

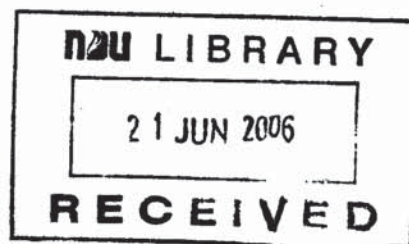
Notre Dame University
Faculty of Political Science,
Public Administration & Diplomacy

Corruption in Lebanon: Does E-government Help?

M.A. Thesis

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Submitted to the Faculty of Political Science,
Public Administration & Diplomacy

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in International Affairs & Diplomacy

Notre Dame University
2006

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
I. Introduction	
E-Government: Reducing Corruption Through Access to Information	1
1) Topics and Issues to be Discussed	2
2) Methodology	6
3) Literature Review	8
4) Organization of the Thesis	10
II. Administrative Corruption and Political Decision-Making	13
1) How Do we Define Corruption?	13
2) Corruption Rates and Rankings	15
3) Government Claims to Fight Corruption Versus Criticism	16
4) Types of Corruption	19
5) Factors that Encourage Corruption	21
6) Consequences of Administrative Corruption and Lack of Access to Information	23
7) Change and E-government	26
III. E-government: Impacts and Benefits	30
1) Expanded Definition of E-government and Scope	33
2) E-government: Delivering Services to Citizens and Fighting Corruption	34
3) E-government: Access to Information and Fighting Corruption	39
IV. Barriers to the Successful Implementation of E-government Projects	47
1) Technical Infrastructure	49
a. Internet Penetration Rates	52
b. Digital Divide	54
2) Aware and Demanding Citizenry	56
3) Legal Framework	58
4) Strong Leadership	59
5) Willingness to Introduce Change	62
V. Conclusion	
E-government: Failure or Success in Reducing Corruption?	66
1) Where Does Lebanon Fall in the International Digital Divide?	67
2) Could E-government Become Lebanon's Corruption Buster?	71
3) E-government Corruption Solver or Efficiency Guarantor?	74
Bibliography	78

Corruption in Lebanon: Does E-government Help?

Abstract

The expansion of e-government applications since the 1990s has led many countries in the developing world to follow the advanced industrialized societies in using e-government as an enabling tool to achieve reform goals. Lebanon is implementing e-government initiatives as part of international efforts to integrate the developing world in the information society. With corruption plaguing the country, this research aims to examine if the government in Lebanon is taking steps to tackle this rampant problem through e-government projects, and to assess the nature of such projects and the level of information access they provide. Finally, the thesis examines whether the level of access is enough to achieve the desired result which is reduction of corruption.

Based on the analysis of the aforementioned factors, partly through comparisons with e-government initiatives in developing countries, this research concludes that the current Lebanese government is focusing on efficiency -- relative as it might be -- and is not attempting to combat corruption through e-government initiatives that must provide full access to information first, before any other service.

Chapter I

Introduction

E-Government: Reducing Corruption Through Information Access

A popular Government without popular information, or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy; or perhaps both. Knowledge will forever govern ignorance; and a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives.

James Madison

The internet has become an important global resource, and internationally much work has been done on the integration of the Third World in the information society and further attempts are carried out to ensure such countries would reap the benefits of the digital revolution.¹ Industrialized countries have gained a lead in harnessing Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and one of the major challenges for developing countries is to surmount the inequality in benefits from such technologies. The appropriate use of information technologies has the potential to deliver massive benefits in terms of human development.

The Lebanese government says it is undertaking national efforts to embrace international steps of “bridging the digital divide between developing and developed countries, through a firm political decision, an efficient national strategy and plan of action as well as through bilateral and multilateral cooperation at the regional and international levels.”² The government has identified several major actions needed to

¹ The Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action of the World Summit on the Information Society reveal the international community’s commitment to integrate the third world into the information society.

²World Summit on the Information Society, *Lebanon Information Society Paper*, November 2003, p.1.

bridge such a divide. Among them is an electronic government strategy as part of the promotion of development-oriented ICT applications, one of the areas of concern for the participants at the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), in which Lebanon took part and is attempting to comply with its framework.

The government asserts that e-government empowers citizens through access to information and has announced its desire in the Declaration of Principles by the WSIS in Geneva in December 2003 to build a society “where everyone can create, utilize and share information and knowledge.”³ This explicitly shows a link between pledges to allow for access to government information and the provision of such information through electronic means. But other than empowerment which is reached through access to information, we have the benefits of transparency and anticorruption that are associated with e-government applications and are seen as factors that contribute to the achievement of an information society. From here, as the title of the research indicates, the study will touch upon the issue of corruption and the extent to which it could be reduced by e-government initiatives that provide access to information and improve service delivery.

Topics and Issues to be Discussed

Traditional methods to carry out public sector activities are losing ground to more advanced methods. Computers were originally developed for military purposes but eventually emerged for civilian purposes and for public sector use. “Traditionally, the interaction between a citizen or business and a government agency took place in a

³ World Summit on the Information Society, *Declaration of Principles, Building the Information Society: a Global Challenge in the New Millennium*, 12 December 2003, WSIS-03/GENEVA/DOC/4-E, http://www.itu.int/wsis/document/doc_multip.asp?lang=en&id=1161/1160 (accessed 21 November, 2004).

government office.”⁴ With emerging ICTs, that relationship has changed. ICTs are powerful information tools that if used properly generate widespread benefits and deliver government services without the need for face-to-face interaction in an office. This is why a new concept, called electronic government or e-government, has emerged.

E-government has no commonly accepted definition because the usage of the word is of recent origin. However, my definition is the following: E-government is the use of information and communication technologies by government agencies to improve the activities of public sector organizations, open up government processes to enable greater public access to information and to make government more accountable. This is achieved by making the government’s operation transparent which would ultimately reduce corruption opportunities.⁵ E-government covers several areas of which two are fundamental for this study:

- Improving government processes by working on upgrading the internal mechanisms of the public sector.
- Connecting citizens either through the improvement of services and/or the provision of information on government activities.

The overall benefits one could get from the delivery of e-government services are quality, convenience (location and time), shorter waiting periods, lower cost, greater transparency and consequently reduction in administrative corruption upon which this research focuses.

⁴ Subhash Bhatnagar, *E-government: From Vision to Implementation* (New Delhi: SAGE publications, 2004), p. 19; World Bank, “A Definition of E Government,” <http://www1.worldbank.org/publicsector/egov/definition.htm> (accessed 21 May, 2005).

⁵ Ibid.

This research takes as its starting point that e-government has the potential to be a major enabler in the reduction of corruption. It looks at the impact of e-government on the reduction of corruption through access to information. It tries to answer the following question: Does e-government reduce corruption in Lebanon through access to information?

Why access to information? Because access to information is fundamental to transparency, to holding governments accountable, and to controlling corruption because it guarantees openness in the conduct of public affairs. "Where official information can be viewed by any interested party -- including members of the public, civil society and the media -- corruption becomes more difficult to conduct and to conceal."⁶

Hence, what is access to information? It is a guarantor to openness in the day-to-day affairs of the government's activities. It is an efficient tool to discourage "arbitrary action on the side of the government...and also to reduce corruption within government institutions and enhance integrity in public life."⁷

Why corruption? Because the 2005 Corruption Perception Index ranks Lebanon 83rd globally, and other statistics show that Lebanon suffers from rampant corruption in the public sector.⁸ Transparency International defines corruption as "the abuse of entrusted office for private gain."⁹

⁶ Transparency International, "Anti Corruption Handbook," http://www.transparency.org/ach/strategies/access_info/discussion.html (accessed 10 June, 2005).

⁷ Corruption Online and Research Information System, "Definition Issues: Access to Information," <http://www.corisweb.org/article/archive/246/> (accessed 2 January, 2005).

⁸ *The Daily Star*, "Rampant Corruption Takes Slight Nose Dive in Lebanon," 5 October 2005.

⁹ No Corruption: The Lebanese Transparency Association, *Corruption in Post-War Reconstruction: Confronting the Vicious Circle*, p. 34.

Given the research question, the thesis will deal with two basic themes: e-government and corruption. Several case studies from developing countries, reveal that the correlation of both themes is that among the many tools available to witness a reduction in corruption through access to information, one has emerged with the advance of ICT: e-government. Because most government records are in print format, their online availability in many countries resulted in more information of this nature becoming available over time and reducing corruption by taking away discretion and increasing chances of exposure. This research will show whether this is the case in Lebanon.

Generally speaking, one important element of a strategy to reduce corruption is to expand the amount of information produced by the public sector because one of the benefits of information produced by governments and placed in the public domain is transparency. "The more information that is openly available from the government and about the government, the less likely will it be that government is able to hide illegal acts, corruption and misrule."¹⁰

If we look at the *E-Government Strategy for Lebanon*, we see that one of the basic objectives of the e-government vision in Lebanon is to impart all sorts of public sector information that citizens are entitled to. This clearly refers to the right of access to information which is part of article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This right to freedom of opinion and expression "includes the freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers."¹¹ The

¹⁰ Transparency International, "Anti Corruption Handbook."

¹¹ United Nations, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 10 December 1948, <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html> (accessed 5 September, 2004).

research then also tries to reveal the level of access to information in Lebanon and whether such info could be obtained through e-government initiatives that would ultimately lead to a reduction in corruption.

In terms of e-government projects and corruption, the Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform (OMSAR) has undertaken efforts to introduce ICT into the public sector. It has signed scores of contracts to equip Lebanese ministries and public institutions with Information Technology networks and computers with the purpose of fully implementing IT infrastructure in government bodies and ultimately enhancing their operation. The decision to mainstream ICTs in government operations has been taken after a series of studies undertaken by OMSAR starting in 1992. A quote from the Minister of State for Administrative Reform Jean Oghassabian summarizes the acknowledgment of the government that e-government is an important tool in getting rid of corruption. "E-government limits interaction between the employee and the citizen, grants him his rights and needs and saves him cost and time. This is one of the efficient means to stop corruption and in here lies the importance of the national electronic strategy."¹²

Methodology

Qualitative and Quantitative research methods were used for the collection and analysis of data. The choice of research methods includes: comparative research, existing data research (surveys and articles) and evaluation research.

Generally, research on the social impact -- increased transparency and reduced corruption -- of e-government initiatives is based on case studies from developing

¹² National News Agency, "Minister Oghassabian Headed a Meeting that Discussed Details of the E-government Strategy," 4 October 2005, <http://www.nna-lb.gov.lb> (accessed 4 October, 2005).

countries such as India, the Philippines, South Korea, Argentina, Mexico and Chile.¹³ That is why the original empirical research in the case of Lebanon was based on interviews with experts. Administrative employees in charge of implementing e-government projects were interviewed by the author to assess the impact and possible attainment of reduced corruption through the available initiatives. Other officials within world organizations such as the UNDP were also interviewed to analyze the work carried out to computerize the Lebanese administration and provide electronic services to citizens. Another interview was also done with an expert on corruption in Lebanon. So, the study was mainly conducted through face-to-face meetings with relevant officials and experts.

Surveys of citizens were evaluated to establish more clearly the linkage between e-government, access to information, and reduction of corruption because many case studies, including the OPEN system of Seoul Municipality that enables online tracking of applications, were evaluated through surveys.¹⁴

One of the surveys was conducted in 2002 by Information International, a Beirut-based research and consulting firm that conducts market and feasibility studies and social and economic research. It took a sample of 200 citizens in the Greater Beirut area. Another survey was published in the report of a researcher on access to information in Lebanon, Ziad Baroud. It was carried out in 1999 taking a sample of 500 people from all regions. Other surveys include studies by the World Bank and Transparency International, a civil society organization that fights corruption. Some

¹³ Bhatnagar, *E-government: From Vision to Implementation*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 187.

statistics were also taken from a report released by the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies.

Examples from local and international case studies were also used throughout this research to demonstrate the potential impact of e-government applications and initiatives on corruption. The case studies include e-government projects in South Korea, India, the Philippines compared with those in Lebanon.

Literature Review

What do researchers and experts in the field of ICT say about e-government's abilities to reduce corruption? All interviewees agree there is corruption in Lebanon but their views differ on e-government's ability to solve it. Khalil Gebara, Co-executive Director of The Lebanese Transparency Association, for example says we have a political class that either does not want or cannot do anything about corruption, which means e-government is not a problem solver in this area.¹⁵ Raghda Jaber, Land Registry Component Coordinator at UNDP, also stresses that corruption is rampant and that if the government's goal is to eradicate corruption, e-government is not a solution.¹⁶ Other interviewees describe resistance by public sector employees as a hindrance to the application of technologies in government departments but believe e-government could reduce administrative corruption if there is enough leadership and willingness by the government to tackle corruption.

The books in the bibliography section describe the Western experience of e-government initiatives and that of developing countries. The authors agree there is corruption almost anywhere in the world and that information technologies are used by

¹⁵ Khalil Gebara, interview by author, 25 September 2005, Beirut, Lebanon.

¹⁶ Raghda Jaber, interview by author, 11 October 2005, Beirut, Lebanon.

governments to deliver widespread benefits to citizens. Subhash Bhatnagar talks about a “sequentiality of objectives on which e-government applications must focus to reduce corruption.”¹⁷ According to him, avoiding to do so defeats the whole purpose. William Eggers argues in his book that modern technologies if and when used properly “have the potential to reshape almost everything about government, and many aspects of everyday life.”¹⁸

Richard Heeks for example, says to introduce reform in the information age means a greater role for ICT in the processes of change. He, too, has recognized the transformation potential of ICT in government. He asserts ICT should become a means to improve access to information.¹⁹ While admitting that defenders of the status quo will resist any change to update the old system of government, both Richard Heeks and William Eggers, say easy and free access to public information makes government accountable and that could be reached through e-government initiatives. E. Lynn Oliver and Larry Sanders, too, believe that e-government strategies must be linked to a larger public sector reform initiative or else they will not be seen important enough to justify essential changes in the government.²⁰

Reports, United Nations documents, and other public documents give an overview of corruption, information and communication technologies and access to information and corruption. The *United Nations Global E-Government Readiness Report 2004* labels Lebanon as one of the Western Asian countries that strengthened their e-government services but fell behind other countries that are aggressive in

¹⁷ Bhatnagar, *E-government: from Vision to Implementation*, p.41.

¹⁸ William Eggers, *Government 2.0* (New York: Rawman & Littlefield publishers, 2004), p. 10.

¹⁹ Richard Heeks, *Reinventing Government in the Information Age* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

²⁰ E. Lynn Oliver and Larry Sanders, *E-government Reconsidered: Renewal of Governance for the Knowledge Age* (Regina: Saskatchewan Institute for Public Policy, 2004).

pursuing e-government initiatives.²¹ UNDP's *Human Development Report* sees a series of political, economic and social hindrances as factors to Lebanon's relative backwardness in this area. The *Global Corruption Report 2003* of Transparency International says due to ICT and in several countries in the world "the corrupt are running out of places to hide."²² The report devotes several chapters to access to information and e-government which it sees as efficient tools to fight corruption. While all reports in the bibliography that mention freedom of information argue in favour of access to information as a tool to reduce corruption, Ziad Baroud reveals an almost non-existent citizen-government link in Lebanon which could be improved through electronic means and a freedom of information law.²³

As for local newspaper articles, they report the day-to-day activities of the Lebanese government in terms of introducing e-government into the administration and other initiatives that involve modern governance techniques.

Organization of the Thesis

Given the existing research on e-government, corruption and access to information, the research is divided into five chapters. This introductory chapter addresses the overall purpose of the research and gives an overview of the topics that will be dealt with in the course of the study. It introduces the concepts of e-government, corruption and access to information, and highlights that "the need to find more

²¹ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Public Administration and Development Management, *UN Global E-Government Readiness Report: Towards Access for Opportunity*, New York, 2004, UNPAN/2004/11, p. 39.

²² Transparency International, *Global Corruption Report 2003*, p. 1.

²³ Ziad Baroud, *Top Secret...for Lebanese Only! The Map of the Sealed Tunnel between the Citizen and Government Departments*, 2004.

effective means of disseminating information has become more pressing in the e-government age.”²⁴

In chapter two I expand upon the concept of corruption and examine the types of corruption that are prevalent in the Lebanese administration and are or could be tackled through technological initiatives. The chapter analyzes not just corrupt practices of civil servants but of citizens as well and sheds light on the consequences of corrupt practices.

Chapter three highlights the importance of e-government projects in terms of access to information and reduction of corruption. It reviews how e-government enables information disclosure. It also examines some e-government initiatives in countries like South Korea and India and compares them with similar ones in Lebanon in order to see whether such projects are capable of reducing corruption.

In chapter four I analyze factors of success and/or barriers to the achievement of successful corruption-reduction ends. The barriers are identified as bad technical infrastructure that includes low internet penetration rates and an internal digital divide or a gap in ICT use within the country, low level of awareness, a deficiency in the legal framework, and lack of leadership. This chapter also reviews and analyzes the readiness and willingness of the Lebanese government to use e-government to provide information and deliver services to the citizen and fight corruption.

In the fifth and final chapter I make an overall analysis of the previous chapters and draw concluding remarks and recommendations. The conclusion is basically the following: E-government is important; however, it cannot be the magical cure for all

²⁴ Oliver and Sanders, p. 89.

administrative problems. It can be a useful tool to limit corruption, but it cannot, on its own, bring about radical change. Some helpful materials have been placed online but much work needs to be undertaken by the Lebanese government in order to introduce e-government initiatives whose sole purpose is to fight corruption. E-government initiatives could help in solving bribery if the right procedures are put in place. However, authorities are looking upon e-government primarily in the context of improved efficiency, and not in terms of the basic need to reduce corrupt practices through increased access to information.

Chapter II

Administrative Corruption and Political Decision-Making

Information is the natural enemy of corruption. Corruption thrives on ignorance, not information. It needs secrecy, not transparency. It seeks darkness, not light.

Former U.S. Vice President Al Gore

How Do we Define Corruption?

Corruption occurs in a variety of ways and is not a Lebanese particularity even if it is propagated in daily activities whether in the public or private sector. It is found everywhere in the world, however it is one of the most stirring issues in Lebanon while reform is a matter of pressing concern. It has been put high up in the priorities of the government in writing but the government's accomplishments in fighting corruption and introducing reform in departments that are corrupt draw several questions.²⁵

There is no precise definition that applies to all types and degrees of corruption but a straightforward definition is that of Transparency International (TI). The world's leading corruption watchdog, TI defines corruption as "the abuse of public offices for private gain and does not distinguish between administrative and political corruption or between petty and grand corruption."²⁶

²⁵ The government's policy statement promises in several articles the implementation of reform but international donors are pressing hard for action to help Lebanon.

²⁶ *The Weekly Economic and Market Report*, "Lebanon's 2004 Corruption Perception Index Worsens," Bank Audi, week 43, October 18-22 2004, p.5.

The term corruption covers a wide range of human actions and “is used to designate a range of activities such as bribe-making/taking, embezzlement, fraudulent mismanagement of funds or nepotism.”²⁷

My definition of corruption in this paper is the same as that of Transparency International but in this chapter I try to see what type of corruption could be tackled through e-government and try to look at the relation of political corruption to administrative corruption because the former is an important aspect of the administration’s daily activities. It is believed that “administrative corruption is the outcome of political corruption.”²⁸ Then unlike Transparency International, I try to distinguish between the different types of corruption though I agree that any type or aspect of corruption is still regarded as an abuse for personal gains.

“Administrative corruption refers to the intentional distortion of prescribed implementation of existing laws, procedures and regulations to provide an unfair advantage to an individual or a firm in return for an illicit private gain to a public official.”²⁹

Bribes are one of the main tools of administrative corruption. They may be used by some parties to buy services provided by officials, or officials may seek bribes in supplying those services. Time-buying is a point of emphasis in here since bribes, along with the many benefits they offer suppliers and the supplied, they may be offered to speed up a certain process within the administration. Civil servants have invented this method in dealing with people, though Article 14, Clause 7 of the Public Service

²⁷ No Corruption: The Lebanese Transparency Association, *Corruption in Post-War Reconstruction: Confronting the Vicious Circle*, p.34.

²⁸ Adnan Hajj, “The Slogan of Corruption: the Standing Phrase During Election Campaigns,” *As Safir*, 20 June 2005.

²⁹ Bhatnagar, *E-government: From Vision to Implementation*, p. 40.

Statute says an employee “shall not seek or accept directly or indirectly, presents, bribes or benefits of any nature whatsoever.”³⁰

Corruption Rates and Rankings

Corruption rates and rankings give a small idea of how much Lebanon is plagued with corruption.

The country is ranked 83rd in the 2005 Corruption Perception Index, despite a slight decline in the perceived level of corruption from 2004. The study conducted by Transparency International (TI) measures the perceived level of corruption in the eyes of businesspersons and analysts. The perception level has declined from 2004 because since the withdrawal of Syrian troops in April 2005 and the promises of the government for more reform, there is more trust in the public sector.³¹

However Khalil Gebara, Co-executive Director at the Lebanese Transparency Association (LTA), TI's local affiliate, says “corruption is still embedded in the Lebanese political and administrative system. The structural issue of corruption has not been solved.”³² Thus, despite the improvement in Lebanon’s ranking, corruption cases in the public administration are still widespread.

A World Bank study in May 2005 rated the country as one of the worst countries in the Middle East in terms of corruption which it defined as the exercise of public power for private gain. The world body “ranked Lebanon in 122nd place worldwide and 13th among 19 countries in the Middle East and North Africa region in

³⁰ Office of the Minister of State for Administrative Reform, *A Code of Conduct for Public Servants*, December 2001, p.4.

³¹ *The Daily Star*, “Rampant Corruption Takes Slight Nose Dive in Lebanon.”

³² *Ibid.*

terms of estimated level of corruption as of May 2005.”³³ Lebanon ranked 114th globally and 14th regionally in the 2002 survey.

The World Bank also gave Lebanon poor marks in governance. It ranked Lebanon in the bottom half of a list of countries in government effectiveness, defined by the report as the measure of competence of the bureaucracy and the quality of public service delivery. It came in 117th place worldwide and 12th in MENA. This ranking resulted from complaints by “small business owners who frequently complain about the vast amounts of time they have to spend in dealing with bureaucratic red tape as well as the large degree of government corruption.”³⁴ The 2002 survey of government effectiveness placed Lebanon 115th globally and 12th regionally.

These somber measures are a reflection of the status quo of the Lebanese administration and have drawn and are drawing international criticism, calling for reform and making it a prerequisite for international aid to help Lebanon come out of its staggering debt.³⁵

Government Claims to Fight Corruption Versus Criticism

Because Lebanon gets poor marks that reflect certain realities, the issue of corruption is discussed every time a new government takes the helm of power with pledges to find solutions through promised reforms despite a government-citizen relationship that has turned into a mutual corrupt tie. The spread of corruption is analogous to cancerous cells that stretch into the sick Lebanese body.

³³ *The Lebanon Weekly Monitor*, “Lebanon Ranks 122nd Globally, 13th in MENA Region in Corruption Control,” Bank Audi, Audi Saradar Group, week 25, June 13-18 2005, p. 4.

³⁴ Daniel Epps, “World Bank Gives Lebanon Poor Marks in Governance,” *The Daily Star*, 8 July 2005.

³⁵ A donors’ conference in Beirut has been postponed several times given the political situation and the corruption that is prevalent in the country.

The postwar governmental structure provided a fertile soil for corruption to develop and make way into the public sector, creating a deeply rooted corruption problem which plagued the country for years. Administrative reform was tackled “as a seasonal process to contain public opinion or political opposition. The country has never witnessed the courageous and radical reform, which must reach the political, as well as the administrative system.”³⁶

However, after years of talk about public sector reform, and limited action to push the process forward, some change may be on the way. Although corruption is not a new term in Lebanese politics, transparency, accountability, and good governance may be so. Corruption and its combating methods have been the buzzword in Lebanon lately, in particular after the withdrawal of Syrian troops in April 2005 and the first legislative elections that were free from Syrian tutelage. The May-June 2005 elections brought with them a government headed by Premier Fouad Saniora which claims to be committed to the fight against corruption.

Minister of State for Administrative Reform Jean Oghassabian, for example, insists on the necessity of having a public sector job that serves the people and not the other way around. He claims the government is tackling administrative reform seriously through a series of projects (including e-government initiatives) that would eradicate corruption step-by-step. “The government will make a revolution in the

³⁶ Oussama Safa, *The Official Campaign Against Corruption in Lebanon*, The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, <http://www.lcps-lebanon.org/conf/00/mdf3/papers/safa.pdf> (accessed 8 October 2004).

administration,”³⁷ the minister says, knowing that, as Social Affairs Minister Naila Mouawad says, the administration is like half-Ottoman.³⁸

The ministers give the impression that they are introducing change to an administration that has not developed much in the past, but at the same time they face the stiff criticism of those who have given up faith. A former high ranking official for example, says willingness to reform is very important. But unfortunately it is an objective that no one wants to achieve nowadays. He describes the current government as being a government of instability unlike what it claims to be.³⁹ Oghassabian, on the other hand, confirms the government is adamant to move ahead with reform even though he acknowledges that the Lebanese government did not fulfill much in the past years in terms of modernizing the work of the government and administrative departments.⁴⁰

Despite pledges, criticism to the alleged reform process is still there. Claims that “there is no continuity in projects when the government changes”⁴¹ are also there. This is why critics think that a process to cure the administration from all its diseases is not feasible while defenders of the government’s alleged attempts to find a way out of its illness think it would be unfair to look at the fight against corruption as an entire package that cannot work unless it is 100 percent applied. That is why we are focusing in this research on *how* electronic means may limit corruption.

³⁷ Ghada Halawi, “Oghassabian: the Government will Make a Revolution in the Administration and Wants to Take its Time so that Appointments Become from Required Standards,” *Al Balad*, 14 August 2005.

³⁸ *An Nahar*, “Donation from the Korean Embassy to Computerize the Ministry of Social Affairs,” 25 October 2005.

³⁹ The official has lately retired from his post in the administration and refused to be identified in an interview with the author because of the sensitivity of the issue of corruption in the country.

⁴⁰ NNA, “Two Meetings at OMSAR to Develop the Administration and Put a Structure for the Economy Ministry,” <http://www.nna-lb.gov.lb> (accessed 25 November, 2005).

⁴¹ Tania Zaroubi, interview by author, 16 June 2005, Beirut, Lebanon.

Types of Corruption

It is better first to look at the different facets of corruption in Lebanon so that it becomes easier to identify which type can be first touched upon in a process that involves the 'how' or the introduction of technical methods.

Corruption in Lebanon comes in three levels:

- Petty or survival corruption which is practiced by civil servants with limited income. It involves bribing civil servants to get them to disregard violation of certain rules that are profitable to violate.
- Parochial corruption which is manifested in nepotism or favoritism of a personal network.
- And grand corruption which is practiced by high level public officials and politicians.

The list of the different facets of corruption is long. However, the type of corruption in citizen-to-government contact is administrative corruption that includes petty corruption, whereby a particular service is either denied or delayed unless bribe is paid. People pay bribes to get their work done. Meaning, they buy time by bribing civil servants.

In a 2000 benchmark poll on corruption in Lebanon, 98.6% of those polled agree there is corruption in Lebanon.⁴² Such corruption results from continuous contact between citizens who demand a service from the government and civil servants who provide such services and, in return, ask for bribes. But it is noteworthy to say that the problem is twofold in the sense that citizens in general are involved in corruption as

⁴² Information International, *Experts Meeting: National Action for Fighting Corruption in Lebanon*, January 22 2001.

much as the public sector employee is because “people who make requests do not have time and want to speed a certain transaction.”⁴³

When President Emile Lahoud came to power, he set up The Presidential Complaints Office that received around 850 complaints a day when the office first started its operation. “Seventy-five percent of complaints were against public sector institutions.”⁴⁴ Furthermore, 25 to 30% of complaints related to corruption and of “too much bribery of government employees resulting from direct contacts with citizens.”⁴⁵

Whether it is petty or grand, corruption in Lebanon has become the norm rather than the exception. It is not a secret that the country is plagued by corruption. “The uniqueness of the talk about corruption in Lebanon is that you do not have to prove it. Nobody makes the least effort to deny it or to prove that is not widespread,”⁴⁶ says former legislator Nassib Lahoud.

Administrative corruption has become a prerequisite for having things done. It subjected citizens to extortion when they approach public sector departments with a certain request for a transaction or any other information. Hundreds if not thousands of examples clearly indicate that administrative corruption has not been addressed⁴⁷ and that some change could be on the way if the government makes the right decisions. Meaning, the government has vowed to limit interaction between the citizen and the public sector employee knowing that such a contact results in administrative corruption and mainly bribery. So, when it vows to introduce e-government to limit such a contact,

⁴³ Jaber, interview by author.

⁴⁴ Safa, *The Official Campaign Against Corruption in Lebanon*.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Nassib Lahoud, “The System of Political Corruption: the Conditions of its Evolvement and the Conditions of its Dismantlement,” *An Nahar*, 7 July 2004.

⁴⁷ Most newspaper articles in the bibliography section state cases of corruption in the country.

then it means it is trying to tackle administrative corruption through e-government or technological initiatives.

Factors that Encourage Corruption

Corruption has many causes but the “two major factors that contribute to the growth of corruption are the low probability of discovery and perceived immunity against prosecution.”⁴⁸

Because of secrecy and limited access to information by citizens in Lebanon, many corrupt practices go undiscovered. Civil servants are almost sure that their shortcomings will not be exposed since no laws force them to reveal information related to their actions and nothing deters them from going ahead with their wrongdoings. Furthermore, a lack of transparency in the government’s functions helps perpetrators in covering their tracks, making it very difficult or almost impossible to unearth their corrupt practices. In here lies the importance of greater public access to information because monopoly of information within the administration leads to the abuse of power.

To try to find out some of the problems the Lebanese face while processing their transactions, Information International conducted a survey in 2002 to see how far the government has gone in easing the plight of its citizens when it came to processing official papers. Among the most sophisticated transactions was the obtainment of a construction permit which is a license required whenever a construction venture is to be carried out. It requires around 7 institutions and sometimes leads to additional fees to the municipality following the approval of the permit. The majority of those polled

⁴⁸ Bhatnagar, *E-government: from Vision to Implementation*, p. 39.

assured that knowing about their rights and the procedural steps for government transactions were beneficial to them since such information would open the public's eyes into misconduct by those in power.⁴⁹

But according to a researcher in a Lebanese ministry, there is a lack of transparency and a deficiency in official statistics which are either outdated or falsified. Also, obtainment of accurate information from ministries is problematic. The deficiency "serves the political ambitions of some people around because instead of having to make technical decisions based on reliable information, the decisions made are mostly political and serve personal goals."⁵⁰

Information International's 2002 poll reveals that a majority of "86.3% wants to know about various steps of transactions because having information about such transactions eases people's attempts to carry them out and ultimately limit bribery."⁵¹

The Lebanese Transparency Association (LTA) has pinpointed several factors that have encouraged rampant corruption in the process of obtaining a construction permit. Among those are first and foremost "citizens' ignorance of their rights and the procedural steps to obtain the permit."⁵² Other causes include the tendency for public servants to accept bribe as an acceptable type of additional benefit, a total absence of monitoring of the day-to-day conduct of these civil servants of their jobs and a flaw in the process of complaint mechanisms. It is exactly for this reason that the LTA described in a manual the steps needed to acquire a construction permit in Lebanon.

⁴⁹ Information International, *The Lebanese and Administrative Transactions According to Information International*, 2002, <http://www.informationinternational.com> (accessed 1 July, 2005).

⁵⁰ Jessy Chahine, "No Excuse for the Lack of Reliable Statistics," *The Daily Star*, 8 September 2005.

⁵¹ Information International, op.cit.

⁵² Transparency International, Corruption Fighters' Toolkit, *Construction Permit Manual*, p.2.

The manual provides people with the necessary tools to resist corrupt practices because it empowers them and informs them of their rights.

Other than lack of citizens' awareness of their rights, low wages are seen as a major problem. The last report of former chief of the Civil Service Board, Minister Hassan Shalak, included a statement that said wages of public sector employees turn the employee either to a poor or a thief. This explains statistics showing more than 80% of transactions in the government are not properly carried out without illegal payment and without bribing more than one employee to speed up the transaction process.⁵³

It is even believed that levy on administrative corruption has increased in some departments in the last few years after several employees were pursued by the media for political more than reform purposes. This in its turn upped the charge of corrupt practices whereby the cost of a transaction has almost doubled given the increased risks in wrongdoing of practitioners and their protectors.⁵⁴

It is hard to estimate the total cost of corruption in Lebanon due to a lack of statistics that results from secrecy and almost no discovery, "but some economists and industrialists believe the country is losing almost \$2 billion annually from waste in public departments."⁵⁵

Consequences of Administrative Corruption and Lack of Access to Information

Widespread administrative corruption has severe consequences but when it comes to citizens and public servants, it has the following outcomes:

⁵³ Hajj, "The Slogan of Corruption: the Standing Phrase During Election Campaigns."

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Osama Habib, "Lebanon's Private Sector Puts Forward Plan to Stamp Out Corruption," *The Daily Star*, 22 June 2005.

Payment of bribes increases tolerance for corruption in society which begins to value the wrong attributes. Some even believe that “a corrupt country produces a corrupt citizen and the opposite is true.”⁵⁶ Others believe that a little bit of corruption and payment of bribes is harmless and even necessary to have an administrative transaction quickly carried out.

“Corruption also creates disincentive for honest and efficient employees and citizens.”⁵⁷ How would a civil servant tolerate to see a broker being paid for getting things done and not feel marginalized if there is a ‘No Tolerance’ policy for example? If the public sector employee gets paid a low salary for the rest of his life, he will be deterred from being efficient and straightforward, in particular when he sees brokers getting what he could have gotten if he were asked from the citizen for a particular service.

Administrative corruption leads employees who are living on bribery to resist the implementation of technology in the public sector because they feel threatened by the introduction of computers. Fear is a significant force that hinders the move towards public sector reform unless the government finds ways to counter resistance. Those who resist can find many ways to stop a process of modernization. For example, “they can simply claim that they do not have time to learn new methods, saying they are preoccupied by work. They also resist staying overtime for training.”⁵⁸

As for the consequences of lack of access to information and citizens’ deprivation of such information, service delivery system becomes less transparent and decisions and actions stop from being traceable. In a Code of Conduct for Public

⁵⁶ Jana Nasrallah, “Corruption from Bani Othman to the Taef,” *An Nahar*, 5 October 2005.

⁵⁷ Bhatnagar, *E-government: from Vision to Implementation*, p. 39.

⁵⁸ Nasser Israoui, interview by author, 5 October 2005, Beirut, Lebanon.

Servants which sets guidelines for ethical practices, the employee is urged to provide the citizen with information on the functions of his administration without misleading behavior. He is also urged to familiarize those who request such information “with the procedures for submission of complaints.”⁵⁹ But a clear absence of transparency and lack of accountability encourage civil servants and service providers to delay or deny services to citizens without any reasons though Article 14, Clause 4 of the Public Servant Statute calls on the employee to “accomplish the citizens’ formalities with speed, precision and integrity within his terms of reference.”⁶⁰

To view a sample on lack of speed and lack of advancement, one looks at the Ministry of Social Affairs which is being newly computerized. Minister Naila Mouawad acknowledges most transactions are handled manually and sometimes the ministry requires around 3 or 4 days to find an application if its owner does not have its serial number to trace it. Furthermore, “the ministry has no memory and piles of papers prevent us from knowing what went on in the past or what is exactly going on today,”⁶¹ Mouawad says. Since this is the case with the Ministry of Social Affairs and many other ministries or public sector departments then there is a clear indication that they suffer from corruption and a lack in transparency. But a change in the factors that encourage corruption, i.e. the discovery of a corrupt practice leads to a more transparent service delivery and less tolerance for bribes because corrupt practices would be revealed through such a discovery. In here lies the importance of change.

⁵⁹ OMSAR, *A Code of Conduct for Public Servants*, p. 5.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ *An Nahar*, “Donation from the Korean Embassy to Computerize the Ministry of Social Affairs,” 25 October 2005.

Change and E-government

An opinion poll carried out by Statistics Lebanon Ltd in February 2006 to analyze the government's priorities, shows that 64,50% of respondents believe fighting corruption and punishing the corrupt should be the top priority of the government despite fears the latter is beginning to lose interest in its reform promises for more pressing political issues. But still, 26,50% believes administrative reform is still on Premier Saniora's agenda while 31,75% says that is no longer the case.⁶²

Still, it is important to note that "change cannot be introduced overnight. A cancerous patient can be cured if the disease is detected at its early stages but if his condition deteriorates, this requires rooting out his ailment which is definitely an unwanted stride"⁶³ in Lebanon politics. Meaning, it is more effective to adopt measures that would root out corruption rather than trying to patch things over after the damage is done. But a major hindrance in this issue is opposition by those who survive from corrupt practices or those who fear they will be exposed for their past practices along with a difficulty to implement disciplinary measures. What puts more oil on fire is the "uncontrollability" of politics. The administration is controllable, says the former official who spoke on condition of anonymity. But "politics breached principles and rules," he added. "Corruption is linked to the elite and the political system."⁶⁴

Naila Mouawad draws links between administrative and political corruption. She describes corruption as one of the problems that Lebanon faces "but this problem is not an administrative problem in the full sense of the word. It is a political problem that

⁶² *An Nahar*, "Survey on the Government's Priorities and International Support to Lebanon," 2 February 2006.

⁶³ Nasrallah, "Corruption from Bani Othman to the Taef."

⁶⁴ Khalil Gebara, interview by author.

has its tools and networks in the administration and of course has consequences on the administration.”⁶⁵

First of all, fighting corruption is a reform process which requires reformers. But the decision to reform is in the hands of the authorities which are controlled by the ruling class that is backed by a political class and both classes are not free from corruption, according to former Prime Minister Salim Hoss. Then, any reform attempt would be on their account or against their interests. Subsequently, if the decision to reform is in the hand of the ruling class which emanates from the political class, would the ruling class take the decision to reform and fight corruption even if it threatens its very existence? “Calling for reform or to put it in other words, fighting corruption becomes analogous to urging the political class to commit suicide, which makes the decision to reform unlikely or almost impossible.”⁶⁶

But going back to the government’s pledges, in particular that of Minister Oghassabian, one assumes that the Lebanon of the post-Syrian withdrawal is willing to fight corruption at least in areas that require the introduction of technologies. The minister on various accounts emphasized the need for the integration of technological methods into the administration.⁶⁷

Generally speaking, e-government can be used to fight corruption in 2 ways:

First, it can become one of the key components of a broader anti-corruption strategy such as the internet portal of the Seoul municipality. It is called Online Procedures Enhancement for Civil Applications (OPEN) because it opens up

⁶⁵ *An Nahar*, “Donation from the Korean Embassy to Computerize the Ministry of Social Affairs.”

⁶⁶ NNA, “Former Prime Minister Hoss Participated at the Arab Conference on the Agreement to Fight Corruption,” <http://www.nna-lb.gov.lb> (accessed 17 June, 2005).

⁶⁷ Several newspaper articles and National News Agency articles quote Oghassabian as stressing the need for technological means to enhance the administration’s efficiency and effectiveness.

administrative procedures to the public. The portal is the result of a decision by the mayor of the city to declare a war on corruption and use several ways to combat it, including electronic means.⁶⁸

“Second, service delivery improvement initiatives can be implemented in corrupt departments, specifically targeting transparency and reduced corruption as objectives.”⁶⁹ Meaning, there would still be an objective to fight corruption but not as part of large-scale strategy that includes several means to combat it. A good example would be that of the computerization of land records in Karnataka, India.

Although such e-government projects could face opposition by those who survive from corrupt practices if no appropriate measures are taken by the government to counter them (as will be seen in the coming chapters), the projects can still help in having an impact on corruption and specifically on reduction of bribes in the following ways:

First, OPEN “increases chances of exposure by maintaining detailed data on transactions, making it possible to track and link the corrupt with their wrongful acts.”⁷⁰

Second, the computerization of land records takes away discretion and reduces opportunity for arbitrary action available to civil servants when they deal with every applicant on a case by case basis. Furthermore, as the likelihood of exposure of wrongdoing gets improved, the fear of consequent humiliation can be a deterrent to corrupt practices and behaviors.

⁶⁸ Bhatnagar, *E-government: from Vision to Implementation*, pp. 184-188.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁷⁰ Bhatnagar, “Administrative Corruption: How Does E-government Help?” Indian Institute of Management, <http://www.iimahd.ernet.in> (accessed 12 April, 2005).

The above examples do not expand upon the various aspects of the two projects because they will be discussed more thoroughly in the following chapter. They were mentioned only to show the potential of e-government in tackling corruption or mainly bribe-taking which as shown in this chapter is one of the main tools of administrative corruption and is widespread in the public sector. But as seen, the government's alleged pledges to introduce reform faces stumbling blocks such as political decision-making. "It is a vicious circle that we do not have a solution for"⁷¹ because administrative corruption requires a radical reform of the administrative as well as political system. It remains to be seen if the 'how' or the methods applied in several developing countries to solve such a problem could be successful in Lebanon or not.

⁷¹ Raymond Khoury, interview by author, 16 June 2005, Beirut, Lebanon.

Chapter III

E-government: Impact and Benefits

There is no real reform unless we realize the dream of an electronic government.

Jean Oghassabian

In the mid-1990s, Layla Rhayem, head of the information section at the Agriculture Ministry was in charge of a comprehensive Biodiversity Survey - the first ever conducted in Lebanon. She had to make it available to the public at a time when Lebanon was still recovering from the 1975-1990 civil war that had shattered the ICT infrastructure. At first she thought about putting the survey in the ministry's library but ended up keeping it in her office's drawer since the library was gutted by civil war fire and the documentation center had no staff and very poor funding.⁷²

In 1997 things started to become better for Mrs Rhayem. She was overjoyed when Georges Akl, National Coordinator of the Sustainable Development Networking Program (SDNP) in Lebanon, suggested setting up a ministry web site. Though most employees and officials were hesitant at first and even some of them openly opposed the idea, they ended up approving the development of the site after several lobbying efforts by Mrs Rhayem. The Biodiversity Survey was finally posted on the web. But Mr. Akl faced difficulty to convince the Lebanese of the value of information sharing because as he said they think keeping information for themselves means power. "Instead, the opposite is true. If you keep information only for yourself, its power is of

⁷² Sustainable Development Networking Programme. "SDNP Lebanon: Promoting Transparency," <http://www.sdn.org/stories/lebanon.html> (accessed 21 July, 2005).

no use to you. But if you share it with everybody, then everybody knows who you are and what you're doing. That is where the power lies."⁷³

Dr. Lamia Mansour, Sustainable Development Adviser at UNDP in Beirut at that time, even said Akl faced difficulties to persuade officials in ministries to relinquish the information they held, though they were finally convinced and Akl extracted information from them by showing them what some developed countries had done in similar instances. "The availability of information is a big constraint in this country. We are still at the stage where, because information is power, people want to keep it under lock and key, whatever information it is,"⁷⁴ Mansour said.

By simply showing the first few pages of government websites, Akl encouraged several organizations to develop their own sites throughout the 2-year project lifespan during which SDNP helped the development of 50 websites, including 9 sites belonging to ministries. "One thing is for sure: this project has established a nice infrastructure which is going to serve as a great lesson for us. It has proved an effective way to change attitudes helping us to move forward into the 21st century,"⁷⁵ Dr. Mansour said.

Why this case study? Because as mentioned before, the disclosure of information guarantees the people's right to know. Also, accountability and trust in the public sector and government institutions rely on easy and free access to information. Information sharing and the change in mentality that goes hand-in-hand with it, is a difficult process. But as SDNP's experience shows a gradual change in the tradition of keeping information for oneself has had a profound and far-reaching result. There has been an acceptance of a new custom, an idea of publishing information on the web. But

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

such a change in mentality is a gradual process. There should be an incentive for information sharing so that ICT projects flourish and if major stakeholders feel ignored or threatened by e-government reforms, they may “find many ways to boycott and manipulate the adoption of ICTs in governance systems and thereby severely undermine, or even fully compromise the intended outcomes.”⁷⁶

This case study reveals three major problems that the Lebanese administration faces when it comes to the application of e-government projects. First, civil servants and politicians feel technological changes are threatening and often oppose their applications. One major reason for that is they do not get anything in return (like higher wages for example given that low salaries are one of the reasons that give birth to corrupt practices). Second, funding comes from international organizations such as the World Bank and the UNDP. Most e-government projects are implemented by them. They allocate a budget to a certain e-government project and ask the involved institution to carry it out with their cooperation. In other words, the project is usually not generated internally, is not championed by a Lebanese and sometimes not demand-driven. Third and most important, access to the type of information mentioned in the case study is not sufficient to fight corruption because as it will be seen later, by simply posting information online or providing electronic access to information, a website would be ineffective. E-government requires much more efforts and set objectives to reduce corruption.

⁷⁶ United Nations Development Programme, Evaluation Office, *Essentials: E-governance*, No. 15, April 2004.

Expanded Definition of E-government and Scope

Before further analyzing the importance and effectiveness of e-government projects in the reduction of corruption and what characteristics they should include, let us first expand upon the different meanings of the term to see what fits the study.

Discussion of e-government covers several perspectives: A technical perspective, a managerial perspective, and a public administration perspective that focuses on outcomes, meaning impact on efficiency, transparency and corruption.

Major English dictionaries do not list the word and there is no commonly accepted definition of e-government given the fact that the term is relatively new, but a wider definition than the one presented in the introductory chapter is the following: E-government is “about a process of reform in the way governments work, share information and deliver services to external and internal clients for the benefit of both government and the citizens, and the businesses that they serve.”⁷⁷

The term was probably used in the mid-1990s after the success of electronic commerce to represent a public sector equivalent of e-commerce. It “aims to make the interaction between government and citizens (G2C), government and business enterprises (G2B), and inter-agency relationships (G2G) more friendly, convenient, transparent, and inexpensive.”⁷⁸

The terms e-government and e-governance are often used interchangeably. But “E-governance is the use of ICT by the government, civil society and political

⁷⁷ Bhatnagar, “Public Service Delivery: Does E-government Help?” Indian Institute of Management. <http://www.iimahd.ernet.in/~subhash/pdfs/ABCDE2003.pdf> (accessed 12 April, 2005).

⁷⁸ World Bank, “A Definition of E-government.”

institutions to engage citizens through dialogue and feedback to promote their greater participation in the process of governance of these institutions.”⁷⁹

Hence e-government is seen “as a subset of e-governance and its focus is largely on improving administrative efficiency and reducing administrative corruption.”⁸⁰

E-government applications or projects can be divided into four broad categories: delivering services to citizens, delivering services to businesses, increasing the government’s efficiency and empowering citizens through access to information. This research mostly focuses on empowerment and improving service delivery because the latter also involves dissemination of information. It attempts to see whether or not such categories have been openly stated by the government as means to reduce administrative corruption that is prevalent in Lebanon.

E-government: Delivering Services to Citizens and Fighting Corruption

If the goal of a project is improving service delivery, e-government helps in reducing the time needed to complete a transaction and improves the government’s ability to deliver services to larger segments of the population. This in return, takes away discretion or delay through automation. In other words, a quick processing time reduces the total time to transact and limits waiting periods which means citizens make fewer visits to government departments and ultimately interact less with officials, limiting the opportunity to ask for bribes. Also, an e-government application can expose manipulation in exchange of bribes if citizens are allowed to keep a traceable electronic record of transactions because they would be able to challenge arbitrary

⁷⁹ Bhatnagar, *E-government: From Vision to Implementation*, p. 21.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

action. The government then would reduce the opportunity for corrupt practices and increase accountability of civil servants.

Several case studies of e-government applications from developing countries report some impact on reducing corruption. In Karnataka, India, for example, the government improved delivery of services taking reduction of corruption as an objective. It “computerized 20 million records of land ownership of 6.7 million farmers in the state. Previously, farmers had to seek out the village accountant to get a copy of the Record of Rights, Tenancy and Crops (RTC).”⁸¹ The farmers had to wait 3 to 30 days and pay a bribe ranging from 100 Rupees (\$2,25) to Rs 2,000 (\$45) to get the document that is essential for many tasks such as obtaining bank loans. Sometimes bribes went up to Rs 10,000 (\$225), depending on the farmers’ demands. The government became aware of the need to reform the system after heavy corruption charges because 9,000 village accountants used to keep the land records in the manual system that was based on a form of monopoly of interaction by the accountants with the citizens.

Today, a farmer can obtain a printed copy of the RTC for a fee of Rs 15 (\$0.34) through a computerized land record kiosk in one of the 177 offices in Karnataka in just a few minutes. He can see the transaction being performed on a computer, can access the database of a mutation request to alter land records upon sale of a land parcel and is empowered to follow up the status of a mutation application on a touch screen. The Public Affairs Center in Bangalore conducted an evaluation in July 2002 that showed the new system is a vast improvement over the manual system that it has replaced with significant impact on efficiency in delivery and corruption. A majority of people polled

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 97.

said procedures were more complex in the manual system since they had to meet several officials for their task. In the new system, most users said they obtained their RTC without meeting any official except the counter staff. Most important, “two thirds of the users of the manual system paid a bribe and 66 percent of them reported having to do so very often. In contrast, only 3 percent of the users of the new system reported paying bribes.”⁸²

The implementation of land records computerization succeeded for two major reasons. First of all there was strong political will for computerization. The state chief minister and revenue minister were highly involved in making the new system work and devoted most of their time to the project. Second, the system faced minimal resistance from staff because they received extensive training through state-level information seminars to allay fears that their job descriptions would not be dramatically altered. An important factor to appease fearful civil servants was that “reducing corruption was not a key message at these gatherings.”⁸³

As for Lebanon, in the aftermath of the civil war and before any restructuring of the ICT infrastructure, the government relied on papers and pens to carry out its activities. Wissam S. Yafi, founder of TidWiT, a Washington-based consulting firm that focuses on ICT issues in developing countries, even goes as saying that a legislator engaged in preparing the budget during that period told him “budget documents used to arrive to the Finance Ministry bound with rope typically used for fruit boxes.”⁸⁴

⁸² Ibid., p. 106.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 102.

⁸⁴ Wissam S. Yafi, “Technocratizing Lebanon? Why not Start with the Tech Sector,” *The Daily Star*, 23 September 2004.

This is only one example describing the way the government conducted its operations in the post-war period. However, since then, Lebanon has advanced in the ICT sector. It has launched several ICT projects that were mostly funded by international and regional agencies through the forms of loans or grants in order to promote principles of good governance as a precondition for development. With time, planning of e-government initiatives became more organized when the UNDP helped OMSAR to set up the Technical Cooperation Unit (TCU) whose primary mission is to promote such projects.

One reform project funded by the World Bank and UNDP was launched in 1993 to modernize and improve the finance ministry's service delivery apparatus. A major component of the project was the Cadastre Operations Modernization and Automation (COMAP) that targeted the Department of Land Registration & Cadastre (DLRC) that is the custodian of real property records in Lebanon. It is a large scale project that aimed at automating the steps involved in real estate property registration and transactions. The project automated 2.5 million title registers (land records) and 600,000 parcel maps.⁸⁵

The project intended to improve service delivery through automation and to offer a cheap, quick and customer-friendly service of digitized land registration. You can now get an affidavit for only 12,000 LL. Although before automation the amount was the same, sometimes it used to cost \$100 because of corruption. A citizen can now get an affidavit from one of 9 registries in Lebanon. The affidavit is also issued on demand while in the past it used to take 3 days and some transactions used to take as much as 6 months because old recording methods and a devastating civil war severely

⁸⁵ Jaber, interview by author.

affected the DLRC's work. Though the transaction in the computerized system is closed and no one can enter it to manipulate data in case a civil servant is bribed, the impact on corruption is yet to happen, says UNDP's Land Registry Component Coordinator Raghda Jaber.⁸⁶

With all the advantages of the new system, one of the major hindrances is that the main objective of the project is not reduction of corruption along with service delivery as was the case of the computerization of land records in India. With the new project, digital titles and maps can be easily queried and updated, minimizing the complexity and non-transparency of the manual process. But UNDP sees automation as crucial only for the sake of providing more efficient services.

Many examples from developing countries show that if e-government is not seen as one of the many tools available to fight corruption, then the project is doomed to fail in that particular area.⁸⁷ It could be successful in providing efficiency, greater transparency and shorter waiting periods and cost, but experience with successful e-government initiatives shows that in order to reduce corruption project implementation should involve much effort such as commitment of a reform-minded politician to conduct necessary institutional reforms.

Automation in this case does not fully solve the problems of corruption because people and civil servants are heavily dependent on bribes and that change and remedying the disease that is plaguing the country cannot be brought overnight. Though the process has been automated, civil servants who have been trained to work on the

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ In several of his articles and his book, Subhash Bhatnagar, an expert in e-government applications in developing countries, says experience showed that features leading to greater transparency and accountability need to be integrated into the objectives of a project so that the latter creates significant impact on corruption.

new system could always turn away citizens and say that the computer is down and receive bribes. Since the processes of lodging complaints are limited in a country like Lebanon, the citizen will have to bow to the demand of the person who ironically is there to help. That civil servant is the same one who has a tendency to resist the implementation of e-government projects since he or she sees the status quo as gainful.

Another reason why automation is not seen as a cure for the complex and well-entrenched problem of corruption (as concluded in the previous chapter) is that it is not enough to reform the administration. Political decision-making is crucial in introducing anti-corruption measures. Without the strong backing of politicians, the administration could not be freed from the ailment that is gripping it. "If they spend 100 years talking about administrative reform, there will be no reform without computerization combined with political will," says the former official who spoke on condition of anonymity in an interview with the author.

E-government is a tool that remedies corruption problems with time and would take 5 to 7 years to see a noticeable improvement in petty corruption only, according to Jaber. "If your goal is fighting corruption, e-government is not the answer, because the more ways you create to limit corruption, the more people will counter them."⁸⁸ Besides, automation of land registry would probably be helpful in limiting petty corruption but would not have impact on grand corruption that is seen as the bigger hindrance to development in the country.

E-government: Access to Information and Fighting Corruption

If the goal of a project is empowering citizens through access to information, it is not enough to provide the type of access mentioned at the start of the chapter because

⁸⁸ Op.cit.

governments are the largest holders of information and the digital world is providing them with more opportunity to disseminate additional information. It is true that public information can be distributed to citizens over the net rather than staying in government file cabinets. But it can do more than that. It can shift power to citizens because with time they would stop relying on public sector employees to dictate what information they need and how and when to use it.

“Before automation the citizen was a postman.”⁸⁹ However, the government is being transformed to become a servant and playing the role of providing precise and easy access to information, a vital task in the digital world. But posting limited information on the internet is not sufficient if the government wants to fully serve the people. For example, after the mayor of Seoul declared an all-out war on corruption in 1998, he eliminated, eased and improved a lot of municipal regulations because they were seen as creating corruption opportunities. The municipal government also set up the internet portal called OPEN that “explains the various elements of the anti-corruption drive, displays an anti-corruption index and survey results, educates citizens on rules and procedures, and enables a real-time monitoring of the progress of an application for a permit or license.”⁹⁰

OPEN was seen successful in eliminating corrupt practices for the two same reasons that were mentioned for Karnataka’s land computerization system. First of all there was commitment from the top. The mayor made the e-government project as part of his anti-corruption strategy, and second, civil servants showed limited level of resistance. A total of 5,000 employees in 485 city departments dealing with various

⁸⁹ Salim Balaa, interview by author, 25 October 2005. Beirut, Lebanon.

⁹⁰ Bhatnagar, *E-government: From Vision to Implementation*, p. 186.

applications were trained in computer rooms to operate the system, and add and change data.⁹¹

In Lebanon, a positive step taken by the government in January 2002 and for the first time in the Arab world was the digitization of government application forms and relevant information into one central portal called INFORMS – from Information and Forms (<http://www.informs.gov.lb>). The portal developed by OMSAR contains more than 4500 forms that can be accessed by citizens and downloaded. “In addition, a hotline call center facility accessible by dialing 1700 has been setup to address phone inquiries by citizens that do not have Internet access and when required the needed forms and relevant information can be faxed back to the inquiring party.”⁹²

In this particular website, e-government has been a catalyst for change because there was commitment from key stakeholders who as said earlier tend to manipulate the adoption of ICTs in government systems if they feel threatened by them. In order to launch INFORMS, 12 OMSAR staff members spent 6 difficult months to collect thousands of forms and make them available online. Such a process took time because employees in various government departments were hesitant to provide them with all necessary information and documents. However, the website received thousands of hits already “on its first day of operation. Since then it has grown to include forms from regional districts and municipalities.”⁹³

It now provides detailed information on fees and departmental contacts. Despite some level of leadership by OMSAR to bring into life such a portal and overcoming

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² WSIS, *Lebanon Information Society Paper*, November 2003, p. 6.

⁹³ UNDP, *Essentials: E-governance*.

resistance, the information available is not enough to fight corruption. The government must like Seoul municipality enable citizens to track applications and go beyond providing simple information and transfer documents to be downloaded from the web. This practice is dubbed “putting lipstick on a bulldog.”⁹⁴

While hitherto attempts to post downloadable forms on government sites are laudable, and help citizens not to waste time while seeking services from the government if they consult the site, such attempts ignore the users’ principal rationale behind using the internet: real information. INFORMS made a lot of progress and provides more details on transactions needed to facilitate people’s lives, but the Lebanese government has not made attempts to allow for free access to the status of applications which lessen the applicants’ tendencies to offer bribes so that their transactions are completed. Though there is no complete blackout on information, “there has not yet been a significant effort to fully embrace technology as a means to promote the values of transparency and bring to light the widest possible range of information resources.”⁹⁵

Specialists in the field say e-government applications must focus on sequential objectives to reduce corruption: “Increasing access to information, presenting the info in a manner that leads to transparency of rules and their application in specific decisions, and increasing accountability by building the ability to trace decisions/actions to individual civil servants.”⁹⁶ These represent the successive stages

⁹⁴ Eggers, p. 4.

⁹⁵ Oliver and Sanders, p. 91.

⁹⁶ Bhatnagar, *E-Government: From Vision to Implementation*, p. 41.

in the hierarchy of objectives on which e-government applications must focus to reduce corruption.

Taking the first objective within the above hierarchy, we clearly see a limited posting of some downloadable information which is troubling amid the advancement of other countries in the provision of e-government services. According to one of its strategic actions, “the government is working on gradually converting the INFORMS information portal to a true online services portal adding more web intelligence taking as priority those forms that are required most by the citizens.”⁹⁷ But such an effort requires a Freedom of Information Law or Right to Know Law.

Then the government knows that unless it disseminates information more actively to its citizens, they will not be encouraged to use government web sites. OMSAR says it also has a strategic action to “add more services to the portal aiming to improve transparency and accountability of citizens’ services.”⁹⁸

Even if the government has such plans, surveys show that people are not much inclined to use INFORMS or are not aware of their rights. For example, in a 2002 survey conducted by Information International, 52% of those polled answered ‘yes’ when asked if they knew about the services provided by OMSAR through INFORMS. While unfortunately almost half of them answered ‘No.’ Of the 52%, only 19% said it has resorted to the portal’s services and 85% of the 19% expressed satisfaction with the services.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ WSIS, *Lebanon Information Society Paper*, November 2003, p. 6.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Information International, *The Lebanese and Administrative Transactions According to Information International*.

Also, in a 1999 survey about the right to have access to information, 65% of respondents said they did not have any information about government transactions that the citizen is entitled to have access to as part of his rights to have access to information. Twenty seven percent of respondents said they only partly know about such rights while only 8% gave a 'yes' answer. When people were asked about the reasons of their ignorance about documents they are entitled to have access to, 46% replied lack of information, 41% talked about a lack of information centers, while 6% mentioned an absence of information law. Also, 65% believed they should resort to either an official or to bribery to confront a restraint on seeking information.¹⁰⁰

Such statistics do not draw optimism. As mentioned in the previous chapter, a lack of access to information law leads to a service delivery system that is less transparent and people become deprived of a right that is guaranteed in the constitution unlike in developed countries where "citizens have more access to the inner workings of government than ever before."¹⁰¹ OMSAR in several statements has neither mentioned how much information would e-government initiatives include nor what information would be revealed. It has only said guaranteeing access to information "limits corruption since it allows people to know what the government is doing with the public finances."¹⁰²

One practical example of enhancing public access to official information is Lebanon's construction permit manual. Though citizens are using it frequently and some officials have received copies of it, "it is too early to determine the direct impact

¹⁰⁰ Baroud, p. 1

¹⁰¹ Eggers, p. 242.

¹⁰² Op. cit., p. 9.

of the manual on the administration itself”¹⁰³ because it was not officially adopted by the government since it was prepared by a Non-governmental Organization. The Lebanese Transparency International’s manual “provides an overview of the documents, fees, and deadlines required to obtain this permit, as well as the different institutions involved.”¹⁰⁴ The LTA, however, believes an electronic version of the document would increase readership. The least that the government could do is to post the manual on one of its websites. Unfortunately that is not the case.

As seen in this chapter, e-government does not just mean having a presence on the web, and reducing corruption requires more than that. E-government applications must be built on a sequence of objectives in order to achieve corruption reduction ends. When all the objectives mentioned above “are pursued at the same time, corruption can be reduced significantly. Ignoring some of them can defeat the whole purpose.”¹⁰⁵

Unfortunately, as both examples show, neither the land registry and cadastre project nor INFORMS fulfill the first objective of increased access to information which is essential for the success of a project. The absence of such a condition is the result of several problems that have been mentioned in this chapter. Some other barriers will be discussed in the next chapter whose focus is on the obstacles for the achievement of successful e-government projects.

Both examples then disclose the three major problems mentioned at the start of the chapter: First of all, most projects face heavy resistance because old systems are advantageous to public servants, in particular corrupt ones. They see automation as a

¹⁰³ Transparency International, Corruption Fighters’ Toolkit, *Construction Permit Manual*, p. 4.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 1.

¹⁰⁵ Bhatnagar, “Administrative Corruption: How Does e-government help?”

loss of power. Second, these projects give limited access to information because of lack of Freedom of Information Law. Third, they do not have a political champion dedicated to the sole purpose of fighting bribery. This indicates that “the government is not run as an institution and very few people are working for the public good.”¹⁰⁶

The examples also reveal that it is hard for e-government projects at this moment to have an impact on corruption since they are still in their early stages and must first provide access to information through a Right to Know Law so that they start producing better results.

¹⁰⁶ Haddara Ziad, interview by author, 8 June 2005. Beirut, Lebanon.

Chapter IV

Barriers to the Successful Implementation of E-government Projects

Obstacles are those frightful things you see when you take your eyes off your goal

Henry Ford

When the Lebanese Customs Department published statistics on imports and exports on its website, it did not know that such information would reveal much more than the figures posted on the site. A British Non-Governmental Investigative Organization called 'Global Witness' monitored such trade statistics in July 2005 and found out that Lebanon had imported \$90 million worth of industrial rough diamonds in February 2005 and \$66 million in March. "The amount corresponded to the exports of the Republic of Congo to Lebanon worth \$156 million."¹⁰⁷

What aggravated the situation was the fact that the gem exports came from the Democratic Republic of Congo via Congo-Brazzaville. The Kinshasa government has long been known for its richness in diamonds or to put it more clearly its richness in 'conflict diamonds,' meaning diamonds that originate from areas controlled by forces that oppose a legitimate government and are used to fund and perpetuate conflict and corruption. With Lebanon lobbying to become part of the Kimberley Process, a mechanism that aims at fighting conflict diamonds, such access to information through electronic means allowed the NGO to put pressure on the Lebanese government to abide by the book and to investigate with the customs the process by which such

¹⁰⁷ *L'Orient Le Jour*, "With the Complicity of Lebanon and Congo-Brazzaville, US156 Million Exported in Fraud," 5 August 2005.

diamonds were imported. The government immediately promised an investigation for fears that not tackling the issue would undermine its bid to join the Kimberley Process.¹⁰⁸

This example shows among other things the role the internet played in revealing important information. It indirectly forced the government to become more transparent and fulfill its pledges of implementing international standards which in this case include the import of gems from countries that are conflict free or from countries where there are no human rights abuses. Although it was not clear why Global Witness pressured the Lebanese government and if it would do so with another country that is known in importing conflict diamonds, the example was given solely for the purpose of clarifying what role ICT could play when it comes to information sharing. When it comes to the role of the internet, this case study shows many things. It reveals the importance of access to information and the effectiveness of holding governments accountable. Though the customs department published information as a first step towards e-government, the case study also shows that civil society and citizens can monitor to a certain extent the government's performance and its activities if they have the capacity to do so and if the government is willing to relinquish information.

Then, before a government starts to think about e-government and possible corruption reduction ends, there are several problematic issues that it needs to deal with. E-government demands a mature technical infrastructure that must include a high penetration of internet across society and a narrow digital divide, an aware and

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

demanding citizenry, an enabling legal framework, a strong leadership and willingness to introduce change.¹⁰⁹

Technical Infrastructure

The UN *Global E-Government Readiness Report 2004* labels Lebanon as one of the Western Asian countries that “fortified their e-government services to the people but fell behind other countries in the world which are aggressively pursuing e-government and ICT development for capacity building and outreach for all.”¹¹⁰

The small progress done draws some optimism but offers little hope to keep in step with the rest of countries in the world though Lebanon came a long way in ICT. A state-of-the-art fixed-line network was installed after the civil war capable of handling more than 1.4 million lines. A cellular network also grew beyond projections. Also, the government led by OMSAR and with international technical assistance introduced technology to the private sector although many government offices still belong to the ‘Ottoman era’ as Minister Naila Mouawad described.

In the early 1990s, OMSAR launched a number of ICT projects after securing loans and grants “with the objective of realizing a modern administration that can operate more efficiently and answer to the service requirements of the citizen in a timely and effective manner.”¹¹¹ It started by deploying a modern network infrastructure in government offices and agencies. OMSAR acknowledges that the completion of the local infrastructure requires much work and that it needs to be interconnected through a government-wide network but says that “the current status of

¹⁰⁹ Bhatnagar, “The Future of E-government,” <http://www.asiatip.com> (accessed 12, April 2005).

¹¹⁰ United Nations, *UN Global E-Government Readiness Report: Towards Access for Opportunity*, p. 39.

¹¹¹ OMSAR, *E-government Strategy for Lebanon*, December 2003, p. 13.

the local infrastructure in most of the government offices is sufficient to support any e-government implementation.”¹¹²

However, what concerns people is the actual benefit from such e-government implementation. Meaning, even if the government claims that such projects could be introduced, they would be meaningless if they produce no results. The minimum task that the government could do is for example to update information on its websites. Most ministries and agencies have a presence on the web with the same limited information that we have mentioned before and some have digital forms that can be downloaded but unfortunately submission of an application can be done only manually. Some technology and communications experts portray government websites as ‘dead sites’ for 2 major reasons. First of all many do not get any updates when changes occur within the government. For example, the Ministry of Interior’s website by 30 November, 2004 had kept Elias Murr as a ‘virtual’ minister even after Suleiman Franjeh became the new minister in the aftermath of the extension of the term of President Emile Lahoud in September 2004.¹¹³

The second reason is that some other sites are not updated since their inception or their latest update is outdated. Some say “government websites that reach to 70 sites do not offer any services to readers, and settle for a description of the governmental institution’s structure and elaborate on the description of the minister’s curriculum vitae.”¹¹⁴

Then what draws criticism in here and presents no optimism in reaching corruption reduction ends is the fact that the simplest information is not being updated

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ *As Safr*, “Elias Murr is Still Interior Minister?!” 30 November 2004.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

on official websites which means that the government does not have capabilities yet to control processes if transactions are carried online in the future. Having a presence on the web is the first stage in e-government while the second stage allows for interactivity online. The third, which is more complicated and Lebanon has not reached it so far, involves electronic delivery of documents. Going back to the first stage, such a phase includes the publication of information for people to seek knowledge about the government itself and the procedures governing service delivery similar to the example provided above about the interior ministry. If the simplest information is not updated on a website then people will get the wrong message and once they do that and later find out that such information was wrong they would stop relying on the site.

The interior ministry's example and several others reveal negligence in updating websites. For example, the ministry of telecommunications planned in September 2005 to introduce the dialing code 71 for mobile phones. It posted the information on its website and informed citizens through media campaigns for weeks. But when for some reason it stopped arrangements to change the existing code 03 to 71, which was planned for commencement at midnight of September 18-19, the ministry updated the information on its sites two days after the release of the statement that called for halting the mobile code change.

Such dereliction backs criticism by specialists in the field about the administration and its ability to achieve efficiency through electronic means. "When almost 80% of forms are downloadable then you can say that we have reached the step two of e-government,"¹¹⁵ says Nasser Israoui. Meaning, if we are still at the first stage, then not much could be expected in the ability of e-government to fight corruption. "I don't

¹¹⁵ Israoui, interview by author.

want to open a site if I do not have services. There is no need for a service for only 13% of the population,”¹¹⁶ says Raghda Jaber, because she believes that people still do not know what their rights are and that many laws are needed for the implementation of e-government services that could tackle the problem of corruption.

Internet Penetration Rates:

On the question of internet penetration rates, there are no clear statistics or figures on computer and internet usage in the country. But Raymond Khoury acknowledges the rate is not sufficient for successful implementation of e-government projects, which means any impact on corruption requires in addition to other things a relatively high computer and internet usage. “Some say PC penetration is 8%, others 11%. Internet penetration is said to be between 11% to 15%. For e-government to be effective, we are targeting 25% PC and internet penetration rates by 2010. By 2014-2015, it should be in the 40% range,”¹¹⁷ he says.

The Philippines for example faced many difficulties when it initiated an electronic procurement system (EPS) that is generally described as one of the best methods to fight corruption anywhere in the world. The system focused on the first stage of public notification and providing complete information on procurement operations. The two other and more advanced components are e-purchasing and e-tendering. “Even with high-level political support, the adoption of EPS in the Philippines has been relatively slow and inconsistent since it was initiated in December 2000,”¹¹⁸ because of the problematic issue of accessibility. A study revealed that only 8% of the population was

¹¹⁶ Jaber, interview by author.

¹¹⁷ *ECOMLEB*, “Interview with Dr. Raymond Khoury, Director of OMSAR’s Technical Cooperation Unit,” Issue Number 4, 3rd Quarter 2005, p. 16.

¹¹⁸ Bhatnagar, *E-government: From Vision to Implementation*, p. 155.

using the internet at the time due to high internet costs and an underdeveloped information technology infrastructure.

Even in Lebanon, the first bottleneck in OMSAR's work comes from the price of telecommunications infrastructure. Internet usage is costly because the government views the sector as generating revenues. But it has made some attempts to improve internet costs by introducing internet flat rates that require dialing four digit numbers to make a connection. For example, 0-25 hours used per month cost L.L. 19,000 or 25-55 hours used per month cost L.L. 39,000. Khoury, however, says "even tough we succeeded in bringing the dial-up and other prices down, we still have a long way to go."¹¹⁹

Such data reveals that internet is still considered to be costly because in addition to the phone bill one has to buy an account from an Internet Service Provider to make a connection. Such an account costs around \$20. High costs discourage people to use the medium and impede expansion in the number of users unless the government provides end users with a cheaper service at affordable cost. In April 2006 the council of ministers took a step towards bringing Digital Subscriber Lines (DSL) to the country by lowering the tariff for data-providers to connect to the state-owned international cable. "The cut applies to the cost of dial-up internet as well, although the change will not be effective immediately."¹²⁰ But offering DSL is not instantaneous. The service will be provided to some customers in the Beirut area before being made available nationwide, and the ministry of telecommunications has to first increase the capacity of the

¹¹⁹ Op. cit.

¹²⁰ Meris Lutz, "Lebanon One Step Closer to DSL Service," *The Daily Star*, April 13 2006.

international telecom connection to meet demands. Such a process takes time and equipment.

Cheap internet access like several other factors discussed in the chapter is a prerequisite for the success of any e-government project. This problem goes hand-in-hand with another major barrier, the digital divide, that is directly linked to internet penetration rates.

Digital Divide

Most governments in developed countries have enthusiastically embraced the internet as a way to cheaply, efficiently and effectively deliver services and information to their citizens. “Governments have also recognized that in order to facilitate these deliveries, they need to overcome the gap between those who have the infrastructure to receive the information and services and those who do not: the digital divide.”¹²¹

“Lebanese statistics concerning the digital divide are very limited”¹²² but ICT access is heavily concentrated in the Greater Beirut area and most ICT sales are concentrated in that region as well. In an attempt to narrow such a gap and among other things to allow users to have access to web-enabled government information services, the government has come up with a strategic action of making access more available and affordable in addition to capacity building.¹²³ It has realized that the most critical divide is between those who have the understanding, skills and knowledge to use ICT effectively and those who do not. That is why it joined forces with private sector organizations in implementing several projects through funds from international donors

¹²¹ Oliver and Sanders, p. 152.

¹²² UNDP, *National Human Development Report Globalization: Towards a Lebanese Agenda: 2001-2002*, Beirut, July 2002.

¹²³ WSIS, *Lebanon Information Society Paper*, p. 2.

and “expanding the reach of e-government services to the community.”¹²⁴ For example, the Professional Computer Association (PCA) has launched its PiPOP initiative (PCA Internet Point of Presence Initiative) by establishing scores of internet centers in villages across the country. Another project that relates to capacity building for ICT use is SmartBus. The bus, which tours rural areas, is equipped with machines and technology tools to give ICT training to people in rural communities. “NGO Mercy Corp owns and operates the SmartBus with funds in part from USAID and other associations who are sponsoring the bus in various regions.”¹²⁵

Also, UNDP in cooperation with OMSAR and in an attempt to narrow the urban/rural ICT divide has launched a project that includes setting up government community access centers in rural areas where because of the absence of affordable internet prices and a limited number of PCs, mainly youths were allowed to have access to the internet at a cost of LL500 an hour. Training on ICT and the English language has been also provided. Several centers have already been launched in southern Lebanon, but unfortunately lack of education and lack of awareness are prompting people to look at these centers as profit making. “They are not perceived as a public good,”¹²⁶ says Ziad Haddara. UNDP covers the cost of the centers for a 6-month period until the municipality takes over but unfortunately such centers are turning into internet cafes because local NGOs are not working on running them and people do not have enough awareness to take advantage of such services.

¹²⁴ OMSAR, *E-government Strategy for Lebanon*, p. 13.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

¹²⁶ Haddara, interview by author.

Aware and Demanding Citizenry

Dissemination of information faces the challenge of lack of people's awareness not just about a right called access to information (as seen in the previous chapter) but about ICT as well. This creates the dilemma of posting more information online. If citizen's knowledge in internet use and access to such facility is limited, then the usefulness of information posted online is limited as well. Consequently, "increasing availability of information on the internet does not mean that citizens will automatically use the information to demand greater accountability."¹²⁷

If all segments of the population do not ask the government to post more information, the government will not make information available in large quantities. The existing information literacy divide separates those who have the understanding, skills and knowledge to use the internet and seek information and those who do not.

Canada for example now has one of the highest internet penetration rates in the world with 16.84 million users, or over 52% of the population. An increased access to the internet there has been paralleled by online content and/or service development or e-government because the population has become increasingly aware and because information literacy is not just about being able to know when information is needed and how to use and evaluate it but also to ask for it. Forty eight percent of Canadians use the internet for government information¹²⁸ and such a percentage has encouraged the government to commit more to connectivity and content.

In Lebanon, in a 2002 survey conducted by Information International, 16.5% of those who know about OMSAR's services on its website said that they have not asked

¹²⁷ Bhatnagar, *E-government: From Vision to Implementation*, p. 43.

¹²⁸ Oliver and Sanders, p. 152.

for its services because they do not have computers.¹²⁹ But true information literacy goes beyond having and knowing how to operate a PC and use the internet, “to being able to make well-informed information choices, and understanding how to use the information found.”¹³⁰ Unfortunately, some people even after checking the INFORMS website to find out about the steps of a procedure, pay bribes rather than telling a corrupt employee that for example he has given wrong information concerning a certain procedure.¹³¹

Raymond Khoury says that the government needs “to explain to the general public what e-government is and what it is not.”¹³² Then a critical factor for the successful implementation of an e-government project is making citizens aware of online services or at least in the case of Lebanon of information provided online. Such a step has not been completely lacking in the country since at the end of 2005 OMSAR dispatched short text messages to citizens, informing them that they can get information on government departments and services through INFORMS. The ministry also launched in April 2006 a campaign in cooperation with Libanpost to distribute leaflets to the public to raise awareness about INFORMS services and that of the hotline number 1700 for those who do not have access to the internet. “Such a campaign aims at doubling the number of those who benefit from the portal,”¹³³ Minister Oghassabian says.

¹²⁹ Information International, *The Lebanese and Administrative Transactions According to Information International*.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Israoui, interview by author.

¹³² *ECOMLEB*, “Interview with Dr. Raymond Khoury, Director of OMSAR’s Technical Cooperation Unit,” p. 16.

¹³³ *An Nahar*, “Oghassabian Launches an Awareness Campaign,” 19 April 2006.

Legal Framework

The status of infrastructure, internet penetration rates, digital divide and aware and demanding citizenry face the same challenges as the legal infrastructure which means the legal framework for ICT or legislation in support of digital content and transactions. According to the e-government strategy prepared by OMSAR, “the basic component of an e-government legal and regulatory framework is that of legalizing electronic information and services”¹³⁴ that is necessary to build a trust between the government and the citizen and to validate the use of e-government applications. Unfortunately, this has not happened yet. The e-government strategy has been approved by the ministerial ICT committee but the council of ministers has not approved it yet. Many laws, including the electronic signatures law that is essential for carrying out transactions online, have not been endorsed.

Since the government acknowledges that “any e-government implementation requires a solid legal and regulatory framework to eliminate the risks associated with electronic delivery of information and services,”¹³⁵ it should expand the legal infrastructure to include a set of laws. Such legislations include an e-government law so that the government conducts operations in digital form, a data protection law that protects and keeps private personal information, a freedom of information law that allows wider access to information, e-signatures law and a cyber crime law that protects digital property. So, the problem is twofold when it comes to laws: Draft ICT laws remain stacked in public office drawers and the country lacks a freedom of information law mainly for political reasons or lack of political will. All specialists in the field of

¹³⁴ OMSAR, *E-government Strategy for Lebanon*, p. 17.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

ICT that were interviewed for this research agree that our problems are political and not only technological. From here we see the importance of a strong and organized leadership that should also link the e-government strategy to a wider public sector reform initiative.

Strong Leadership

A strong leadership is an important aspect of any successful e-government strategy and “has been cited as a defining factor for success in all cases”¹³⁶ that have been discussed in Bhatnagar’s book *E-Government: From Vision to Implementation*. The successful computerization of land records in Karnataka and Seoul’s OPEN system illustrate the role of leadership and the importance of training.

Unfortunately until now no specific leader or minister or head of an institution has the exclusive responsibility to carry out e-government projects in Lebanon. In 1997, OMSAR found difficulty to carry out a national ICT strategy designed by consultants hired by the Lebanese government because of its wider responsibility of administrative reform. In 1998, with a new government in place, ICT initiatives were handled by the economy and trade ministry. In 2000, with the government change, the ICT ball was thrown into OMSAR’s court again and the ministry faced several political and economic obstacles (similar to previous years) in implementing ICT, including, e-government projects.¹³⁷

OMSAR is hitherto playing such a role because no other institution or ministry has the mandate of ICT policy formulation and implementation. As seen in the previous chapter, commitment from the top and strong political will for computerization and

¹³⁶ Bhatnagar, *E-government: From Vision to Implementation*, p. 70.

¹³⁷ Yafi, “Technocratizing Lebanon? Why not Start with the Tech Sector.”

training are necessary for an e-government project to succeed. Along with the problem of a lack of political champion to carry out a project, comes the lack of continuity of projects with the change in government. “When a new government takes power it would come and change the projects introduced by its predecessor,”¹³⁸ says Tania Zaroubi.

A study conducted for Harvard University and titled “Institutionalizing National ICT Strategies: The Case of Lebanon,” recommended the creation of an institution in charge of supporting and coordinating all “ICT initiatives within a strategic framework put together by ICT technocrats and with the participation of the Lebanese government.”¹³⁹ The institution, according to the study, would coordinate with different national ICT stakeholders and would assure the continuity in ICT strategies to achieve positive results. Such an institution would ensure the successful implementation of e-government strategies because it would have a clearly defined task, it would be enabled with the instruments to implement them across the government and would control or be able to influence “the budgetary, legal, policy and administrative tools required to implement e-government.”¹⁴⁰

Dr. Raymond Khoury also believes there is a need to set up an agency operated by technocrats to oversee sustainability of projects after their implementation. Though such an institution would be seen by some as a budgetary burden, it is believed it would

¹³⁸ Zaroubi. Interview by author.

¹³⁹ Op.cit.

¹⁴⁰ Oliver and Sanders, p. 63.

generate more revenues if strategies are implemented properly because the citizen would be willing to pay for higher levels of convenience and efficiency.¹⁴¹

Another aspect of good e-government organization is to have committees which mainly focus on the administrative aspects of e-government. In previous years, a group of OMSAR employees in charge of the e-government strategy, used to go to the various ministries to collect some information in order to update the INFORMS website, a clear evidence for the almost complete absence of personnel within each ministry or agency to commit the latter to action in projects for the common good. Then, besides leadership the government faces lack of adequate human resources to implement and manage projects related to e-government. Low wages in the public sector are seen to be hindering the attraction of IT specialists and making them more inclined to work in the private sector given its relatively higher wages.¹⁴²

According to Ziad Haddara, the UNDP is working on a governmental committee to work on the government's e-strategy and take charge in coordinating and implementing it. The committee's actual mandate would be the promotion of technology and securing funds. It would report to the prime minister, consequently creating an indirect recognition of the importance of ICT. Once that entity is formally recognized, Haddara adds, it would be very easy to secure funds for more projects and hopefully for e-government initiatives that could put an end to corruption.¹⁴³

As far as training is concerned, OMSAR had until the end of 2005 trained over 8000 civil servants in ICT usage. But many criticize public sector employees who

¹⁴¹ *ECOMLEB*, "Interview with Dr. Raymond Khoury, Director of OMSAR's Technical Cooperation Unit," p. 17.

¹⁴² Aline Farah, "Administrative Reform and the Fight Against Corruption Face Stumbling Blocks," *An Nahar*, 12 January 2005.

¹⁴³ Haddara, interview by author.

despite their training continue to resist the introduction of ICT into government offices¹⁴⁴ because of a lack of incentives and disciplinary measures. The incentives -- higher wages, overtime and promotion -- that are found in the private sector are almost non-existent in the public sector. "That is why OMSAR is looking for people who are willing to change. It is counting on rare situations whereby some ministers want to show results and good performance and some managers want to be associated with successful accomplishments."¹⁴⁵ It is wagering on the tendency of some ministries to develop to put pressure on those who are not pushing for introduction of modern governance techniques. But this does not mean that there is a general willingness to introduce change.

Willingness to Introduce Change

A strong leadership can deal with changes, respond to disasters and establish visions and plans and implement them during the periods set for their implementations. But how much is the government as a whole willing to carry out e-government projects that would limit corruption or to have an administration with a service-oriented culture? As said by former Prime Minister Salim Hoss reform or fighting corruption works against the interest of the ruling class that itself is engaged in corruption. Let us assume that a legislator or a senior civil servant is known for providing services to people. He would become less necessary, less powerful and less useful if the interaction of those people with the government becomes simpler. This would be a logical excuse for him to oppose the introduction of technology into government departments.

¹⁴⁴ Op.cit.

¹⁴⁵ Israoui, interview by author.

For example, a project that is far from being implemented is a national ID or e-government personal smart card through which a citizen among other things can vote to choose members of parliament. When the idea was proposed by the former administration official who spoke on condition of anonymity, politicians opposed because they felt the smart card would change many of the old-fashioned ways to conduct the government's day-to-day affairs. For instance, "90% of the political system could change through such project" because citizens would be able to choose whomever they wish to choose without being subjected to pressure by candidates. The initiative that was supposed to be carried out by the interior ministry with funding from an international agency was not implemented and the pretext for non-implementation was that "the ministry had other priorities."¹⁴⁶ But it is a fact that politicians like civil servants do not like to introduce a change that could threaten their very existence. If they agree on having electronic ID cards, they could be easily removed from the political scene and/or they become less necessary when interactions with the government become simpler. Meaning, legislators' services would be less needed when functions become computerized or when citizens stop needing their intervention to help them navigate government bureaucracies. This explains why politicians seek to prevent the implementation of "e-government projects that have a confrontational role for corrupt"¹⁴⁷ people.

"What a country chooses to provide is a function of both the willingness and ability to do so."¹⁴⁸ Since as seen in this chapter willingness and ability are relatively

¹⁴⁶ Zaroubi, interview by author.

¹⁴⁷ Balaa, interview by author.

¹⁴⁸ United Nations, *UN Global E-Government Readiness Report: Towards Access for Opportunity*, p. 68.

weak, e-government will risk keeping its constrained role of disseminating electronic information as other countries are moving at a fast rate towards achieving information societies. Willingness to improve implies introducing the e-government strategy into reform initiatives because “you cannot succeed in e-government unless the government takes it seriously...If administrative reform is given priority, the e-government strategy can be adopted.”¹⁴⁹ E-government in Lebanon is likely to be more effective and have a more powerful impact when it is clearly defined as part of the promised reform initiatives because “experience suggests that if e-government strategies are not linked to a larger public sector reform initiative, they will not carry sufficient weight among government’s priorities to justify the fundamental changes necessary in the organization.”¹⁵⁰ This will likely keep e-government at the same level that it is currently at, meaning, there will still be scattered projects in some institutions funded by world bodies but will not have the powerful impact that they have in countries like India and South Korea because corruption reduction through e-government is not just technological. It is also related to leadership and access to information.

Several factors that were thoroughly discussed in this chapter are seen as prerequisites for the implementation of e-government projects which entail a reduction in corruption. They are a well-established technical infrastructure with high internet penetration rates and a narrow digital divide, an aware and demanding citizenry, a wide legal framework (that also includes a Freedom of Information Law), a strong leadership and willingness to introduce to introduce change. These problematic issues are a hindrance to successful e-government projects unless the government puts information

¹⁴⁹ *ECOMLEB*, “Interview with Dr. Raymond Khoury, Director of OMSAR’s Technical Cooperation Unit,” p. 17.

¹⁵⁰ Oliver and Sanders, p. 62.

technology at the center of state reform. Such an objective even if it existed is far from being realized because of the problem of opposition by politicians ruling the country.

Chapter V

Conclusion

E-Government: Failure or Success in Reducing Corruption?

E-government is not the 'Big Bang,' a single event that immediately and forever alters the universe of government.

Subhash Bhatnagar

When one looks at post-war Lebanon in terms of ICT infrastructure and incorporation of technology into the government, he or she concludes that there have been good advances in the field at a time when technology was seen as a luxury. But e-government is not only about technology and should not be seen only as a website. It should be viewed not only as a way to share information and deliver services but as a process or a tool to transform the way the government functions because the biggest challenges to e-government projects are not only technological but political as well.

As seen, the human capital is less prepared than technology to meet the challenge of changing the way government functions. Every decision taken is marked by political infighting and barriers such as lack of leadership, opposition, and more pressing priorities which are nothing but hindrances that give way to old fashioned politics. Minister of State for Administrative Reform Jean Oghassabian acknowledges that administrative reform faces many barriers including resistance to change and to the introduction of the culture of modern administration into the public sector and other obstacles such as change in governments.¹⁵¹

¹⁵¹ NNA, "Two Meetings at OMSAR to Develop the Administration and Put a Structure for the Economy Ministry."

Where Does Lebanon Fall in the International Digital Divide?

While the Lebanese government is struggling to join the process launched by the international community to bridge the digital divide through an e-government strategy, other countries have reached more advanced stages and reaped the benefits of e-government initiatives by linking them to reform and the fight against corruption. “Farsighted political leaders have responded to the information age with vision, rather than torpor, and used technology to redesign government.”¹⁵²

Unlike Lebanon, “successful Arab states like the United Arab Emirates have set clear objectives and diligently executed those targets.”¹⁵³ When application forms and relevant information were digitized into the central portal INFORMS for the first time in the Arab world in 2002, this was seen an important step toward introducing Lebanon into the information society. The country was seen as a regional leader in information technology and at the end of the 1990s Lebanon had an IT vision at a time when this was not common in other Arab countries, but it failed in the execution process. The UN *Global E-Government Readiness Report 2004* says there was some progress in terms of e-government programs in some countries in the region, including Lebanon, “but not sufficient for them to keep in step with the rest of the world and maintain their relative position”¹⁵⁴ in e-government readiness.

Not only Lebanon was on the right track when it first started introducing ICT aimed at setting up an information society, it was also “the first Arab nation to adopt a draft law on electronic signatures in 2000, the same year such legislation was passed in

¹⁵² Eggers, p. 241.

¹⁵³ Habib Battah, “UN Report Says Lebanon is no Longer a Regional Leader in Information Technology. Lack of IT Ministry, Infrastructure Development Seen as Discouraging Sector,” *The Daily Star*, 6 February 2004.

¹⁵⁴ United Nations, *UN Global E-Government Readiness Report: Towards Access for Opportunity*, p. 55.

the United States and France. The draft, however, never made it past parliamentary committees, symbolizing a general loss of legislative momentum.”¹⁵⁵ Such a stalled state of affairs lowered the capabilities of the country to be a pioneer in e-government initiatives after the active role it played when it first introduced ICT projects because “in this field, if you do not improve yourself it means you are going backwards.”¹⁵⁶

Why did Lebanon fall behind other countries? Because the country’s e-government strategy, that has not been adopted yet, lacks many factors that are required to exist before the implementation of e-government projects. Those are mainly related to willingness and ability. For example, “Lebanon was a pioneer in choosing a project similar to Dubai Media City. The project called Technology Beirut Zone was given the green light but it stopped because of sectarian disagreements and political”¹⁵⁷ wrangling even though there was enough funding for the entire plan to go ahead and put Lebanon on the list of countries in the region that have made huge advances in ICT.

Willingness, then, takes precedence over ability and is a prerequisite for the success of any e-government initiative because whenever a certain party decides to go ahead with a project it can also create capabilities that would sustain such a project. Specialists in the field agree that among the essential factors necessary to exist in any assessment of e-government readiness in any country is political will and a leadership that has a strong intention to reform the administration.¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁵ Will Rasmussen, “U.S. Based Alliance Law Firm to Work with Adil. Firm Will Help Build Regulatory System,” *The Daily Star*, October 7 2004.

¹⁵⁶ Haddara, interview by author.

¹⁵⁷ *An Nahar*, “Fifth Digital Economy Conference Kicks Off,” 10 June 2005.

¹⁵⁸ Bhatnagar, *E-government: From Vision to Implementation*, p.74.

If no information law exists in the country and draft laws are for years waiting to be passed into law, one wonders if he or she has to have faith in speeches and promises of having in the future an administration that serves the people through e-government initiatives and computerization of the public sector. “More than 53 draft laws related to administrative reform remain inactive at the council of ministers because of major disagreement over them.”¹⁵⁹

In the United States and Canada “interacting with the state online is like visiting Amazon.com.”¹⁶⁰ Everything people want to do involving the government is calibrated to their interests, location and needs. While this is not what we expect from the Lebanese government, it is unfortunate to see that Lebanon’s e-government strategy is not up to the challenges the country faces today because the latter can overcome the obstacles that are preventing it from moving forward if the government has the intention to do so.

Intention or willingness can come through the unwavering support of a strong chief executive. But “it is not enough for chief executives to simply delegate the transformation effort to others. They must be personally engaged. This sends a signal to the rest of the organization that technology modernization is a top priority.”¹⁶¹ The former official who spoke on condition of anonymity said personal initiatives are very important because with an absence of will by officials to promote the e-government strategy, a few high-ranking public sector employees can go against the current and achieve some results. It is better to fight all those who oppose computerization than idly sit and watch other countries advance towards an information society, he said. “Some

¹⁵⁹ Op.cit.

¹⁶⁰ Eggers, p. 241.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 237.

people will be unable to adapt. Others will be unwilling, hoping the change will fail because failure is in their interest. Overcoming such opposition requires a cadre of people who are maniacal about transforming government.”¹⁶²

Along with strong leadership comes the appropriate training of public sector employees to use ICT to seek government information. “Without the appropriate skills, people can only treat a computer as a box of metal. An English-speaking literate person needs one-week to learn how to use an operating system and simple applications like word processing, and another week to use the internet.”¹⁶³

In terms of training provided to the population through community access centers and any other way of training or ICT-capacity building initiatives in Lebanon, the most difficult stage is to find ways for these centers to keep going after initial community and donor interest wanes. Enthusiasm starts projects but professionalism -- a missing element in Lebanon -- maintains them. Computer literacy provides extraordinary access to information, but only for those who understand the process of information seeking. Such understanding is still lacking, in particular in rural areas where the basic needs of life take precedence over information technologies. “Thus, the distinction between those who have the facility and access to information technology and those who do not will become as distinct functionally as the difference between those who can read and those who cannot,”¹⁶⁴ in the information age.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 228.

¹⁶³ Heeks, p. 207.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 219.

Could E-government Become Lebanon's Corruption Buster?

In countries where there have been investments in promoting the extension of technology into government functions and of internet connections to the general public, ICT can be used as a fundamental tool to promote openness and consequently control the risks of corruption. The same applies to a well-established legal framework, to an aware and demanding citizenry and a strong leadership willing to introduce change. If there are laws that do not hinder transactions on the internet and freedom of information laws allow aware citizens to ask the government for information, e-government can help in bringing about a reduction in corruption. But in Lebanon citizen access to the internet is still limited, draft laws await endorsement, people are not aware of their rights and the government and officials have other priorities, thus restricting the usefulness of internet-based information. "Though the growing use of information technology in the provision of access to information is welcome in many cases, caution should be observed to ensure its appropriateness in a particular context."¹⁶⁵

This entails that access to information through official websites and portals will not provide enough results in terms of reduction of corruption. Meaning the government will not easily relinquish information through a Right to Know Law and in turn people will not use the portals sufficiently to scrutinize corrupt employees or officials in case such portals like that of Seoul municipality allow citizens to follow up on their transactions and disclose the details of the decision-making process of authorization and licensing procedures on the internet.

Then what should the solution to such a problem be?

¹⁶⁵ Transparency International, "Anti Corruption Handbook."

Fighting corruption and e-government are new terms in Lebanese politics, while access to information is not very common. Citizens do not know what their rights are when it comes to government transactions, and apparently the government is not in a hurry to allow the Lebanese to access information that might be threatening because it could reveal many hidden corrupt practices. Since specialists say that most e-government projects are “incompatible with a regime that does not promote increased access to information,”¹⁶⁶ there should first be a law that allows the citizen to ask the government about public funds and inquire about any official figure that he or she sees as unclear and skeptical. In India for example, an anti-corruption group “stalled the privatization of water supplies to New Delhi’s 14 million people by gaining access to classified documents showing that privatization would raise bills by up to five times.”¹⁶⁷ India’s Right to Information Law that was enacted in October 2005 aims at reducing corruption although officials who are engaged in implementing the law know that they are going to face many obstacles. But still they are convinced that the law is putting the country on the right path to try to change a bureaucracy that has for centuries served the interests of rulers.¹⁶⁸ Now, many citizens, who felt they were ignored, have the opportunity to enjoy a right that is part of article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

As previously seen, increased access to information is the first in the hierarchy of objectives on which e-government applications must focus to reduce corruption because the very essence of e-government is helping citizens to search for information

¹⁶⁶ Bhatnagar, *E-government: From Vision to Implementation*, p. 34.

¹⁶⁷ Misra Neelesh, “India’s New Information Law Aims at Corruption but Faces Obstacles,” *The Associated Press*, 14 March 2006.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

and ask for it through electronic means. The government must realize that a Freedom of Information Law is a must, but unfortunately, most specialists who were interviewed to write this research had either not heard of such a law or do not try to link it to e-government that is only seen as a technology-oriented tool to computerize the government's operations and introduce Lebanon into the information society. They must realize that "issues of information updating and interaction ultimately make the system more useful than the pretty design of the interface."¹⁶⁹

What is interesting in this case is that among the factors that have encouraged the adoption of Freedom of Information Laws in many countries are modernization and the information society. The expansion of the internet into everyday usage has increased the demand for more information. "Inside governments, the need to modernize record systems and the move towards e-government has created an internal constituency that is promoting the dissemination of information as a goal in itself."¹⁷⁰ Such a scenario would be helpful in Lebanon if, one day, internet usage becomes more widespread.

This is another example of the extent that Lebanon has fallen behind other countries because of government procrastination in adopting the e-government strategy that could pave the way toward spearheading e-government projects if as the government has vowed it truly intends to modernize the administration. "Citizens have to entrust the current government in its serious attempts to introduce change,"¹⁷¹ says Oghassabian. But the problem is that the people's experience with the government has not been very positive thus far and if technology can change many of the things they

¹⁶⁹ Heeks, p. 208.

¹⁷⁰ Toby Mendel, "Freedom of Information as an Internationally Protected Human Right," <http://www.article19.org/docimages/627.htm> (accessed 13 December 2004).

¹⁷¹ *An Nahar*, "Oghassabian Launches Recruitment Through the Internet," 5 January 2006.

hate about the government, lack of political decision-making is pulling such advancement backwards. “What the public sector needs most is a change in the mentality of politicians and employees that make profits out of it or else this sector will not be able to play its role in upgrading the government.”¹⁷²

What is ironic is that among the basic factors to introduce change into the administration is commitment from the top. But what is actually impeding the process of administrative reform and the adoption of the e-government strategy is the political decision-makers’ unwillingness to do anything about it. Reform will only happen when someone up in the organization chain has the will and capacity to impose changes on established systems. Lack of commitment does not apply only to Lebanon, but in many developing countries “a few political leaders and civil servants who believe in the idea of reform have initiated innovative applications. The vast majority, however, is yet to awaken to the potential of e-government for reform.”¹⁷³ The basic problem facing such a reform is that those officials who need to make decisions are the same as those who benefit from corruption.

E-government: Corruption Solver or Efficiency Guarantor?

Then “e-government should not be seen as a panacea for the complex and well-entrenched problems of corruption”¹⁷⁴ that become worse with the presence of a ruling elite that is not willing to understand the importance of ICT in the government. E-government should only be viewed as one of those tools that have great potential in tackling corruption-related problems if the right decisions are made. Then what are the

¹⁷² NNA, “Oghassabian Inaugurated a Workshop on Society and the Reform of the Private Sector,” <http://www.nna-lb.gov.lb> (accessed 2 May, 2005).

¹⁷³ Bhatnagar, *E-government: from Vision to Implementation*, p. 93.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

advantages of e-government projects or what impact do they have on the administration, given moves to go ahead with the adoption of laws and the e-government strategy have come to a standstill?

Developing countries have different goals while introducing e-government. Some countries that have advanced ICT infrastructure invest in e-government because citizens expect their government to provide online services at the same rate that is offered by the private sector. Others focus on improving the efficiency of the public sector to reduce administrative burdens. "Governments are also using e-government applications to encourage citizens to move towards self-service to save costs and time for both citizens and the government."¹⁷⁵ Others use e-government to increase democratic principles such as citizen participation, allowing citizens to decide what kind of services they want and how they should be offered. Some other countries have entered into competition with developed countries after enjoying early successes in e-government applications.¹⁷⁶

Lebanon is one of those countries that aim at saving cost and time for the citizen and the government to reduce burdens, in other words to increase efficiency. "We want to make it easier for people to make transactions and save them time, money, and the trouble to make several visits to government offices. We want also the administration to become productive and less costly,"¹⁷⁷ says Oghassabian. This statement reveals that the government focuses on efficiency rather than embarking on e-government projects aimed at finding a solution to corruption-related problems in the administration

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ *An Nahar*, "Oghassabian: Reform Arrangements by the Government," 11 October 2005.

although the minister has hinted that e-government could reduce corruption through limiting interaction between the civil servant and the citizen.¹⁷⁸

Among the latest initiatives by OMSAR at the end of 2005 was the application by Lebanese citizens for public sector posts through INFORMS. More than 519 application forms were sent from inside and outside the country. Such an initiative was seen by the government as one of the first reform steps in upgrading the public sector and making it more efficient and capable of introducing modern technological concepts into people's lives.¹⁷⁹

While such an effort is laudable, the government does not seem to be aiming at solving corruption problems through e-government as much as it is trying to save the citizen time and reduce costs. At a meeting of officials involved in the country's reform process in May 2006, Minister Oghassabian said bribery in the public sector has reached unprecedented levels, adding that current measures are inappropriate to put an end to such a phenomenon. "The status quo calls for serious thinking in taking the necessary measures to contain this corruption and deter it,"¹⁸⁰ he said. Despite such a statement, meeting participants gave several recommendations that do not include upgrading the country's e-government services. If that is the case, then most of the sites that are in their embryonic stages are doomed to provide basic one-way information.

In order to promote the idea of having an administration that serves the people, the government has to start thinking that such a plan cannot succeed unless a real e-government service is in place and the legal framework supports free access to

¹⁷⁸ NNA, "Minister Oghassabian Headed a Meeting that Discussed Details of the E-government Strategy."

¹⁷⁹ *An Nahar*, "Oghassabian Launches Recruitment Through the Internet."

¹⁸⁰ NNA, "Minister Oghassabian Discussed Ways to Limit Corruption with the Higher Council of Reform and Administrative Development," <http://www.nna-lb.gov.lb> (accessed 8 May, 2006).

information. Serving people is not only attempting not to waste their time. Serving them means that the government should put the citizen at the center, meaning to arm people with useful information and allow them to complete transactions anywhere and anytime from a variety of devices. Success also requires changing people's attitudes, belief systems, and ways of interacting with the government. It is about making more efforts to help move them from what they know to something new. The government "is not transformed simply because it creates a website; that might be only a cosmetic change. Success requires a more complete makeover, namely rethinking the model of how to use ICTs to organize the work of the whole organization,"¹⁸¹ bureaucracy and society.

¹⁸¹ Oliver and Sanders, p. 59.

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