Political discourse around the transparency of elections and Change MPs (May-June 2022)"
[5] Maharat Foundation, 2022, " Political discourse around the transparency of elections and Change MPs (May-June 2022)"

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Campaigns
were against MPs
from the forces of
Change

RECOMMENDATIONS TO COUNTER POLITICAL PROPAGANDA ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS DURING ELECTORAL PERIODS:

A **To policy-makers:**

- Incorporate digital media education into educational curriculums to enhance the critical thinking of social media platforms users so that they do not contribute to disrupting the information ecosystem.

- Include relevant and balanced provisions in the electoral law on the regulation of content on social media.

- Develop codes of conduct for political parties, candidates and supporters, including comprehensive guidelines on the ethical use of social media during elections.

B **To social media platforms:**

- Provide transparency on the use of technology including algorithms for effective monitoring during electoral periods.

- Increase investment in content moderation, by hiring more local staff from the MENA region to perform human content moderation.

- facilitate access to information for CSOs, researchers and academic institutions.

C **To civil society actors:**

- enhance digital media education programs and foster young people's abilities to produce alternative content based on facts and evidence rather than misleading content aiming to stir up negative emotions and incite hatred.

- support independent media platforms in order to enhance transparency and accountability by countering the false narratives perpetuated by political actors.

FOR MORE INFORAMTION, CONTACT US:

maharatfoundation.org

info@maharatfoundation.org