Approaching e-democracy: A Case Study Analysis from Jordan

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Abstract

Despite the notable growing citizens participation enabled by the new advancements in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), especially with the introduction of web 2.0, developing countries seems to lag way behind in the utilization of these advancements toward the empowerment of citizen’s for more participation and democratization in decision making. However, this lag is not only due to underutilization of ICT tools only, other challenges face this transition. These vary from pure political barriers such as the very slow democratization process to weak ICT infrastructure. This paper seeks to understand, address and document the Jordanian experience of both side’s government and citizens in the transition to e-democracy. The analysis of this case studies showed that, citizens are taking lead and gaining more power day by day despite the weak governmental push for effective citizen’s participation. Therefore, we argue that this represent a growing challenge for governments to direct and respond quickly to the growing public power empowered by e-democracy. Consequently, governments need to account and shift their classical e-government models toward more e-democratic oriented model that leverage democracy and secure citizens rights of participation in decision making.

Index Terms— e-democracy, e-government, developing countries, web 2.0.

1. Introduction

As governments throughout the advanced and developed world continue with the next phase of administrative reforms, broadly organized under the umbrella of e-government, a distinct but nevertheless related set of developments is occurring in the sphere of what is now commonly termed e-democracy [1]. On the other end, developing countries are still struggling with the development of their e-governments and with even developing their understanding of e-government. In fact, the majority of developing countries see e-government as an online presence in what can be classified as one-way non-interactive informative e-government model, which is far from e-democracy the ultimate goal of e-government. In fact, the transition from the first model (or understanding) to e-democracy represent a huge challenge and a critical need especially for a region that is central in the world economy such as the Middle East.

However, “E-democracy is simpler to describe than it is to realize” [1]. Consequently, questions such as: “How these governments do plan for e-democracy in their e-government effort? to what extent e-democracy is present in e-government efforts? What is their current stage? What role does new technologies such web 2.0 enables both government and citizens? How each side is utilizing these technologies? And how can the government enhance and develop its e-democracy effort? ” represent significant research question that need to be answer.

Within this context, this paper seeks to understand the maturity and readiness of e-democracy in e-government efforts in Jordan as a case study from the region and the developing world to model and identify e-democracy activities, success factors and failure aspects in these countries.

Jordan represent and interesting case and a good example to symbolize these countries since: a) Jordan’s political, economical and social context characterize most of the developing world, b) the Jordanian e-government project is still infant (as many countries in developing world), which gives us a significant opportunity to watch and monitor from early stages how developing countries are accounting and planning for e-democracy in their e-governments projects, c) after the rise of web 2.0 tools, Jordan (as many other countries in the region) witnessed an increased citizens participation and therefore the way to e-democracy might grow to be piloted by the public, d) finally, the Jordanian e-government effort has both failure and success aspects which is worth to look into.

Consequently, we believe that this case study will provide us with deep insights on developing world
experience in approaching both e-democracy and e-government.

This paper is organized as following; section two provides a literature review of e-government and e-democracy, whereas in section three we provide our research framework. Section four provides the case study analysis which includes a political and technological background on Jordan, e-government effort and analysis of e-democracy practices. Finally we summarize our work in section 5 as policy implication and then conclude our work and draw our final findings in section 6.

2. Literature Review

The e-democracy concept is rooted in the big e-government theory. In fact, e-democracy is the ultimate goal of e-government envisioned to lead countries to good-governance [2]. See figure 1.

Figure 1 Models of e-Government (source: [3])

E-Government refers to deployment of ICT’s in public and government services seeking more efficient, effective and high quality service for businesses and citizens. In the UN Global E-Readiness Reports, e-government has been defined as “The use of ICT and its application by the government for the provision of information and public services to the people. The aim of e-government, therefore, is to provide efficient government management of information to the citizen; better service delivery to citizens; and empowerment of the people through access to information and participation in public policy decision-making” [4]. However, Kolsaker and Lee-Kelley [5] found that “The concept of e-democracy is ill-defined, and the field poorly theorized and relatively under-researched”. Therefore there is no one unique definition for e-democracy. Grönlund in [6] sees E-democracy as a term ‘usually, and vaguely, used to mean IT applied to enhance public participation in democratic processes’. Kampen and Snijkers in [7] argues that ICT leads to increased citizens and politicians communication which raise citizens participation in policy creation and that “In the final stage, e-government in general and e-democracy in particular serve as melting pots for all feasible governmental reforms, ranging from the introduction of referenda and direct democracy to proactive government”.

Sæbø and Päivärinta in [8] (based on an extensive literature research analysis), defined four models for e-democracy (see next table) categorized based on agenda initiator and citizen role in decision making.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partisan E-Democracy</th>
<th>Direct E-Democracy</th>
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<tr>
<td>Citizens express bottom-up opinions and take on major governance decisions.</td>
<td>Citizens participate directly in decision-making processes. The citizens are involved throughout the legislative or the local level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT seeks to obtain visibility for alternative political expressionscounteracted by political filter.</td>
<td>ICT is a crucial precondition for democracy to support coordination among decision makers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government initiatives and citizens set the agenda</td>
<td>Citizens participate directly in decision-making processes. The citizens are involved throughout the legislative or the local level.</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICT seeks to improve the quality of democratic exchange between government and citizens.</td>
<td>ICT is developed for centralized citizen participation and involvement in decision-making processes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government initiatives and citizens set the agenda</td>
<td>Citizens are explicitly defined role in decision-making processes.</td>
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Table 1. Models of E-Democracy (source: [8])

Along with each one of these models they introduces their genres such as “dialogue systems” for Liberal E-Democracy, “Your question” for Deliberative E-Democracy, “Discussion forum” for Partisan E-Democracy, and “E-Voting” for Direct E-Democracy. Although many of these genres were vaguely and identically named, their essences were different.

Dimensions of democracy empowered by ICT were defined by Åström, in [9], following table shows these three categories showing how ICT is empower the users.
As e-business, e-democracy comes with its associated applications and infrastructure with a high cost [10]. But in contrast to businesses, government economical incentives to undertake these investments are weak, especially if the return on these investments can is difficult to measure in the short-run. Yet, indirect returns on these investments can be more observable at the long run through public participation in policy and strategy setting which results in increased public satisfaction and production that contribute to whole economic growth.

3. Research Framework

Since the introduction information communication technologies, citizens became more informed and involved more dramatically in decision making. Yet the effect of these technologies on democratization was growing slowly. The first generation of ICT tools as classical email, discussion forums, and so on were considered foremost the first services to open the door for citizens and politicians communication. However these classical tools were mostly not real-time, one-way services. With the introduction of the new generation of ICT’s namely web 2.0 services such as social networks, blogs and wiki’s a notable shift in classical media on the web empowered people with more easy-to-use, interactive and real time tools that allow users to express their opinions, participate in knowledge creation and decision making resulting in rising “power of the crowd”.

To account for human and technology aspects, our work revises the relation between following aspects: a) web 1.0 and web 2.0, b) government-side and citizen-side, and c) e-government and e-democracy. To understand the whole picture, and account for all of these aspects we define a systematical research framework depicted in figure 2. In this research framework we study the path to democracy from two points of view; the first one (which can be consider as citizens pull) is undertaken by citizen’s through the utilization of the new technology advancement represented as web 2.0 services build on the classical ICT infrastructure.

These two perspectives are studies under the local country context to account for indigenous variations such as political context, ICT infrastructure level, and cultural aspects. As can be seen in the research framework we argue that government and e-government seems to have weak utilization of both classical and novel ICT tools and therefore contribution for further democratization. In contrast, due to the current advancements in web 2.0 and increase power of users we see a strong utilization of these advanced tools by citizens and therefore strong contribution and push power toward more democratic political system.

![Figure 2. Theoretical model](image-url)

In fact this can be explained due to the nature of governments, citizens and most significantly the ICT technological innovations. Government’s efforts are usually and mainly concentrated on the development of e-governments services using classical trusted ICT applications and tool, whereas people does not hesitate to utilize newly novel ICT tools. However this is not the case in all countries. Some advanced countries are either hooking or reengineering and then hooking these technologies in their e-government project, whereas still the lack of experience, political structure and country context plays a major role in adopting these technologies in the developing world.
4. Case Study Analysis: Jordan

4.1 Background: Jordanian Context:

Jordan is a constitutional monarchy with a political system of three independent branches under the monarchy reign: the government (cabinet), the national assembly, and the judicial system.

In the last few years, Jordan with very limited natural resources realized the importance of ICT sector as a growth engine in knowledge economy. Therefore, since then the Jordanian government is on an ongoing process for setting the success transition environment for installation and utilization of ICT’s in the country. Although the Jordanian government “has thrived in many aspects of the society, there are still challenges that need to be overcome to complete the transition to an information society” [11]. Next figure show the growth of ICT sector (penetration rate).

![ICT penetration rates per 100 inhabitants as %](complied based on data from Jordan TRC website)

It can be easily seen the low penetration and usage of internet compared to mobile communication. In fact this is a direct result of the weak infrastructure and investments in the data and internet communication services. According to [11] ICT connectivity and infrastructure is still moderate in Jordan, yet Internet cafes, universities, schools and Knowledge stations (local ICT centers in rural areas) provide a great and main sources of communication and internet access points.

Jordan enjoys a young high quality educated human capital with a literacy rate of more almost 90% of total population and more than 3000 graduates in ICT fields [12]. This is a direct result of the government investments in education and especially in ICT education; with more than 27 universities all have ICT undergraduate and graduate related studies. Moreover, out of 24 initiatives in ICT sector by MoICT, 21 of them apply to the development of human capital ICT education [11].

Realizing the significant and enormous opportunities that e-government offers, Jordan was one of the first countries to launch its e-government development project in the region. However, this project is moving very slowly due to numerous obstacles that hinder the rapid development of the e-government in the country. According to int@j [12], these include; low level Internet penetration, high cost of ICT connection and equipment, weak ICT backbone infrastructure, digital divide, privacy and security concerns, limited public sector reform efforts, lack of enabling legal framework and lack of awareness in general population including the public sector. These to add-up to the weak financial resources, lack of expertise, and poor cooperation and communication between different public and government bodies, in addition to the bureaucratic process in all government bodies such as “long process delay, complex procedures, duplicate of work and efforts, duplicate of documents and data, and process redundancy”[13]. As a result, Al-Omari in [14] affirmed that “most of the official efforts within Jordan E-Government system didn’t go beyond the elementary design stages and a portion of the implementation stages”.

This was can be easily observed, especially in the G2C and G2B which are more tangible for the public than G2G. For instance, although the e-government portal provides very helpful informative services, the one-way non-interactive website needs a lot of development to support real online and complete e-services. In addition the redirection from the portal to other departments and ministries provides a further burden for people because these links are usually either broken or very slow and in some case provides nothing than the same informative services, and even with outdated information in many cases. Therefore, huge support and development need to be undertaken to upgrade the level of this portal to become a real complete one-stop stop shop for government services.

4.2 E-democracy Analysis:

In this section we analyze the Jordanian approach to e-democracy based on the research framework. Were we study the e-democracy practices from citizens side (pull side) as well as the government effort (push side).

4.2.1. Government effort: Jordan government has no e-voting system yet, and the Jordanian parliament
(House of Representatives) presence on the web is still new and lacks of experience, were as the house of senator still with no presence on the web. Although the parliament portal is available, there is no services available on the website expect for formal information which can be easily found anywhere else. Moreover, the website offers no interactive or participatory services for citizens to express their views and comments on the democratic process or to communicate with their representatives. Parliament members mostly either does not or do not know how to develop, operate, or even use the World Wide Web to have their own websites or utilize the available portal. This represents a challenge for the public citizens to communicate, participate or audit their representatives. However, despite these numerous difficulties Jordan government is pushing for more training, development, deployment and expansion of e-government awareness.

In fact, 96% of all Jordanian government (25 ministries, 46 institutions and 25 main departments; see [15]) have their portals or websites except for defense ministry which actually does not exist literally. We could only find 4 governmental bodies without any presence on the internet through a website or portal. Yet, this presence is still weak and suffers from many impediments that can be summarized in following common concerns:

1. A large part and effort on these websites is paid to the basic and informative data services about the “department” or organization, such as history, key persons, speeches, divisions and responsibilities and so on.

2. Although some portals provide information on the procedures to get the services, only limited and very rare cases the service, query, application or form can be preceded and processed online (less than 1%).

3. Feedback forms and contacts such as e-mail, phones, and fax are usually offered online. However, usually they online feedbacks and emails are not processed and are offered not for and key persons and divisions but rather for the website administration and usually discarded or delayed. In fact, based on a simple experiment we send 50 e-mails to different government websites and only 7 were responded of which 3 were after than 2 weeks.

4. Updates on most portals are not periodically and many websites have old data that dates backs to more than 3 years. In addition, technically; all portals suffer from broken links, delay and other similar problems.

5. Online exchange and interaction among different departments even with the same ministry is still relatively missing, except for website links which are many times broken.

These key characteristics show hot issues that need to be addressed to allow more effective and interactive participatory movement toward e-democracy or at least to the development of basic online governmental services. Nonetheless, last few years showed some solo improvements efforts by very few ministries and departments that can be considered as a first steps to approach e-democrat and increase public participation. However, we need to mention that these efforts are not systematic or planned at national level but rather individual attempts by these ministries and department. Two worthy attempts to document are:

1. Stakeholders consultation by MoICT and TRC: From end of 2006 and by the beginning of 2007, both MoICT and TRC started to post on their portals drafts of policies, strategies, laws, and decisions for consultation with public and interested stakeholders online, before the real adoption of these policies. Previously such documents were written and approved without any consultation with all stakeholders or offered on the public to comment on them. Carrying these drafts for consultation online and to the public was highly valued. For instance, MoICT released a first draft for ICT policy 2007 on 17 October 2006 and requested suggestions from stakeholders. 12 stakeholders have responded with their suggestions for modification, which were also posted online. After that MoICT released its response for the stakeholder’s suggestion and responded to all comments and edited the ICT policy. From 169 paragraphs in the first draft, final draft consists of 175 and final draft was released on February 8, 2007 and approved by the council of ministers and prime mister by 29 of May 2007. TRC as well, used the same experience of consultation with stakeholders online. Next figure retrieved from TRC website shows, three consultations posted online and comments on comments received from stakeholders.

2. “Ask government” by Jordan media center: During 2005, 2006 and 2007, Jordan media center launched and maintained “Jordan.jo” website to be the...
government media center on the World Wide Web. This website was designed to be the source of all information about the government and marketed by national media such as TV and radio all over the country. To increase citizen’s participation, they launched “ask government “service which allow and citizen to send question and requests for any ministry or government body. However, questions posted were usually filtered and only general ones are posted to the public. In 2007 due to illegal and poor website technical development, the portal was hacked and crashed. Up-to-date this website is still under reconstruction and whole process seems to be working very slowly. Yet, the poor interaction and democracy in this model presents one interesting experience for ways to learn from failure in approaching e-democracy.

4.3.2. Citizens experience
This part tackles the role of citizens in utilizing the web 2.0 advancements in approaching more electronic based democratic participation. In this section we discuss two experiences, one is new electronic news website and the second is facebook and political blogs.

1. Experience of newly interactive online electronic newspapers: Last two years witnessed a rise of quit high number of online news websites, to a point were some people believed that any journalist having a laptop or computer and access to internet has created an online news agency. These websites allow citizens to participate by posting comments. Traditionally, classic and government owned (or subsidized) newspapers when going online did not allow citizens comments even if the technology allows this. Therefore these news sites were a chance for citizens to express their opinions and participate in the hot discussion in real-time. However these sites suffered from many drawbacks and obstacle. Some are internal and others external. Main internal obstacles include lack of financial support, lack of technology knowledge and lack of connections to information resources. External include; political well of classical players, citizens fear of new experience and rivalry competition. Therefore many of these sites did not survive for long time to influence and make difference on the political stage.

In fact, Backhouse found serious concerns in not “bringing new players into the game, since it may serve to entrench the access of the traditional political players, the so-called elites, lobby groups and major political parties”[10]. Therefore many of these new websites were operated by classical political players and consequently very few websites can give total freedom of speech and participation. This can be easily seen by comments for users. Nevertheless, some of these websites still could provide the platform for people to influence policy decisions and became more informed. One recent experience rose when some of these sites raised concerns about government privatization policy. Some sites received thousands of hits for these topics in few hours according to their statements. However, external barriers such as weak infrastructure, low internet usage and access numbers, high cost of computers and internet access are still holding further public participation. Next figure show some of these sites.

Figure 5. Sample of new interactive online newspapers

2. Blogs and facebook: Blogs space and facebook allowed many citizens to have their own space where they can express their opinions and get people comment on them. These also allowed more people to be connected and form interest groups. However, local owned sites that provide blogging services are still under some pressure and influence from government. Facebook and other social networks allowed more freedom and networkness within the space. However, most users in these communities are young people between 18-25 years old. Even though, these youngsters are considered by most developing world governments weakly informed and politically involved, presently these users created a lot of pressure on politicians after recent rise in goods prices (from 14 of April and 1 of May 2008). Using facebook groups, these groups have called for demonstrations in Egypt and Jordan. Although these demonstrations were not a total success, these calls were able to attract attention by governments to the public opinion and especially to these young people.
5. Policy implications and recommendation

No one can disagree on the need to move toward more democratic decision making process in all public issues, were public can take role in decision making of their country. Therefore, e-government efforts should be oriented toward more citizens’ participation. The current technological advancements are very fast; more and more portion of the public are connected are equipped with very easy tools that help them to express and participate more than ever. Consequently governments are under more pressure to catch-up with these advancements. In fact, governments have and should seize the technological opportunity provided by what called web 2.0 and social networking toward more e-democratic participatory model.

Jordan government should recognize the importance and potential of e-democracy in building healthy relationship the government and citizens. Therefore, help the government to increase public respect and trust to its policy. This can be achieved by rapid and continuous development of primary success factors for ICT such as physical infrastructure, human resources training, interactive application and services online development and deployment and automation of government services and processes. On other side, parliament and other public representative communities should open for technology and go online. Moreover, training and assistant should be provided for parliament members and more easy and interactive ways to communicate with their people should be supported if not by themselves then by government. Finally we believe that the government should understand that one-way e-government will fail in this era, therefore more integration of public oriented and interactive participatory democratic model should be the ultimate goal of all e-government efforts.

6. Conclusion

In this paper we discussed the Jordanian experience in movement toward e-democracy. This case study provides a very interesting experience in a county which is experiencing a strong transition to the democratic system but lack the proper ICT infrastructure, experience financial difficulties and still facing many difficulties in its e-government development. Analyzing this case study based on cases initiated from both government and public, we found that technological advancement in web 2.0 and social networking offered the public very powerful set of tools to participate and connect to decision makers. However, the government efforts were lacking behind these developments and relied on classical slow development of e-government. Therefore, we believe that government should shift toward more interactive e-democratic oriented e-government development. This will allow more social satisfaction and participation in decision making and therefore more stable and democratic community.

7. References


