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Can COVID-19 enable online voting in Lebanon?

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As the coronavirus continues to spread, it has been giving rise to several debatable topics with regards to what new laws will be issued, how businesses will be conducted and how life as we know it will be post COVID-19. Albeit this is a stressful time for every individual as well as institution, the impact of such a crisis is raising fundamental issues that should not be ignored. As the world is trying to adapt in every aspect, policy makers should acclimatize as well, particularly towards matters that have been kept on hold; one of which being the

voting process around the world. This article raises the question as to whether Lebanon is ready to establish an online voting system subsequent to the crisis.

Lebanese electoral system

The Lebanese electoral system is exceedingly complicated as several political factors come into play and interfere in this process, which has resulted in a situation of having a different electoral law at each election. However, Lebanon an achievement has been witnessed in the most recent election, as the 2018 Lebanese electoral law stated, based on article 111, that every eligible Lebanese citizen whether residing in Lebanon or not, has the right to vote.¹ That being said, as Lebanon has opened its doors for improvements with regards to its voting system, there's no reason as to why Lebanon should not take a further step in considering innovation in it as well.

Lebanese adaptation

Currently, amid the spread of the coronavirus, Lebanon has undergone a lockdown and has witnessed drastic repercussions on all levels. However, despite the crisis, which has hit the majority of the world, Lebanon has portrayed perseverance and its willingness to adapt to the digital world, particularly in the educational, governmental and legal sectors. This has been evidenced through the adaptation of online schooling (using Google classroom, Zoom, Microsoft teams and etc..²), governmental entities have also been looking into a digital transformation strategy³, and the legal sector has proudly adopted the online investigation method.⁴

Why should Lebanon consider online elections?

Online voting is a new technology that has been gaining popularity in several countries over the last ten years, providing an online democratic process that offers transparency, security and efficiency.⁵ It has been adopted in countries where the number of expats is exceedingly high.⁶ Lebanese diaspora consists of approximately 8.4-11 million, which is a number worthy of mentioning. Additionally, looking into the numbers documented for the last Lebanese elections, \$133 million is said to have been spent in total⁷ to see this process carried out across its network of embassies. One of the main advantages for online voting is its cost-effective mechanism. Online voting can significantly reduce election budgets as it limits the costs of: paper, printing, staff, ballot packages and manual tabulation of votes, eliminates the use of equipment in addition to the entire process being automated, private and authenticated.⁸ Online elections focuses on: a simplified election process, reduces cost, time and use

¹ <https://www.ministryinfo.gov.lb/en/22598>

² <https://www.executive-magazine.com/economics-policy/healthcare/coronavirus/lebanese-turn-to-distance-learning-amid-coronavirus-disruptions>

³ <https://www.omsar.gov.lb/getattachment/b4b8b496-d357-49dc-bd85-a6a850c088e4/Digital-Transformation-Strategy-in-Lebanon>

⁴ <https://www.mtv.com.lb/news/>

⁵ <https://www.socialfish.org/online-voting-advantages-and-challenges-for-associations/>

⁶ <https://www.ndi.org/e-voting-guide/internet-voting>

⁷ <https://www.mtv.com.lb/news/articles/747808/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%B1%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%85-%D9%87%D8%B0%D9%87-%D9%83%D9%84%D9%81%D8%A9-%D8%A5%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-2018>

⁸ <https://www.votehoanow.com/benefits/index.php>

of resources, minimizes mistakes and increases accuracy and confidentiality, and encourages younger members to vote.

Thus, in light of COVID-19 and the measures that have been taken to combat its spread, it is undoubtedly an ideal time to adopt proper procedures in every aspect of our lives in readiness to overcome any national emergency.

Conclusive remarks

Although the electronic voting and counting systems bring huge benefits to the course of elections and the way in which they are managed, the new technologies present new challenges. Therefore, it is important to make decisions regarding the use of these technologies, in all aspects, in consultation with the various parties. It is necessary to adhere to the standards of transparency and competitiveness because observing these principles when testing and validating the integrity of these systems enhances credibility among electoral stakeholders, such as political parties, the media, and civil society. This process should facilitate the verification of election results, in a way that gives voters and stakeholders the means to ensure that votes are being accurately recorded.⁹

In reference to other countries who have adopted the online voting system, several countries have opted for the internet system such as the US, Canada, France and Switzerland. However, the only country who has fully offered the online system for all electorate is Estonia, in which it has allowed citizens to vote as well as fully understand their electronic voting system. Albeit this requires extensive technical knowledge, it allowed interested programming experts to help monitor system glitches, and work to immunize its security. Additionally, in 2018, the swiss government has declared that two-thirds of those entitled to vote have turned to the online voting option, indicating an increased demand for this type of voting.¹⁰

⁹ <https://openelectiondata.net/ar/guide/key-categories/electronic-voting>

¹⁰ <https://www.ndi.org/e-voting-guide/internet-voting>