The Challenges of E-participation in Saudi Arabian E-government websites: From Government Perspective

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ABSTRACT

With advancements in Web 2.0 technologies, governments have opportunities to build relationships with its citizens. Saudi Arabia is one of the governments that make efforts to improve e-participation in e-government website. However, there are impediments to the effective implementation of the e-participation especially in developing countries. This research study will investigate that challenges from government perspective. This study will assist decision makers in governments to understand the drivers of providing interactive e-participation in e-government websites.

Keywords- *E-government, E-participation, Saudi Arabia, Citizen Engagement, Web 2.0*

INTRODUCTION

The Internet Technology has not only created opportunities for private sector organizations to increase their market share but also made it possible for public sector organizations to become more efficient, effective and responsive while providing the convenient ways for delivering services to citizens. In this milieu, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) is no exception where e-government is considered to be necessity rather than luxury (Al-Nuaim 2011). Although the antecedents of e-Government in KSA can be traced back to 1998 (Sahraoui et al. 2006; Abanumy et al. 2007), however, the serious efforts for formalizing the e-government program are usually linked with the initiative of "*Yesser*" that started in 2005. It is also evident in report published by United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2008) which explicitly mentions the improved rankings for e-government readiness from 2005 to 2008. Moreover, e-participation (sub-set of e-government) has been considered as one of the key elements of 2nd e-Government Plan (2012-2016) of KSA that is under execution. While signifying this key element as one of the strategic work streams, KSA is committed to increase the public participation in government processes through the effective use of social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Youtube. Besides this, the government of Saudi Arabia is implementing blogs and establishing a supporting community of practice to obtain citizens feedback and viewpoints on e-government (2nd e-Government Action Plan, yesser.gov.sa). however, there are challenges that face Saudi government agencies' effort in providing e-participation. Therefore, this research aims to help government agencies in providing interactive e-participation by investigated the challenges for e-participation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

E-Government

'Electronic Government, abbreviated to e-government, is a slogan that spread throughout the globalized world in the 1990s' (Damm 2006). According to Luk (2008), many governments worldwide implement e-government in the belief that it is capable of improving efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and transparency in governance'. Overall idea is to improve the performance of public sector entities in order to bring them at par with private sector. Accordingly the e-government phenomenon is sometimes connoted with New Public Management (NPM) philosophy that emerged in 1980s to modernize the public sector (Chappelet 2004). In this regard, Curthoys also argued that e-government 'combines key characteristics of technological development and public administration' (2004).

Although technical aspects of e-government under the world "e" are very important and require due diligence while implementing the e-government, however, focus is more on public sector reforms under the e-government agenda. In this context Al-Nuaim (2011) argued that 'e-government is more about government then about "e"'. While quantifying the contribution of "e" towards e-government, Benkert (2007) suggested that it is as only 20% while the rest of 80% is all about government. Due to this amalgamation of "e" and "government", Riad et al. (2010) suggest to take holistic approach of combining change efforts and adopting new and emerging technologies to ensure that agenda of e-government i.e. transformation of public sector for bringing in more effectiveness into government. They further argued that besides bringing in effectiveness within government, e-government can also have potential to improve the government-citizens relationships through technology.

E-Participation

Linde and Karlsson refer to e-participation as 'type of e-government innovation' (2013). Lee and Kim view 'e-participation as a special type of e-government service in that e-participation is available at government websites or as part of e-government services run by government agencies' (2014). Following the argument of Riad et al. (2010) that supported the idea that e-government can bring improvements in reinvigorating the government-citizens relationships. Åström et al. *(2012)* conceptualized these relationships under catchword of 'Political Participation'. Accordingly scholars argued that rapid technological innovations particular after the Internet revolution has strengthened the belief of governments about creating more political participation using Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This phenomenon of more political participation using ICT is encapsulated under the buzzword of e-participation which is aimed to improve the image of government to become more inclusive society (Ahmed, 2007). 'E-participation, then, is the process of engaging citizens through ICTs in policy and decision-making in order to make public administration participatory, inclusive, collaborative and deliberative for intrinsic and instrumental ends' (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affair, 2014).

Lyu (2007) supported e-participation processes in order to strengthen the liberal/representative democracies. According to scholar, the public participation should not be limited to only periodical voting events. While exploiting the potential of e-participation, governments can encourage a continuum of public participation. According to Romsdahl (2005), the growing trend of Internet across various fields

has raised the comfort level of governments to reinvigorate the government-citizens relationships through enhanced participation by marginalized citizens' groups. Precisely, while using the information technologies in particular the Internet, citizens can better be engaged in a political discourse. In this connection, Medaglia (2007) refers to e-participation as 'the interactions on democratic issues between citizens, politicians and officers that take place between elections, including consultation, ward representation and self-organization among citizens groups'

Indubitably the role of ICT is considered to be remarkable in implementing e-Participation programs; however, its effectiveness is mainly dependent upon the respective governments' overall policies and seriousness about its implementation. This can better be analyzed from the arguments of Medaglia (2012) and Islam (2008) who suggest governments to become more proactive in channelizing the e-participation for initiating e-enabled consultation in order to increase citizens' activism in public policy affairs. The citizens' activism through online channels can either for civic or political matters (Turnšek 2007) that eventually 'promote transparent, inclusive, pluralistic and decentralized societies' (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2007).

Macintosh and White (2008) argued that under the e-participation agenda, governments exploit the web technologies for increasing citizens' activism. This can be done either through supporting 'top-down' engagement or through fostering 'ground-up' efforts. The top-down approach mainly focuses upon the initiatives carried out by government while the ground-up approach emphasizes upon the initiatives which are promoted by citizens. 'Government initiated e-participation includes, but is not limited to, online polls, online surveys, and agenda-specific online discussion boards (e.g. regulation.gov). Meanwhile, citizen-initiated e-participation services range from email contact to online policy forums' (Lee and Kim 2014)

Moreover, although e-participation is usually assumed to be 'sum total of both the government programs to encourage participation from the citizen and the willingness of the citizen to do so as it encompasses both the demand and the supply side' (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2005), however, the arguments in above mentioned academic literature put more emphasis on government side to become preemptive in channelizing e-participation so that an environment of openness, and transparency in government-citizens interactions can be made effective through ICT.

E-Participation in Saudi Arabia

Despite the fact that Saudi Government is pursuing kingdom culture with absolute monarchy, yet, the e-participation related initiatives (usually considered to be values of democracy) of Saudi Government are remarkable. 'Generally speaking, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has focused much in participation and dialogue throughout its development march. All such efforts have been envisioned to enable citizens to participate in making all decisions and in formulating all development plans at all Government Agencies for the welfare of the whole Community' (Saudi.gov.sa).

Specific to e-Participation, Saudi Government is considering this endeavor as one of the key strategic objectives as depicted in Saudi Arabia's 2nd e-Government action Plan. This strategic objective is planned to be attained while exploiting the use of state-of-art technology for revitalizing the citizen-government

relationships. The 2nd e-Government action plan also emphasizes upon gathering public feedback using emerging web 2.0 tools such as blogs and moderated forums.

Moreover, the e-participation efforts of Saudi Arabia are greatly commended by various reputed international organizations such as United Nations. Specifically, after conducting the global survey under the auspices of 'e-Government for the People', the United Nations department of Economic and Social Affairs applauds the e-participation initiatives of Saudi government (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2012).

The Challenges of E-participation

Despite the fact, e-participation has the potential for reinvigorating the government-citizens relations however its effectiveness is faced with myriad of challenges. Medagalia (2007) pointed out that governments worldwide implementing the e-participation usually underscore the supply side of e-participation services and typically focus upon introducing contemporary e-tools. However, the biggest challenge is how to design e-participation as per needs and wants of citizens. In this context, Maier and Remier (2010) argued that 'the key challenges for those interested in setting up such a platform are not technical, but organizational and conceptual'.

While emphasizing upon the assessing the needs and wants of citizens along with their capabilities, Loukis et al. (2013) pointed out three main challenges of e-participation: quality, relevance and utility. The governments are not only supposed to make provision of quantity of e-participation services rather they should emphasize upon the quality of these services. Another important consideration should be how relevant are these e-participation services with the needs of citizens. Amongst these challenges, the most important one is the utilization of these services. With respect to quality aspect of e-participation, Macintosh et al. (2009) argued that measuring the quality of online discussion requires a focused approach. The authors also suggest that besides measuring the quality of e-participation services, assessing the impact of e-participation services is also considered to be a methodological challenge.

In relation with utilization of e-participation services, the prevalent digital divide is also considered as one of the attention-grabbing challenge as highlighted in the report published by Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development – OECD (2003). Due to prevalent digital divide within respective country, the penetration of e-participation services may create different pessimistic and optimistic views. The pessimistic view is concerned with fear of widening the existing inequalities within the society while the optimistic view suggests that the democratic participation can be enhanced with the application of IT tools. Accordingly, 'the problem of engaging representative stakeholders from all groups of society in e-Participation is a major challenge' (Macintosh et al. 2009).

Gulati et al. (2010) stressed upon need of building trust amongst citizens in order to ensure effectiveness of e-participation services. This is also considered as one of the challenges related with e-participation services. The authors argues that despite earmarking the huge funds on e-participation and increasing the capability of government, the effectiveness of e-participation cannot be ensured if the citizens are not willing to utilize those services.

Macintosh (2007) argued that there could be numerous challenges for e-participation. However, all these can be categorized in five distinct categories. These are: social complexity, political culture,

organizational structures, technological dependencies, understanding e-Participation. Social complexity suggests that as the society consists of diversified people having different education levels, and different political interests, hence, implementing e-participation usually becomes complex in order to cater for needs of all groups of given society. Political culture is related with the trust levels of citizens. It has been found that citizens usually have less trust about government to the extent that their inputs through e-participation will be taken seriously. The challenges pertain to organization structure refer to lack of integration of e-participation into government day-to-day functions. With reference to Technological dependencies, sometime it is believed that technology will provide solutions for all problems related with public participation. Understanding e-participation includes the challenges pertaining to systematic evaluation of e-participation.

There are several studies that investigated that challenges that face governments in implementing e-government service however, there is a need to investigate that challenges in the context of e-participation. E-participation differs from other government services. E-participation would be an interaction between government and its citizens. Therefore, this research study try to fill up the gap in related to the challenges that face government agencies to provide interactive e-participation in their e-government websites especially in developing countries such as Saudi Arabia.

RESEARCH AIM AND QUESTION

This research aims to find out the challenges that may impact on government agencies' efforts to provide an interactive e-participation in their e-government websites. This research attempts to answer the following question:

Q: what are the challenges for e-participation in e-government websites in Saudi Arabia?

FUTURE WORK

The researcher will conduct interviews with managers in Saudi ministries who are responsible for e-participation tools in ministry's website. The interviews will assist the researcher to investigate the problem deeply.

CONCLUSION

Although, the advancements in information technologies especially Web 2.0 technologies used as e-participation tools, government agencies facing challenges that impact on their efforts in e-participation. Therefore, such challenges will be investigated empirically in Saudi e-government websites. The outcome of this research will help developing countries to improve e-participation in their e-government websites.

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