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Fake News and Fact Checking during Elections in the Middle East and North Africa



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Introduction

Democratic practices are filled with many illegal and immoral practices, especially with the intensification of competition between candidates. Opposition seek to destroy each other, and exploit personal issues in the electoral struggle with the aim of misleading voters, destroying the reputation of the other opposition, and bringing him down in the electoral battle, especially since the voters have the power to topple any candidate if the opposing party succeeded in spreading misleading news about him or tarnishing his reputation, especially at the critical stage in the elections few days or hours before the polling process.

Information manipulation is a set of tactics that involve the collection and spreading of information in order to influence or disrupt democratic decision-making, it can exploit traditional information channels such as television, publications, or radio broadcasts, in addition to social media platforms, through this variety in tactics, different types of content are distributed. These tactics are used by parties and candidates to discredit competitors, and to manipulate political discourse in a way that advances their agenda; it can also be used by local and foreign governments, business actors, and non-independent media.

Candidates' smear campaigns are a well-known pre-election phenomenon that exists in all countries, including democratic States, where fake news is spread to reduce the value of competitors in a morally unacceptable way, which involves encroachment on personal freedoms and interference in private life that is always contested by competitors, under the contenders' weakness and inability to compete through electoral ideas and platforms.

In general, the campaigns of distortion and disinformation during elections emerge at a time when the electoral conflict is most intense and represent opportunities for people and political currents to come to power. It also increases when the elections are a crucial stage for the survival of a president or a political party in power; while these practices decrease when the elections are equal or their results tend towards a specific candidate or party. Therefore, it can be said that the fake news and disinformation campaigns reflect the strength of the electoral battle and the extent to which it is a critical stage for the country in which it is taking place.

The phenomenon of these campaigns is widespread in presidential elections more than in parliamentary elections, in which competition is on the scale of small circles, and the level of distortion and misleading in it is limited to the people of the constituency,

but in the presidential election, disinformation campaigns are influential for the State itself, and misleading news and smear campaigns spreads to the opposition at the State level and even beyond as the parties to the conflict and their supporters try to influence of the candidates for the outcome to their advantage. This paper deals with the impact of fake news and disinformation on elections and thus the assault on democracy.

Social Media and Countering Disinformation

Social media is one of the means of disinformation and distortion of opposition during the elections, as it is available to everyone, and it can be used with fake accounts. These platforms revealed that they have plans to deal with misinformation, and also they have expertise in identifying, combating, and preventing misinformation. Especially after accusing it of being a means of manipulation and directing voters in the US presidential election in 2016¹.

The 2016 US presidential elections represented a warning bell about the danger of social platforms and their use in electoral misleading, by spreading misinformation about persecution and ethnic targeting, and giving foreign countries public opinion misleading information against one candidate and in favor of another in countries where elections are taking place, to support the candidate who serves its interests, in light of the unclear plans of these platforms to combat disinformation and distortion of adversaries, as these platforms, if it intervene, would be impartial, and could not check published information.

Falsification of facts campaigns supported by artificial intelligence in particular are a growing problem on TikTok more than other popular “Facebook – YouTube – Twitter”, and once a misleading video is removed by the platform, manipulated and easily reposted version can go viral on the platform, and after TikTok became the world's second most popular app, there is a need for proactive serious work to improve the integrity of the content, To counter misinformation on this platform that could be hugely damaging during an election².

The availability of the Internet and the ease of using social media platforms have made it easier to deal with fake and misleading news and spreading rumors. Therefore, misleading information spreads during elections to influence voters and public opinion to serve the interests of competing political parties. Fake news and misleading rumors,

¹ فهم التلاعب بالمعلومات، المعهد الجمهوري الدولي والمعهد الديمقراطي الوطني، <https://2u.pw/lgwD6u>
² هل تكبح الـ "سوشيال ميديا" التضليل الإعلامي في الانتخابات النصفية الأميركية؟، انديبننت عربية، <https://2u.pw/qmHzTw>

have turned over the past years into a weapon used by various political parties with the aim of distorting competitors and thus reducing their chances of winning the elections.

Verification of Information and Speeches of Politicians during the Elections

The speeches and the information of the candidates are presented to influence voters, it's one of the means of electoral misinformation, as the candidates are aware of the importance of using information as an effective power in persuasion citizens to adjust their views, and it is known politically that the candidates always rely on talking emotionally and trying to win over the masses with inaccurate information, which makes the voter vulnerable to misleading, and the possibility of choosing the wrong candidate that may harm his interests if he wins.

The tasks of checking and exposing fake and misleading information, and providing correct information to voters without interfering to modify their choices are the responsibility of journalists and independent media, especially in light of the diversity of media and communication platforms through which information can be checked.

Editor-in-chief of (POLITICACT) press platform and information auditor Angie Holland, a journalist who won a Pulitzer Prize for their fact-finding efforts in the 2008 US presidential election, recommended the importance to refer to reliable and traditional news sources, such as news channels that have a proven track record of reliability than to get news from social media. This was in a discussion about fact-checking the 2022 US midterm elections.

It is also important to build alliances between verification platforms and strengthen the capabilities of a new generation of information auditors to help detect disinformation campaigns aimed at changing voters' views and controlling the electoral process.

There are many methods that journalists and research institutions can use to verify candidates' speeches and provide correct information to the public, top of which are: analyzing the data, figures and sources contained in the speeches and comparing them with official facts and documented information, in addition to searching for evidence within the content to reveal contradictory information.

In addition to the importance of using open source tools to search for images, track image and video data, flights of planes, and ships to monitor information about travel and their dates to track politicians' trips. Artificial intelligence techniques can be used for the immediate verification of data delivered by candidates based on the databases

of institutions engaged in verification, this technique was tried in the speech of former US President Donald Trump and proved its effectiveness³.

In the process of verifying candidates' speeches and exposing misinformation, that journalists adhere to impartiality, avoid comparison or preference between the candidates, and don't use an offensive method, such as making judgments about the credibility or lying of the candidate, they only present the facts.

Confronting the Phenomenon of Distortion of Opposition during Elections in Middle Eastern Countries

Due to the seriousness of the phenomenon of distorting opposition and spreading misleading news during elections, which affects the integrity of the electoral process, many elections in the countries of the Middle East have witnessed campaigns of this phenomenon, and at the same time there are attempts by some countries in the Middle East to confront the phenomenon through enacting legislation to confront it, and among these examples are:

Distortion of Candidates in Tunisia

Tunisia witnessed the largest distortion of candidates in the presidential elections in 2019, as clear smear campaigns were launched by spreading scandals from candidates to each other, publishing leaks and audio recordings of candidates, releasing fake news and exchanging accusations directly; these leaks and campaigns of distortion and misleading led to the loss of prominent candidates in the presidential elections at the time, and all the prominent personalities failed in these elections for many reasons, including these campaigns. Won in the end, the current Tunisian president, Kais Saied, who was outside expectations because he was not from the political system at the time, and was not targeted by smear campaigns.

With the widespread smear campaigns in the Tunisian presidential elections, political opposition justified them as being necessary for Tunisians to know the truth about some of the candidates for power, and to expose the hidden face, reflecting the absence of moral standards in electoral contests, and satisfy all parties with misleading and distortion practices.

Tunisians justified the smear campaigns by saying that Tunisia is an emerging country with democracy, it is still learning about the mechanisms of sound democracy, and that smear campaigns can be accepted, and that the electoral law has generated a

³ التحقق من المعلومات ومن خطابات السياسيين خلال الانتخابات، <https://cutt.us/Hy0ly>

sense among Tunisians that the struggle of politicians is not disciplined by any legal and moral controls, and that everything is permissible in the electoral struggle. This created a lack of acceptance by some of the candidates of transparency, and prompted the existence of such methods. Politicians continued their smear campaigns and said: The voter can filter and scrutinize these campaigns, despite the fact that detecting fake news and distorting opposition is not possible for ordinary voters⁴.

An example of distorting opposition and misleading campaigns in the Tunisian presidential elections is that candidate Nabil Karoui has accused candidate Youssef Chahed of treason and treachery, while Chahed hinted that there is a mystery behind the failure of former Tunisian President Caid Essebsi to sign the electoral amendments, and accused parties of tax evasion, exploitation of the work of associations and charitable work for political purposes, and the flow of billions from abroad. The deputy in the People's Assembly, Al-Sahbi Bin Faraj, in support of Youssef Chahed, published an audio recording of the candidate, Nabil Al-Qarawi, as he plans to attack community associations dealing with transparency and combating corruption, such as "Al Bawsala" and "vigilant" associations, and the leak contained obscene and immoral speech.

And if we move from the Tunisian presidential elections in 2019 to the parliamentary elections in December 2022, we find the same scene again, as the Independent High Authority for Elections in Tunisia accused parties of distorting the campaign for the first phase of the legislative elections held on 17 December 2022, and said that the videos and photos which go viral through social media and websites are mostly not related to candidates for the elections of members of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People⁵.

The distortion of Tunisia's parliamentary elections appeared, via social media, with videos and banners with funny and unrealistic slogans, such as the promise to liberate Palestine and build ports in inland areas where there is no sea. The campaign included vulgar slogans and satirical scenes, with one candidate dressed as a brave knight promising voters a better life. The scenes aimed at undermining the election and offending the boycott campaigns adopted by some political parties as an official position⁶.

Despite the apparent distortion and misinformation campaigns that took place in the Tunisian presidential elections in 2019, and the parliamentary elections at the end

⁴ تسريبات وحملات تشويه تسبق الانتخابات الرئاسية في تونس، <https://2u.pw/HDSf16>

⁵ المعارضة تنتقد سياسة الرئيس والهيئة العليا المستقلة للانتخابات تتهم "أطرافاً" بتشويه الحملة، <https://2u.pw/vZePI8>

⁶ هل تتعرض الانتخابات التونسية لـ"مؤامرة ساخرة"؟، <https://cutt.us/IYSEn>

of 2022, there was no official intervention from state agencies or the Independent Electoral Commission to prosecute those responsible for these campaigns, considering that these campaigns came within the framework of the election competition, and the campaign of mockery and distortion of the parliamentary elections is also supported by political parties, led by the Ennahda Movement, which boycotted the elections, and used these means to establish a position against the Tunisian president.

Incidents of Misinformation, Distortion, and Preemptive Measures in Turkey

Proactively for Turkey's general elections scheduled for June 2023, the Turkish Parliament passed a law to combat disinformation that imposes a penalty of up to three years in prison for those who publish "fake or misleading information". Turkish law targets visual, audio and written media, social networks, and websites that will be bound by its provisions, to report their users who publish misleading or fake news, and to provide the authorities with their data⁷.

The law passed by Turkey's parliament provides for harsh sanctions aimed at countering disinformation and gives Turkish authorities the right to confront any allegations promoted on social media that do not appeal to Turkish authorities, especially given the importance of elections scheduled for 2023 for Turkey's ruling party.

Article 29 of the Turkish Anti-Disinformation Act, in particular, says anyone who publicly disseminates false information about the country's domestic and foreign security, public order, and general health, with the sole aim of creating anxiety, fear, or panic among the public" will face one to three years in prison.

The Turkish law bears the name "Press Law" and was proposed in May 2022 by the Justice and Development Party. The law was issued despite objections to it to counter fake news and disinformation in the elections, as during the Turkish presidential elections that took place in 2018, electoral disinformation was monitored, and it had a role in influencing the electoral process.

Among those facts was the circulation of a claim in the Turkish media that the Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) distributed electoral brochures in the city of Antalya in support of the Nation Alliance opposing President Erdogan, a claim that the opposition alliance was supported by the Kurdish People's Party, which the Turkish government considers a terrorist party, thus pushing Voters to vote against the coalition opposing the president as collaborating with a party accused of terrorism.

⁷ السجن لناشري الأخبار الكاذبة بتركيا.. على مواقع التواصل، العربية، 14 أكتوبر 2022، <https://cutt.us/Szhk0>

A scrutiny of these allegations shows that the facts circulated by the Turkish media about the HDP's distributing electoral brochures for the opposition Nation Alliance were incorrect, and the slogans "We support the Nation Alliance in the capital" were forged and not issued by the party.

In the same context, it was reported that the candidate of the Republican People's Party, Muharrem Ince, took photos with political figures close to the opposition resident in the United States, Fethullah Gulen, who is accused of terrorism, which is misleading against the candidate to push public opinion to vote against him, and it turned out that these photos fake and not real⁸. The fake images have gone viral and increased hate speech against the competing candidates, especially in light of the weak actions and mean that can be taken to deal with disinformation during the election period.

Disinformation in Iran's Elections

Due to the political tension in Iran, and the ongoing protests in the Iranian streets, there was an extensive movement during the Iranian presidential elections in 2021, which witnessed a competition between the current President Ibrahim Raisi, who is described as a hardline candidate supported by the Supreme Leader of Iran Ali Khamenei, and the moderate candidate Abdel Nasser Hemmati, There were conflicting voices and trends among Iranians regarding the benefit of these elections and the results that could lead to real change in favor of the people, and the majority of public opinion considered that the results of the elections would be in favor of the existing regime in Iran without real change, which led to the circulation of rumors and misleading news in a large way⁹.

In Iran, Article 698 of the Islamic Penal Code defines the crime of spreading false news, and its penalty is imprisonment from three months to one and a half years and 74 lashes. It also stipulates that whoever, with intent to harm others or disturb the minds of the public or official authorities, takes action against him to spread lies by submitting a complaint, report, letter, or any printed or written documents¹⁰.

At the official level in Iran, the police are working to combat misleading news during the elections, and consider spreading any false news and rumors about the elections and candidates a crime. The police of tribal areas collect documents of these violations and present them to the competent authorities, especially with the increase in the spread of

⁸ أخبار مزيفة ودعاية غير متكافئة وتحذير من تلوث المعلومات من قبل انتخابات 31 مارس، مارس 2019، <https://cutt.us/sz19z>

⁹ بنسبة 62%.. إيران تعلن رسمياً فوز رئيسي بانتخابات الرئاسة، <https://2u.pw/smDNJI>

¹⁰ ما هي عقوبة نشر الأخبار الكاذبة في إيران، <https://2u.pw/t7LrIN>

false news about the elections in this However, the spread and republishing of rumors and fake news about the elections hastened due to the unsettled political climate in Iran.

Officially, the authorities in Iran confirm that they receive reports from candidates about whom false news and misleading information are published, and law enforcement forces verify this complaint and hold those involved responsible, and the Iranian authorities believe that the best way to confront this misinformation is for users not to publish on social media unconfirmed news and stop sharing it¹¹.

However, the Iranian authorities are tracking misleading news that targets government candidates only, as they are seeking to confront any fake news or misleading information released by opposition forces, not to prevent fake news, but within the Iranian authorities' policy against the opposition. In the renewal elections for the Islamic Council and the councils of cities and villages in 2021, 3 citizens were arrested after reports from candidates about publishing incorrect content, rumors against them and their families, and publishing personal photos, these people were identified after police investigations, as Iranian authorities move frequently to confront any news they see as disturbing public opinion¹².

Recommendations

Disinformation in elections and distortion of opposition are considered an attack on democracy and the rights of voters to conduct fair and transparent elections, the results of which reflect the needs of voters and their aspirations for a better future, while misinformation and smear campaigns affect the free choice of voters, and these negative practices can be addressed through several actions:

- Enhancing transparency and making government data available on various issues to prevent candidates from tampering with data and misleading voters, not allowing raising controversy about misleading information, involving the public in combating this information and spreading awareness, and not just saying “This is incorrect news” to deny it.
- Activating legislation that prevents abuse and distortion of competitors to each other, under the supervision of the bodies that administer elections to prevent distortion and misleading, and obliging candidates to an electoral code of honor.
- Raising voter awareness on how to deal with candidates' data, and scrutinizing the news circulated during the elections.

¹¹ شرطة القبائل القبلية: نشر أي أخبار كاذبة وإشاعات عن الانتخابات والمرشحين "جريمة"، <https://2u.pw/1EC0XV>
¹² القبض على مرتكبي بث أخبار كاذبة عن الانتخابات والمرشحين، <https://2u.pw/Zes2E6>

- Working on digital literacy, building citizen capacity to deal with a world characterized by digitization, and the ability to access information via the Internet, which makes digital illiteracy a good climate for practicing disinformation.
- Activating procedures for tracking down fake news on social media platforms, and following up on complaints to prevent the spread of misleading news.
- Enhancing the role of journalists and research institutions to disseminate facts about data and trending topics during elections without interfering with a candidate