

January 13, 2013

SIMONE HÜSER
DR. OTMAR OEHRING

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The Media and its Role in Monitoring the Parliamentary Elections

Event: Workshop

Date: January 05, 2013

Place: Office KAS Amman

Organization: The First Media Company – Scoopat, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung/KAS Amman Office

Program:

Saturday, January 05, 2013

Opening Session

Mr. Maher Madieh

Director
First Media Company – Scoopat
Amman
Jordan

Dr. Otmar Oehring

Resident Representative
Konrad Adenauer Stiftung
Amman Office
Jordan

First Session: Parliamentary Elections 2013

HE Eng. Musa Maaitah

Former Minister of
Political Development
Amman
Jordan

Discussion

Second Session: The Media and its Role in Monitoring the Parliamentary Elections

HE Dr. Nabil Al Sherif

Former Minister of
Information
Amman

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e.V.

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Jordan

January 13, 2013

Discussion

Third Session: Media Ethics in Covering the Parliamentary Elections

SIMONE HÜSER
DR. OTMAR OEHRING

Dr. Shaker Al Khasawneh

Attorney at Law
Amman
Jordan

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Discussion

Conclusion

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Opening Session

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With regard to the upcoming parliamentary elections in Jordan on January 23, 2013, KAS Amman and the First Media Company – Scoopat hosted a workshop entitled "The Media and its Role in Monitoring the Parliamentary Elections" on January 05, 2013. Various representatives of the media as well as high ranking politicians and experts participated in the event. The aim was to discuss the role of the media in the electoral process, especially with regard to the amended election law.

Mr. Maher Madieh, Director of the First Media Company, opened the workshop by thanking all speakers and participants for their interest in this event and emphasized the importance of the topic at this time. Subsequently, Dr. Otmar Oehring, Resident Representative of KAS Amman, thanked all participants and pointed to the fruitful and professional cooperation between The First Media Company and KAS Amman. He further emphasized the importance of the freedom of Media and Speech in a state, a value both companies share. The upcoming elections and the time leading up to this event are of utmost importance for the further democratization of Jordan in which the media plays a crucial role.

First Session: Parliamentary Elections 2013

HE Eng. Musa Al Maaitah is the former Minister for Political Development and a governmental expert for the new election law that has been passed in 2012. He emphasized that due to the political developments throughout the Arab world in the past two years and the Jordanian reform process, which still needs genuine realization, the upcoming parliamentary

elections are crucial for the further development of Jordan.



From left to right: Dr. Otmar Oehring, Mr. Maher Madieh, HE Eng. Musa Maaitah

After Marouf Bakhit became Prime Minister of Jordan in February 2011 (until October 2011) the National Dialogue Committee suggested a law that expands the constituencies and substitutes the Single Non Transferable Vote (SNTV), which was implemented in 1993, by a proportional representation. The new law gives every constituent two votes, one for a candidate of his or her constituency and one for a national candidate competing under the proportional representation system. This new law is a huge step for Jordan and of significant importance for the political landscape of the country as it does not promote tribalism in the way the SNTV system did. In this context, the constituencies play a significant role; every voter should be registered in the district where he/she lives and/or works and not in the district where he/she is originally from so that people vote according to their political and economic interests and not based on tribal backgrounds. Moreover, integrity and freedom have to be basic values of every electoral process. Thus, every constituency should have an electoral record so that constituents are only able to vote once. Moreover, as the literacy rate in Jordan is still high, ballot papers should be adjusted and include for instance logos, symbols, and pictures to

AUSLANDSBÜRO JORDANIEN

January 13, 2013

SIMONE HÜSER
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also give uneducated people the chance to vote.

With regard to the process that led to the amended electoral law HE criticized the government of Fayez Al Tarawneh who was Prime Minister of Jordan from April 2012 until October 2012. By ignoring the will for the two vote system that was wanted by the parliament, Tarawneh, Maaitah emphasized, missed the chance to further push significant reforms on an electoral law prepared by the government of Khasawneh. Not only did the anger of the population against the government increase as people felt that their political and economic demands were not respected, the government of Tarawneh also lost precious time during the reform process.



Media representatives

HE Musa Maaitah emphasized that the electoral law is the most important political law as it redistributes political power between people on the one side and political parties and decision makers on the other side. Therefore, people should use elections as a tool to promote their political will by voting for politicians that best represent their interests. 25 percent of all countries world wide are based on proportional list system. The Jordanian electoral law so far only allocates 27 out of 150 on the bases of proportional representation. However, HE pointed out that since political parties in Jordan are still weak and not as

established as for instance in fully fledged democracies such as Germany or the UK it is appropriate for the current status of the Jordanian political system. Over time the system will pave the way for political parties to establish and to become stronger. Thus, a start has been made despite or also because of the challenges in the process of amending the law. Yet, as the SNTV promoted tribalism and self-interest within society, progress and development will need its time. Corruption and bribery for instance is a significant problem in Jordan which has led to a major loss of the people's trust in elections and politicians. However, as in every state the parliament is the force that can make changes, HE urges Jordanians to vote to elect a parliament that works in their interest.

Subsequently, HE Musa Maaitah made clear that in order to have a successful and progressive election law and election itself, it is important to see the political reality of a state. Some Jordanian parties he emphasized were too demanding in their ideas of an electoral law which would have not met the political reality of Jordan. Politics, he pointed out, should be about making compromises and finding the best solution possible according to what is feasible at that time. Boycotting in contrast is highly contra productive for a political system. All over the world boycotting has been used in times of crisis to make or rather impose a stand. The Jordanian elections in 2010 were boycotted by the Islamist parties and also this year they are threatening to not participate. The reason is their discontent with the outcomes of the electoral law. Yet, instead of boycotting parties should convince people and try to bring the best arguments to prove their standing right.

AUSLANDSBÜRO JORDANIEN

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During the subsequent discussion the participants pointed out that although the election law has been changed from the SNTV to the two vote system with a proportional list, the 27 percent allocated to parties are too little. A higher percentage would have given parties a better chance to develop. Additionally, the question was raised how representative the outcome of the election will be if the participation is below 50 percent. This scenario might be likely due to the fact that Jordanians have lost confidence in politicians as they feel marginalized by the political sphere which shows in low rates of voting.

Second Session: The Media and its Role in Monitoring the Parliamentary Elections

HE Dr. Nabil Al Sherif, former Minister of Information, focused in his presentation on the media and its role in monitoring the upcoming parliamentary elections.

HE emphasized that one of the major roles of media in the election process is to encourage people to vote and to work for the highest number of participation. Thereby, however, journalists should always make sure to transfer their reports and information neutrally to give every candidate the same chance as well as to give voters the possibility to choose in compliance with their own interest. Especially the TV coverage is highly influential to people's opinion. Here, HE gave the example of the US presidential elections in 1960 – in which John F. Kennedy and Robert Nixon competed against each other – that gave an example of how powerful the mere TV appearance of candidates can be. This appearance or the eloquence of a candidate, however, does not necessarily prove that the candidate is the more capable one. Therefore, it is highly

important that the media delivers accurate and professional information regarding the content of every campaign and the candidates' agenda. Furthermore, the media has the important role to educate people about their political rights and duties. Especially now, a few weeks before the Jordanian parliamentary election which applies a new election law that is significantly different to the one before, media should inform people about the amendments; their effect on the new parliament; the pros and cons; and how the election will work in practice. Thus, media should simplify the concepts of the election laws and the legal aspects for the people. Currently, HE pointed out, the media is not fulfilling this role sufficiently.



From left to right: Dr. Otmar Oehring, Mr. Maher Madieh, HE Dr. Nabil Al Sherif

Moreover, media should communicate and determine the national interest to the people. Voters should pay more attention to the candidates' national agenda, especially during this election period as the constituent will have to vote on the local level but also on the national level. Therefore, the media should for instance report about the standing of various candidates regarding the water issue in Jordan or the country's security challenge – topics of significant importance to Jordan.

During the days of voting but also during the period of campaigning the media should fulfill its role as the observer and 'watchdog' of the process. Violations of

AUSLANDSBÜRO JORDANIEN

January 13, 2013

**SIMONE HÜSER
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the election law or fraud should be made public. In this context, HE pointed out that international observers and experts should be involved in the reporting by journalists in order to give people the chance to get the opinion from outsiders and experts but also in order to test whether international standards are met. During the ballot day itself media should observe the process and pay attention to possible fraud. Here, certainly, the integrity and rights of the voters have to be fully respected.

As the media is the representative of the people and should work for the duty of the people and not the politicians it should not only transfer information to the people but also communicate the people's views and ideas to the politicians. Subsequently, statements, reactions, and elections pledges by the politicians to people's demands should be analyzed. Staying neutral in this process is highly challenging but of utmost importance.



Media representatives

Since every campaigning period includes massive advertisement by the candidates it is essential to separate between the item or information itself and the advertisement of a candidate. Interviews for instance can easily work as advertisement. Therefore, the media has to be careful and highly professional in their reporting in order to not work in favor of a candidate. It also happens that politicians working as journalists run for

elections and use their access as a tool for campaigning.

Indeed, to follow all these rules, standards, and regulations is challenging and mistakes do happen. However, as the media is a powerful actor in the political sphere it has to always try to work on the highest level of professionalism and keep its neutrality. Since Jordan is still in the process of democratization and development these things will take time. During the discussion participants pointed out that the media, especially the independent media channels, are always urged to report neutrally and to not favor any candidate. However, also companies such as the Jordan TV, affiliated with the government, do not give equal opportunity to all candidates. Indeed, they do give all candidates the same amount of time in reports or for interviews but the times of broadcasting differ significantly which leaves some candidates off with better times, such as 8pm, than others whose news are shown at 5am. Additionally, participants emphasized that it is extremely difficult or sometimes even impossible to meet the expectations to be highly professional and neutral but responsible at the same time. In this context, participants pointed out that they are caught in a dilemma: If they report about a candidate that is corrupt or using bribery they might be accused of not being professional and neutral.

Third Session: Media Ethics in Covering the Parliamentary Elections

Dr. Shaker Al Khasawneh is an Attorney at Law and specialized in media and publication issues. He is also member of the 'Independent Committee to Monitor the Media during the Election Process'. In

AUSLANDSBÜRO JORDANIEN

January 13, 2013

SIMONE HÜSER
DR. OTMAR OEHRING

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his speech he elaborated on the work of the committee and the role media should play in the election period.

Dr. Al Khasawneh emphasized that media today has significant power in a political systems and hence, plays an increasing role in democratization processes. The Arab Spring has made clear that the media's influence has grown significantly in the Arab world and should be seen as a serious power, also in Jordan. The 'Independent Committee to Monitor the Media during the Election Process' has been newly established and consists of academics from three different universities to monitor the media coverage of the elections by using quantitative and qualitative studies as well as subsequent analysis. In the past this task was mainly fulfilled by Civil Society Organizations which, however, were often presented as not being accurate enough as their work was not based on theories, statistics etc. The committee monitors the media coverage of a variety of topics for instance the media's reporting of the participation of parties and voters compared to the boycotts; the transfer of legal information about the election law to the people; their neutrality and accuracy regarding dates; the media's procedures during the ballot days; the way actions of the king and governmental bodies, such as the Ministry of Interior, are presented; the extent to which all target groups (i.e. youth, women, tribes) are covered; and how the media covers the various constituencies as there is a tendency to focus more on the third and fourth constituencies outside Amman which are the areas where a lot of the so called 'political money' is located.

From left to right: Dr. Shaker Al Khasawneh, Dr. Otmar Oehring, Mr. Maher Madieh

Subsequently, Dr. Al Khasawneh elaborated on some of the main issues the committee faces. He pointed to Article 22 of the election law which states that "formal media has to treat all candidates during the election campaign period with impartiality and equality". The problem, however, is that this law only applies for the formal or official media such as TV channels, newspapers, official online news etc. but not for social networks like Twitter, Facebook, or blogs. Since most of the users of these networks are not journalists they often lack professionalism. Indeed, their work is important as it shows the perspective of the citizens; yet, because their words are publically available bloggers and commentators should recognize their responsibility and should be familiar with the ethics of journalism. Moreover, Dr. Al Khasawneh pointed out that a common violation by the media during the election campaign period is the discussion of the personal life of candidates which should not be of public interest and undermines professionalism. Dr. Al Khasawneh further elaborated that media tends to make projections who will win the election campaign which can be highly damaging for the election process as people are prone to be influenced. Indeed, in other states, like the US, subjective media coverage is common but it should only be applied in fully democratic systems and not in states such as Jordan which are still in the



AUSLANDSBÜRO JORDANIEN

January 13, 2013

**SIMONE HÜSER
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process of democratization. In many developing states people have lost trust in politics due to high scale corruption. Therefore, media has to stay neutral and accurate to support people to gain back their beliefs in politics and media.

During the subsequent discussion participants pointed out that the expectations towards the media are very high regarding legal information. Here, the independent election commission is not doing enough to educate citizens about the election law, its amendments, and its impact. Furthermore, media representatives criticized that they are expected to be highly neutral. However, various candidates participating in the election campaign are accused of severe corruption and other crimes, yet, they are still allowed to run for parliament. It was criticized that there should be more legal consequences for candidates violating the law. The media is ousted into a dilemma as they are urged to stay neutral in their news coverage whilst candidates accused of crime almost do not face any consequences and are allowed to continue in their campaigns as, according to the law, a defendant is innocent without final conviction. Media representatives however, see it as their duty to inform citizens about cases in which candidates are accused of crimes.

Conclusion

The workshop can be assessed as a great success with informative presentations and highly lively and fruitful discussions. Representatives from the media used the chance to debate with experts and decision makers the pros and cons of the current laws in Jordan that influence the media performance. Thus, both sides had the chance to gain insights and a better

understanding of the arguments of the other side.

It has become clear that the media has grown to a more powerful and independent actor in recent years which is a positive indicator for democratization. Yet, both sides – the media as well as the government – need more time to develop. Workshops promote this development as they offer a forum for discussion.