

# HATE SPEECH DISCOURSES 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 the political actors and electronic armies contributed to the spread of hate speech during the parliamentary elections of 2022.

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

### Hate speech targeting women

During the period ranging from 1 April 2022 to 15 May 2022, according to the media monitoring conducted by Maharat Foundation, 43% of female candidates experienced different types of online violence against women on social media.<sup>1</sup> Most of it took the form of psychological abuse, with the remaining percentage split equally between sexual assault and remarks about the victims' age and physical appearance.

An examination of the nature of violent discourse directed at female candidates via comments on their accounts and social media activities revealed that 86% of violent responses and comments were cyberbullying (abuse, ridicule), 6% were violence based on appearance and age, and a similar percentage was sexual harassment. The percentage of remarks explicitly biased against women, including gender stereotypes, the role of women in society, and behaviors imposed on them by society, was 1%.

# 43%

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One of the campaigns that best illustrates this phenomenon is the one that targeted the journalist Dalia Ahmad. In fact, Dalia Ahmad, the TV anchor for Al Jadeed, was targeted by a racist and misogynistic campaign on January 13, 2022, based on her skin color and Sudanese ancestry, after calling Lebanese officials, including President Michel Aoun and Hezbollah General Secretary Hassan Nasrallah, "crocodiles" on her satirical political television program.<sup>2</sup> The campaign was renewed on 24 February, after Ahmad sarcastically criticized Nasrallah and Berri, the Speaker of the Parliament of Lebanon.

The goal of this campaign was to harass, intimidate, and silence Dalia Ahmad by using racial slurs and sexist insults. Indeed, militants of some Lebanese political parties resorted to sexual violence by referring to her as an "illegitimate girl," a term used to denigrate prostitutes; as well as racial and psychological violence based on her looks and skin tone.

MP Halima Kaakour, who represents the forces of Change<sup>3</sup> was also subjected to a hate campaign after using the word "patriarchal" to object to the way Nabih Berri, the Speaker of the parliament, was conducting the parliamentary session. The use of this word was taken out of context by social media users who accused her of criticizing the Maronite patriarch, placing the debate in a religious context.

<sup>1</sup>Maharat Foundation, 2022, "Political propaganda and information manipulation on social media during the Lebanese parliamentary elections (April-May 2022)"

## Religiously-motivated hate speech

During the electoral period, trends of religiously-motivated hate speech have been observed in Lebanon. Indeed, Maharat documented audio-video manipulation, or "cheapfakes," which have been used to propagate hate speech based on religion by changing backgrounds, altering audio, and adding photoshopped logos of political parties. This can be exemplified by the dissemination of a manipulated video of the Shia cleric Nazir Al-Jishi where he claims to be a Hezbollah member and warns about the Lebanese Forces Party, arguing that this party poses a threat to other religious groups and their social practices.

Furthermore, MPs from the forces of Change who supported the legalization of civil marriage in Lebanon were subjected to a religious hate campaign on social media, led by Sunni clerics, one of whom stated that "they declared war on Islam and declared war on God, and we will declare war on you", referring to Change MPs.

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<sup>2</sup>Maharat Foundation, 2022, "Political propaganda and manipulation campaigns during the Lebanese parliamentary elections of 2022 on social media platforms (February-March 2022)"

**Hate speech on  
social media  
was based on**

**Sexual  
Orientation**

**National  
Origin**

**Belief or  
Opinion**

## Hate speech targeting political opponents and promoting violence and hatred

The monitoring revealed that pages and groups run by political supporters, which are also known as "electronic armies" instigated various non-coordinated campaigns in which hate speech was used against their opponents. For instance, a hate speech message was disseminated at the same time on several Facebook groups by a partisan of the Progressive Socialist Party.

In addition, some accounts have been used to instigate violence based on political opinions as well as through offensive and defamatory discourse targeting political opponents that includes accusations of treason and corruption.

Furthermore, multiple candidates were targeted by hate speech on social media based on their sexual orientation, national origin, belief, or opinion.

This can be illustrated by the case of Omar Harfoush, a Sunni candidate from Tripoli, who was subjected to hate speech on Facebook, where homophobic comments related to his supposed sexual orientation and gender identity were directed at him, with the aim of ridiculing and undermining him.

Candidate Wadah al-Sadiq was also subjected to a hate campaign related to his non-Lebanese origins. Indeed, he was shamed on Twitter for his Armenian origins.

<sup>3</sup>Forces of Change MPs is a term used to refer to members of Parliament who supported the revolution of 17 October 2019.  
<sup>4</sup>Maharat Foundation, 2022, " Political discourse around the transparency of elections and Change MPs ([May-June 2022](#))"

## RECOMMENDATIONS TO FIGHT ONLINE HATE SPEECH DURING ELECTORAL PERIODS:

### A To policy-makers:

- **Establish an independent elections management body whose tasks include voter education and dissemination of awareness programs to combat hate speech, and replace the supervisory commission for elections, whose role is actually limited to monitoring and informing the judicial authorities of any violations related to misinformation and hate speech without any direct powers.**
- **Include relevant and balanced provisions in the electoral law on the regulation of content on social media.**
- **Urge the political parties to adopt a code of conduct that encourages partisans not to use hate speech on social media.**
- **Incorporate digital media education into educational curriculums to address the root causes and drivers of hate speech.**

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO FIGHT ONLINE HATE SPEECH DURING ELECTORAL PERIODS:**

### **B To social media platforms:**

- **Greater investment in content moderation, by hiring more local staff from different parts of the region to perform human content moderation.**
- **Enhance collaboration with CSOs working on social media monitoring to combat hate speech more effectively.**
- **Work closely with civil society and electoral bodies to introduce and explain their community guidelines and content moderation policies.**
- **Increase collaboration with researchers in the MENA region to create hate speech lexicons in different dialects to identify different forms of harmful content in the region.**
- **Provide transparency on the use of technology including algorithms for effective monitoring.**

### **C To civil society actors:**

- **Create safe spaces for women active in the political field where they can share their experience related to online hate speech and encourage them to use available complaint mechanisms.**
- **Develop special programmes to monitor, document, and analyze hate speech on social media.**
- **Promote digital literacy among social media users.**

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