

Seminar discusses poll coverage in Arab world

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Scribes laud Ministry of interior for help during elections

DOHA • Journalists in the Arab world need to learn a lot and do proper homework to cover an election freely and independently, a media seminar here was told yesterday.

The three-day roundtable discussion on covering elections is being organised by the US-based National Democratic Institute in partnership with the Permanent Election Committee at the Supreme Council for Family Affairs and Darinfo, the Dar Al Sharq Center for Information.

Several participants at the second day of the seminar felt that journalists in the Arab world are far away from offering a free and fair coverage of any election taking place in the region. They are easily being influenced by material and other vested interests.

Sami Ghali, editor-in-chief of Al Mida newspaper from Yemen that won accolades for its coverage of the last general elections in Yemen, said the democratic transformation in Yemen is different from that of Qatar and things are much easier for journalists working here.

He said the main challenge in any election is how to stop the newspaper editors from influencing the campaign. He explained the methods used by his newspaper in covering the elections. Before the elections, they introduced their own set of rules for the staff to ensure that they provide a fair and balanced coverage of the campaign by each candidate.

The first page was always carrying reports about the two leading candidates but they were not highlighting their viewpoints but rather the people's views about them gathered through opinion polls.

Hussain Abdul Rahman from Kuwait felt that no journalist in the Arab world can cover an election in an unbiased manner.

"They are taking money from the candidates and the parties. This has been happening all over the Arab world. They don't know anything about the elections and they never read the constitution. They should read other papers in the world to see how they are covering the elections," he commented. He said, women reporters in Kuwait do not like to cover the election campaign of a woman candidate.

A participant representing the Al Wasat newspaper in Bahrain said 70 per cent of the journalists in Bahrain are affiliated to one of the political groups. There is no independent election body in the country. Some candidates had been columnists of newspapers and some used to give Friday sermons in mosques, which they utilized to promote themselves during the election campaign.

Mohammed Al Makki from the London-based Al Hayat newspaper said, in many Arab countries journalists are being treated like criminals and there is no law to protect their rights.

"In many democratic countries there are laws covering journalists. Free press and the judicial system can not be separated," he said.

Commenting on the coverage of the recent Municipal Council elections in Qatar, Al Makki said, the local newspapers didn't hold in depth discussions on the law and the constitutions in the context of the elections.

They also didn't give the opportunity for the public to express their views about the candidates and the interaction between the candidate and the voters was very weak.



Yahya Al Awad, Director, Darinfo addressing the seminar at the Al Sharq premises yesterday. (A section of the audience attending the seminar. (Salim Matramkot)

Yahya Al Awadh, director of Darinfo said, during the last CMC elections, 18 candidates had made contracts with Darinfo to help and guide them in the election campaign. One male candidate from the Old Airport area, where Shaikha Al Jefairi won with a record majority, wanted to focus his campaign on his plus points as a man over his rival woman candidate. But his tactic failed to impress the voters as proved by the results.

Dr Ilham Badr from Qatar Radio lauded the Ministry of Interior for providing all information during the election without any reservations.

Recalling her experiences of covering the elections, she said, each candidate was given five minutes on the radio to address the public. But one candidate never turned up. After inquiries, it was found that the candidate was physically challenged and he was not able to speak. He was contesting the elections to promote the cause of people with special needs and he had his support base among them.

Saleh Al Gharib from Al Sharq daily also appreciated the role of the Ministry of Interior during the elections, saying that in any Arab country the Interior Ministry posed the biggest obstacle during the elections.

Scott Bate from the National Democratic Institute said, during the US elections, a section of the media in the country focused on trivial personal issues concerning the candidates and ignored more serious issues like the Iraq war that cost the country heavily. He said, journalists in the Arab countries should gain first hand experience on covering elections.

Murad Zafir was the moderator at the discussions yesterday. The participants stressed the importance of training journalists on the election rules and supervising their performance during the elections to ensure that they remain committed to the law and the constitution.