

## A road map to participatory democracy

**Hiba Huneini**

The past two weeks witnessed the beginning of two important actions that aim at ensuring transparency, access to information, and participatory democracy at the level of public communication within the legislative and executive authorities in Lebanon. Last week, the General Secretariat of the Lebanese Parliament in partnership with Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) launched the Parliament's new website that includes updated features and new sections to ensure easier access to information. The website includes all updates on the work of all Parliamentary committees. It has an upgraded section for all legislations categorized in a clear way based on their progress status. It also includes a new interactive and participatory section under the title "Contribute to Legislation", that ensures community participation in the legislation process through enabling citizens to track draft laws which are being discussed in the Parliamentary committees and comment on them through the electronic consultation platform. There is also another section dedicated for submitting a draft law by community members. This is considered a remarkable progress in opening an official institutionalized channel for enabling community members to take an active role in legislation.

Two weeks earlier, the General Directorate of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers and the General Secretariat of the Council of Ministers launched the "National Observatory" that is a separate online platform from the website of the Council of Ministers. It includes a package of 220 reforms since "Taif Agreement" until now with their sources, status, steps taken and those that are yet to be implemented, and the mechanism for implementing them. It also included a list of 75 enacted laws that still need certain procedures, decrees, or decisions to be put into effect.

In addition, the platform includes static tables of procedures and laws related to: 1) human rights, 2) Sustainable Development Agenda 2030, 3) drafts agreements under negotiations with the Arab countries and EU within the joint high committees and partnership with the European Union, 4) laws and projects within the privatization and partnership framework, 5) infrastructure projects in Beirut, 6) rented buildings by governmental institutions, and 7) contacts of employees in all departments assigned to look into requests for access to information.

Access to information is essential as a building block for any social accountability process; however, it is not enough if not accompanied by concrete actions and reforms. This is particularly important in Lebanon's complex situation that's full of grievances and loss of any trust in the state and governmental institutions. Any public engagement should be a dynamic process that requires a two-way structured communication.

The two initiatives mentioned above are essential basic steps in the road map of participatory democracy where citizens are empowered and enabled to have a seat on the decision-making table. They are also granted the right to submit suggestions for draft laws and participate in commenting and amending the laws that are being discussed in the Parliamentary committees. Such tools and processes are complex and critical enough to require an enabling environment and clear mechanisms as they might raise the level of citizens' disappointments if not implemented properly. For this reason, in any public communication or civic engagement process, it is essential to close the feedback loop.

Most of the times, public opinion and insights are collected and integrated in policies or plans without putting enough time in getting back to the citizens and updating them how their input impacted the policy or plan. Thus, it is important to engage the masses in legislation and policies, but people should know how their efforts and opinions are affecting the work of the Parliament and government.

If such actions are accompanied with a series of interactive methodologies, this will be the main tool in creating the community's buy-in for all reforms, maximizing the impact of reforms, as well as ensuring the national plea for more transparent, responsive,

and efficient governments and public institutions. Such a long-term process that needs an accumulation of community engagement methods at national and local levels will be a key instrument of policymaking and building trust in Lebanon.

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