

MISLEADING POLITICAL DISCOURSE AND MANIPULATION CAMPAIGNS 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 discourses and manipulation campaigns contributed to misleading the 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

During the months of February and March 2022, 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, although they were expected to build their discourse on facts and evidence¹.

Furthermore, well-known militant political groups sought to manipulate the democratic discourse on social media through what is known in the Lebanese context as “electronic armies” aiming to spread disinformation. Those manipulation campaigns were not only launched by “electronic armies” affiliated with the traditional political parties, since online pages and groups supporting the forces of Change² and political movements that emerged after the 17 October revolution disseminated political propaganda and disinformation aiming to discredit candidates from traditional parties.

The engagement of party followers in disinformation campaigns as well as in the manipulation of information, demonstrates the absence of an organizational framework that fosters transparency and integrity in the partisan activities of political parties.

It is also important to note that during this period, social media were dominated by topics that were not supported by facts and in which the conversation revolved primarily around political accusations. Indeed, 8% of monitored content during the months of February and March 2022 were promoting conspiracy theories, aiming at triggering partisan emotions.

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

² Forces of Change is a term used to refer to individuals or organizations who supported and participated in the revolution of 17 October 2019.

8% Promoting
conspiracy
theories

79
Rumors
were Fact-checked

Period ranging from 1 April 2022 to 15 May 2022

Similarly, between the 1st of April 2022 and the 15th of May 2022, 42 of the Facebook pages and groups which were analyzed in the framework of the media monitoring contributed to the spread of rumors, as 79 rumors and six pieces of false news were posted.³ Furthermore, fake accounts which were only active during the electoral period were used to discredit candidates by circulating rumors about their withdrawal or accusing them of engaging in bribery and vote-buying. Some of the fake accounts identified were used to launch campaigns to attract votes, such as "your boycott serves them", or to attack candidates and their reputations, using the hashtags "#the_story_of_Paula_Yacoubian_list" and "#don't_be_like_Jad", which targeted candidates from the Change movement. Those fake accounts further undermined information integrity during the electoral period. In addition, Maharat documented audio-video manipulation, or "cheapfakes," that were used to change backgrounds, alter audio, and add photoshopped logos of political parties, which contributed to the spread of disinformation. For example, a manipulated video circulated on social media in which a Shia cleric, claiming to be a member of Hezbollah, portrays the Lebanese Forces party as a threat to other religious groups of the country.

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

Period ranging from 15 May 2022 until 31 October 2022

With regards to the post-electoral period, it was marked by the spread of rumors regarding the results of the parliamentary elections, especially information related to allegations of fraud that questioned the integrity of the electoral process. Furthermore, Change forces MPs became the target of rumors aiming to offend them and tarnish their image, which were also circulated by media pages⁴. For instance, information was circulated that MP Mark Daou called for more United States sanctions against Lebanon. This information was fact-checked, and found to be incorrect.

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

RECOMMENDATIONS TO FIGHT THE MANIPULATION OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE AND DISINFORMATION/MISINFORMATION 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 misinformation and disinformation, 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 disinformation and misinformation on social media**
- **Incorporate digital media literacy into educational curricula to enhance the critical thinking of social media platforms users so that they do not contribute to disrupting the information ecosystem.**

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 disinformation more effectively.**
- **share with researchers from the region their data about disinformation campaigns and their resolution, and information on how their content moderation system works in Arabic.**
- **Work closely with civil society and electoral bodies to introduce and explain their community guidelines and content moderation policies.**
- **Provide transparency on the use of technology including algorithms for effective monitoring.**

C To civil society actors:

- **Increase fact-checking initiatives and support independent media platforms that produce neutral, impartial and accurate information.**
- **Develop special programmes to monitor, document, and analyze harmful content on social networking sites.**
- **Launch more initiatives for information verification, networking, and exchange of experiences.**
- **Promote digital literacy among social media users.**
- **Conduct research on the use of AI technologies to spread disinformation and its impact on public opinion.**

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT US:

maharatfoundation.org

info@maharatfoundation.org

