The role of E-Government in Increasing Transparency in Saudi Arabia

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Abstract. As many nations globally continue to embrace e-government technology, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has not been left behind, and it's aiming to be in its pivotal spot. The deployment of e-government is expected to increase government transparency and accountability in its departments. In this era of instant information access, most government entities are under great pressure to be transparent and accountable in their activities and decision-making processes. E-government does not only involve the application of new technology, but it also involves an electronic administration that touches various key relationships between KSA and its citizens. The paper presents a discussion on the roles played by e-government to enhance transparency in Saudi Arabia.

Keywords: transparency, accountability, Saudi Arabia, e-government.

1. INTRODUCTION

Saudi Arabia is a developing nation that has shown its commitment to adopt e-government to enhance the transparency of public decision making and public information. The nation has developed an action plan for crafting and executing different e-government initiatives. One of the most highly-pursued and greatly-expected results of the e-government in Saudi Arabia is the increase of transparency, availability, and access to public information and services. The e-government action plans focus on improving government efficiency and effectiveness through public organizations, improving public service delivery, and enhancing accountability and transparency. In its vision 2030 blueprint, the kingdom of Saudi Arabia government has clearly expressed its active quest to increase the transparency of public decision making through the integration of E-government in their system of governance. Therefore, this article discusses the role of e-government in increasing transparency in Saudi Arabia.

2. E-GOVERNMENT AND TRANSPARENCY IN KSA

Businesses, citizens, and other stakeholders can access information and services they require through a single access point ((*World Bank Group,* 2019). In the KSA action plans, specific initiatives such as m-government and open data portals have been developed to enhance e-government. E-government offers easy and fast access to government services and information, increase government responsiveness and transparency towards all stakeholders' needs and makes government agencies approachable by broadening their availability. The concept of e-government offers an opportunity to increase citizen access to public information and services, enhance citizen participation, involvement in the political processes, and minimize government bureaucracy. Saudi Arabia has invested heavily in e-government initiatives to improve transparency in public decision making. In addition, the nation has established a national anti-corruption commission and has taken part in the United Nations Convention against corruption. This shows the nation's commitment to fight corruption and enhance transparency in all its initiatives, including the e-government. All these efforts have led to Saudi Arabia being ranked in 48th position worldwide by the Transparency International Organization.

The adoption of e-government in Saudi Arabia has greatly enhanced transparency and accountability in decision-making processes. It has also facilitated the availability of public data and information to different stakeholders. The Ministry of Communications and Information Technology was required to come up with a strategy of offering government services digitally according to High Order No. 7/B/33181 (Alrowili et al., 2015).

Consequently, the Communication and Information Technology Commission (CITC), in conjunction with the Ministry of Finance and Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT) in 2005 established the YESSER program. The objective of the YESSER program is to enhance productivity, increase efficiency, and increase accountability and transparency in government agencies. Conducting government services in a digital platform minimizes documentation, distance, and time to access government information and services. Without the deployment of e-government, these factors are likely to hinder transparency in Saudi Arabia. Government organizations can publish information regarding public decision-making and methods in particular situations, and the stakeholders can efficiently and effectively access that information through e-government. E-government in KSA has created an atmosphere where decision-making procedures and information can be accessed with ease.

E-government involves the deployment of IT in public agencies to transform government relations with businesses, citizens, and other government entities. The integration of e-government in Saudi Arabia has not been an easy mission. It has taken some time to build institutional awareness and infrastructure capabilities to support this mission and achieve success. The application of ICT in Saudi Arabia has transformed how the government operates, deliver services to citizens, enhance the quality of the services, change government structure, and boost public confidence through transparency (Khan, 2013). Despite the effort and vision of Yesser, e-government is at its infancy stage in Saudi Arabia, and there is a great need to expand the list of services being offered through e-government.

According to Alotaibi and Roussinov (2017), applications of m-government, which is viewed as a subset of e-government, in most countries enhance transparency and provision of government services. Taxes and bills notifications, traffic updates, weather updates, tracking devices, and emergency assistance are some of the e-government services. Provision of these services through the e-government by the KSA government increases transparency since the information is readily available to all stakeholders. For instance, the government of Saudi Arabia has implemented a health mobile, employee inquiry system, and the ministry of education has adopted a system that assists students in accessing higher education information through mobile technology.

E-government often changes the nature of the relationship between the state and its citizens through developing a new web government and citizen interface. Using government portals, information is delivered faster to the public, which is expected to enhance the government's transparency. The citizens are able to engage with the government and keep an eye on government performance. In 2014, the UN Global e-Government Survey found out that Saudi Arabia was number 34 worldwide, which was a major improvement from number 90 in 2004 (Stansbury, 2015). Concerning the extent to which governments employ ICT to allow the citizen to access government information and services, that is, online service delivery, Saudi Arabia was ranked number 18 in the world. The United Arab Emirates and Bahrain were ranked number 12 and 7 accordingly. The two nations have a smaller population to services compared to KSA. Saudi Arabia has won several awards in education, tourism, and health sectors in the best m-government service delivery award given annually by UAE. Saudi Arabia is one of the leading countries in the globe regarding accessing and sharing public information and services through mobile and electronic services (Stansbury, 2015). Although some people may argue that e-government application in Saudi Arabia is a way to control information access to help the government to watch public behavior and increase political dominance and control of dictatorial regimes, there is no doubt that e-government enhances Saudi Arabian government accountability and transparency.

E-government technology reduces the communication gap between the government and the public to promote deeper understanding and enhance public administration control, curb corruption, and establish more transparency in public service delivery. The development of mobile technologies in Saudi Arabia has provided additional tools that enhance e-government application and integration. Transactions can be processed quickly and easier, which promotes government operations accountability and transparency. Although traditional transaction methods between the Saudi citizens and the government are still very common in KSA, mobile phone application in Saudi Arabia has registered a massive growth. In 2015, Saudi Arabia had approximately 53 million mobile users. This represents around 167.5% of the total population, implying that almost every person had two mobile subscriptions (Alotaibi et al., 2017). About 67 percent of the Saudi population use smartphones. This growth can be translated to increased transparency in Saudi Arabia because most of the populations are better equipped to access e-government and m-government services.

The presence of public information on government departments' websites has a remarkable impact on public decision making transparency. Through e-government, the Saudi Arabian government is able to identify some of the

critical factors for increasing transparency in all its activities and decisions. They are able to understand the behaviors of different stakeholders with regard to their digital service delivery systems. The Saudi Arabian Ministry of Health developed a system that keeps subscribers informed of the development in health and medicine and update citizens about disease prevention through mobile devices (Al-Shboul et al., 2014). The system also offers a specialized course that helps subscribers to understand how to live with certain conditions such as pregnancy and live with chronic diseases like cancer and diabetes. To enroll in these services, users are required to send a blank text message to a certain number offered by the mobile operator.

Moreover, Riyadh and Madinah Education services are offered by the Ministry of Education with the primary objective of helping or allowing users to communicate with different education departments by sending SMS. The system also allows users to attach some files. The Ministry of Education also allows users to track higher education information. To access services provided by the ministry, students are required to register on the Ministry of Higher education site using their mobile number and name. Students who have enrolled with these services can browse through the ministry web-site and also get text messages concerning their education information (Muzafar & Jhanjhi, 2020). These e-government initiatives have greatly boosted government-citizen interaction and transparency.

According to the World Bank (2019), e-government provides a framework for enhancing government financial accountability and transparency by strengthening accounting records systems. Financial records are mostly seen as an important resource to increase the transparency of governments. In addition, e-government has been used by many countries to increase transparency between the government, employees, and the business sector. For example, the Saudi Arabian Ministry of Labor has a system that enables beneficiaries or employees to find out whether they are registered by the Ministry of Labor as an employee. The system allows users to send a text message containing their ID number. The ministry also allows subscribers to check the status of their companies using registered mobile numbers. The ministry introduced these services to avoid incorrect assumptions concerning the companies' status and transparency as well as reducing the demand of people visiting the labor offices or the ministry (Alotaibi et al., 2016).

Using e-government and m-government, the Ministry of Labor notifies employees concerning their status of employment. To access these services, users are required to register and provide their password for online services. Besides, the government has a system that enables residents and citizens to check their traffic offense by sending a text message to the number provided by their mobile service operator. The Ministry of Commerce and Industry (MCI) developed Commercial Violation Reporting Application in 2011 that enable residents to report commercial violations to the MCI directly (Alrowili et al., 2015). The system uses an integrated map that enables citizens to enter the name of the company and its industry. The application allows users to call the ministry if they do not have access to the internet. The application was given Yesser's electronic government's achievement award, and the application has been highly rated by users. These e-government applications have increased transparency in the labor industry in Saudi Arabia.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Saudi Arabia has invested a lot of resources to enhance the adoption of e-government. Through the cooperation between the ministry of information technology and other ministries, the government has digitized its services to enhance transparency and improve service delivery. Government bureaucracies and communication gap, which always hinder transparency, have been greatly minimized. E-government in Saudi Arabia has been instrumental in increasing transparency in public decision making processes and procedures because the government-citizens engagement has been enhanced.

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