



E-DEMOCRACY IN MIDDLE EAST: HARD TO APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The paper will explore the key benefits and challenges in advancing e-Government for democratic participation and social inclusion, particularly from a Middle Eastern regional perspective (i.e., Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan). The use of online Internet services for applying e-democracy is studied with many clarifying comments and obstacles. The authors suggest that the implementation of e-Democracy requires an environment of confidence that must be created. In addition, a transition period of "real democracy" must be implemented first for some time. Some of the problems with implementing of e-Democracy in the Middle East are presented. In addition, many observations and examples are given to verify the notes of the authors.

Keywords: *E-Democracy, E-Government, Social Issues, E-Parliament.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The world has witnesses' huge amounts of changes in social life in the last 30 years that might exceed the amount of changes for centuries. The development of a high technology machines and equipments makes these changes very rapid. Among those technologies that accelerate the changes is the development of fast computers, mobiles, cable TVs, and the Internet. Across the world, people are using the Internet World-Wide-Web in new ways to get information, use services and participate in democracy [8]. While it's not happening as quickly as many visionaries predicted, discussions and practical use of e-Democratic tools is reaching critical mass.

The new technologies lead to the existence of the e-Government in most countries. Government websites that implements' the e-Government must make better use of available technology, and address the problems of access and democratic outreach. Where, the implementation of e-Governments yields to exist what is called e-Democracy. Some possible shapes for e-Democracy are e-voting, e-parliament, e-activisiam, e-lists, and may be others.

"E-Democracy represents the use of information and communication technologies and strategies by

democratic actors within political and governance processes of local communities, nations and on the international stage. Democratic actors/sectors include governments, elected officials, the media, political organizations, and citizen/voters.

To many, e-Democracy suggests greater and more active citizen participation enabled by the Internet, mobile communications, and other technologies in today's representative democracy as well as through more participatory or direct forms of citizen involvement in addressing public challenges." [4].

It is clear that a lot of societies were not able to absorb and accommodate the fast changes in technology. The economical factor of these societies/countries is one of the roles that affect this issue. Other factors, is the faith in some societies, in particular the populations of certain countries who are restricted to a certain faith. For example, you can find until today some people who do not have TV in their houses and some others may not have satellite in their houses and who prohibit any kind of work on their weekly holiday including driving. They do so by saying that their faith prevent getting TV or working on their holiday.

In most countries, the conversion from democracy toward e-Democracy requires some



time to achieve the transformation. There are many reasons behind this; among them are social and economical issues that will be discussed in this paper.

The organization of this paper will be as follows: section 2 is the current status, section 3 is e-Government, section 4 is e-Democracy, sections 5 are observations related to Middle East, and section 6 are concluding remarks.

2. CURRENT STATUS

This study concentrates on Middle East countries, especially those countries who are trying to implement the e-government in most aspects of their life. These countries are unique for many reasons. First, the sense of emotional feelings between people is still high in the Middle East in comparison to other areas. You can feel this from the still existing family relations with the same family. Second, it is the source for the most common religions in the world. They are: Christian, Islam and Judaism. Third, they still developing countries, where the percentage of people below the poverty line is still high.

It was observed by the authors that the people of the Middle East are very educated when it comes to the politics. The reason for that is that their area was suffered a lot in conflicts over the last 30 years like the Arab-Israel conflict, the war between Iraq and Iran and many other conflicts. Therefore, when you discuss political issues with individuals, you conclude that the majority of them have a deep knowledge of what is going on.

The previous shiny point becomes a disappointed when it comes to democracy. A lot of people have no confidence in their leadership. They claim that the leaders practice what the authors called "Double standard double faces". They claim that he past experience during the last 30 years showed them that what the government wants will be implemented regardless of what people wants. When the desire of both parties (the government and the people) agrees, so both of them are happy and a clam environment appears. However, when the people desire is not in the same direction of the government, the people have learned that the government will impose its view on the people. The history has showed a lot of examples. For example, when people elect their local representatives, and the government finds that the representatives have different point of

view than the government, then the government change the rules and start appointing them.

The previous view got some creditability among individuals during the last 10 years by many actions performed by their government in few countries. As a result, the people do not trust or have a confidence in their government. In addition, they think that the governments are not serious in the issue of democracy. This is considered as one of the challenging factors that prevent Middle East countries from moving toward e-Democracy. However, some of the Middle East countries started their e-Democracy. For example, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan starts transforming into an e-Country since 1999, by implementing the services of the e-Government processes. This yields that it starts to be one of the countries that use the e-Democracy. Since 1989, in Jordan democratic elections have taken place and the government has implemented major reforms programs aimed at further increasing democratic participation, improving the provision of health care and education, and modernizing the private sector as well as government agencies [2].

3. E-GOVERNMENTS

The United Nations and American Society for Public Administration defined e-Government as "utilizing the Internet and the World-Wide-Web for delivering government information and services to citizens". [12]

E-Government can be defined as a process of conducting business between the public and the government through the use of automated systems and the Internet network [1].

Such trends indicate that governments are implementing e-Government to achieve certain objectives such as improvement of services level and easy links between public and private sectors and individuals in a digital environment. The Middle East countries where seeking for rapid development, so e-Government is said to be essential, as a project, for the reality imposed by technology.

For the e-Government service delivery in the world, Figure 1 demonstrates the percentage of the government sites that offering online services during the years 2001 and 2008; and especially the percentages for the Middle East were listed in Table 1 [9].

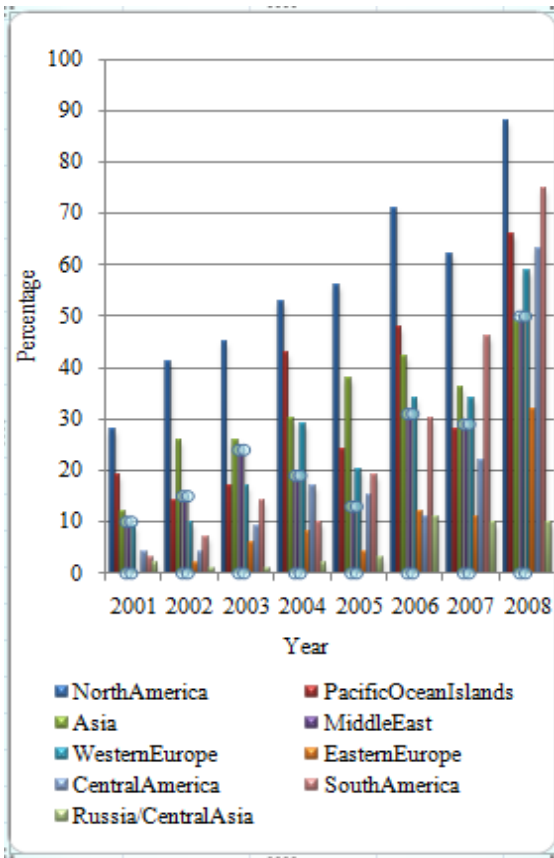


Figure 1: Percentage of e-Government Websites Offering Online Services by Region of World

Table 1. Middle East Percentages for the e-Government Sites that Offer Online Services.

Year	Percentage
2001	10%
2002	15%
2003	24%
2004	19%
2005	13%
2006	31%
2007	29%
2008	50%

The major differences in e-Government by region score in the world demonstrated in Figure 2 for the period through 2001 and 2008 were; and especially for the Middle East e-Government rating score demonstrates in Table 2 [9].

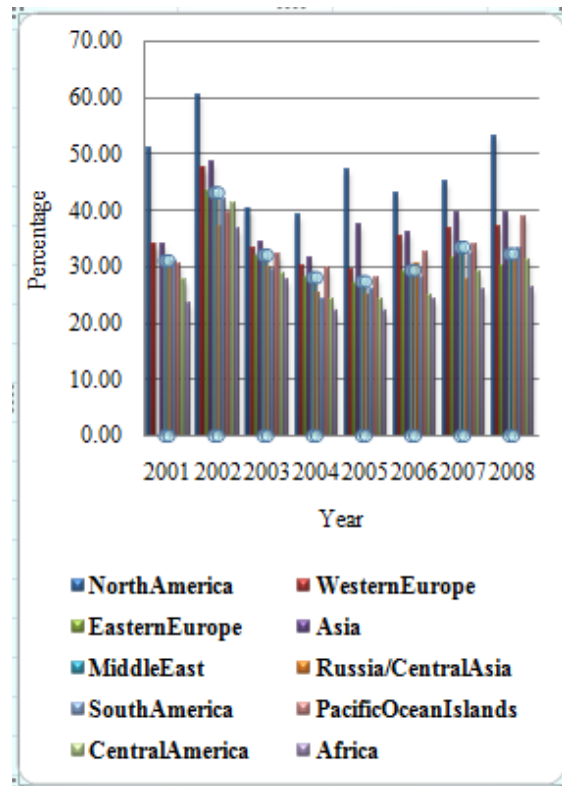


Figure 2: E-Government Ratings by Region Score in the World

From Figure 1 and Figure 2, the Middle East percentages were marked with 4 circles surrounded the rectangles to be clearer. It is clear that from Figure 1 that there is an increasing in the number of online services in the last three years in 2006, 2007, and 2008, which means that such an e-Democracy can be implanted very well in the Middle East.

Table 2. E-Government Ratings Score for the Middle East.

Year	Percentage
2001	31.1%
2002	43.2%
2003	32.1%
2004	28.1%
2005	27.4%
2006	29.4%
2007	33.5%
2008	32.3%



4. E-DEMOCRACY

This stage of e-Government service delivery capability enables the public to participate in the process of transforming the government forward towards its democratic goals in terms of improved transparency and governance [11].

The driving force of the e-Democracy is to combine the use of electronic communications technologies such as the Internet with the democracy. The government has to make this more accessible for everyone to in order to provide people with a chance to participate. Other definitions for e-Democracy, that is to formalize the government democratic architecture into electronic one [1]. For example one aspect of e-Democracy is in participating in electronic voting (e-Voting). e-voting must meet four main characteristics - security, privacy, accuracy and mobility [5].

e-Democracy initiatives include e-Forums, e-Consultations, e-Referenda, e-Voting, and other forms of e-Participation [5]. So, demonstrating e-Democracy has many advantages over traditional practice of democracy. E-Democracy reduces the cost and time and it eliminates the boundaries. In addition, it increases the transparency of government by increasing availability of information. However, any country cannot go for e-Democracy unless it implements the traditional democracy. So, the e-Democracy systems must meet certain standards of security, data protection, secrecy, reliability, accuracy, efficiency, integrity, and equality [3].

In the democracy sense, the authors can split it into two groups. The first group is what the authors call “*real democracy*” and the second is “*decoration democracy*”. Where, the first term implements the real vote of the people. The necessity for using the word real in front of this term is to differentiate between it and “*decoration democracy*” term. The second term implements the democracy, but it has many concerns about its accuracy. This case occurs, for example, for some elections where the government to support preventatives by one or another way in order to win. Other possible candidates either can not run due to a veto by certain authorities, or they got threaten. The “*decoration democracy*” decrease confidence among people about democracy, and they try to avoid participation in the democracy

process since they feel that sometimes their participation is useless.

To move forward toward the e-Democracy, the involved people should practice the “*real democracy*” rather than the “*decoration democracy*”. So, the implementation of e-Democracy can be strengthen or weaken by certain activities of the people who manage it. However, the key point is to use the trust and truthness between the government and the people. This enhances the democracy process and it affects the e-Democracy.

5. OBSERVATIONS RELATED TO MIDDLE EAST

The latest estimated statistics¹ for the Middle East countries for the Internet usage and the population and percentage of population penetration were listed in Table 3. From the estimated statistics, it is clear that some countries still need time to be familiar with Internet use. Also it is clear that there is an increase in Internet usage for some countries. For example, the user growth for the period 2000 and 2010 for Iraq while it still in war time is about 2,500.0%, and for Jordan about 1,268.3%.

The Middle East countries can be considered as a unique for many reasons: First, the area in general is not stable due to Arabic Israel conflict, second, Second, the soci-ecominc changes due to the export of oil., and finally is the strong belief in certain faiths, and many others restrictions.

Each one of the previous factors affect the democracy process and especially e-Democracy in different countries. For example, the victims of Israelis will support persons or ideas that recognized their rights and they will ignore other view that even contradict with the democracy. The second factor is the richness which occurs in some oil countries that reflected on the people and they do not worry of the correct implementation of the democracy since their economy situation has improved a lot. For the third case, the believers of certain faith will support people who are from the same faith and they will not vote for persons of other faiths. This force many Middle East countries to assign a certain quota to certain faiths in order to make them presented in the democracy process.

¹ *the source data was taken from Internet World Stats17. Sep. 2010.*
<http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats5.htm>



Table 3. Estimated Middle East Internet Usage and Population Statistics

MIDDLE EAST	Population (2010 Est.)	Usage, in Dec/2000	Internet Usage, Latest Data	% Population (Penetration)	User Growth (2000-2010)	(%) of Table
Bahrain	738,004	40,000	649,300	88.0 %	1,523.3 %	1.0 %
Iran	76,923,300	250,000	33,200,000	43.2 %	13,180.0 %	52.5 %
Iraq	29,671,605	12,500	325,000	1.1 %	2,500.0 %	0.5 %
Israel	7,353,985	1,270,000	5,263,146	71.6 %	314.4 %	8.3 %
Jordan	6,407,085	127,300	1,741,900	27.2 %	1,268.3 %	2.8 %
Kuwait	2,789,132	150,000	1,100,000	39.4 %	633.3 %	1.7 %
Lebanon	4,125,247	300,000	1,000,000	24.2 %	233.3 %	1.6 %
Oman	2,967,717	90,000	1,236,700	41.7 %	1,274.1 %	2.0 %
Palestine (West Bk.)	2,514,845	35,000	356,000	14.2 %	917.1 %	0.6 %
Qatar	840,926	30,000	436,000	51.8 %	1,353.3 %	0.7 %
Saudi Arabia	25,731,776	200,000	9,800,000	38.1 %	4,800.0 %	15.5 %
Syria	22,198,110	30,000	3,935,000	17.7 %	13,016.7 %	6.2 %
United Arab Emirates	4,975,593	735,000	3,777,900	75.9 %	414.0 %	6.0 %
Yemen	23,495,361	15,000	420,000	1.8 %	2,700.0 %	0.7 %
Gaza Strip	1,604,238	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
TOTAL Middle East	212,336,924	3,284,800	63,240,946	29.8 %	1,825.3 %	100.0 %

For example, Jordan assigns some seats in the parliament for the Christian and for the Chechen people. In Kuwait e-Democracy mentioned in Middle Eastern e-Government circles [4], where in Egypt the Egyptian government provides the first package of e-Democracy services by developing an e-Voting system. And finally as mentioned from the United Nations Department of Economic & Social Affairs (UNDESA) where reports that the ranks of e-Governance readiness in the Gulf area will be around 50% in 2005.

6. DISCUSSIONS

There still a large group of the population in the Middle East countries who are not familiar with Internet use until now as it clear from Table 3. On the other hand, there are others who are familiar very well with usage of Internet. Also, still some Middle East countries not offering online services as demonstrated in Table 2. For this it clear that implementing e-Democracy in the Middle East are restricted until now from offerings online services and number of Internet use.

Also there are other restrictions for applying the e-Democracy in the Middle East. Such as: e-Democracy concept still needs time to take its final shape; some countries still have gained disrepute in

censoring the Internet now; some other countries still in exchanging time from applying the traditional way in the government applications into electronic way; the lack of confidence between the audience and the government; the constraints over using of Internet online services in the Middle East; and finally the hardest constraint is the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians over land and freedom.

7. CONCLUDING and REMARKS

The leak of confidence in the authorities who have the power is reflected on the people. They feel the same amount of confidence in the e-Democracy or even less in most cases. The events that they observed realized that there are two kinds of e-Democracy. The first might be "real democracy" which in many cases creates more diversity and anti-unity among people. The second is that the "decoration democracy" which is an implementation of a policy which make what we call "double standards". The authors think that in order to move to real e-Democracy, two necessary steps are required. The first is the stabilization of the area through the solution of the Arabic Israel conflict. The second is to implement the "real democracy" for some transition period before moving to e-Democracy in order to create confidence environment. And to increase the confidence between the governments and the



people, which yields of implementing more e-Government services and let the people share in most of the governments' conclusions, also by allowing women to share in most of the governments' positions, as in Jordan.

The authors think that around the year 2020 will be all of the Middle East Countries in e-Democracy especially if the peace shades over their countries.

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