Chapter 1

Introduction: Strengthening Parliaments through ICTs

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is a brief introduction to the field of e-parliament. The discussion starts with an evaluation of the relationship between parliament and ICTs. Later on, the contributions of ICTs to the basic functions of parliaments within the framework of legislation, representation and oversight are explained. This section is followed by a brief discussion about requirements related to successful e-parliament applications. Finally, the chapter introduces the aim of the book and covers information about the main sections of the book and other chapters.

INTRODUCTION

Parliaments that are composed of publically-elected representatives are indispensable institutions of democratic regimes. Parliaments in democratic countries enable the representation of different segments of society in the political arena, encourage the expression of diverse ideas and opinions, negotiate the needs and priorities of citizens, formulate the laws that regulate society, allocate national resources, and oversee executive power. Furthermore, by informing and instructing citizens about affairs of government, parliaments also contribute to education of them. However, awareness of a parliament’s education function is often low (Roskin et al., 1991). Parliaments, by negotiating their countries’ priorities, are mediatory democratic platforms trying to build consensus amongst different interest groups of different segments of society. As long as they fulfill their consensus-building functions, parliaments play a significant role in the processes of acceptance, institutionalization, and encouragement of democratic values and principles. In this way, parliaments can pioneer entire political and administrative systems in their countries to be operated on strong democratic grounds.

Today, interest in democratic processes and trust in political institutions have decreased. When
compared with other agents of the system, such as judicial bodies, media and NGOs, the fact that the citizens have less trust in politicians, political parties and eventually parliaments and decreasing of voting turnout in elections are main indicators of this situation. The fact that the politicians do not have a positive image in the eyes of the public and the public dissatisfaction felt regarding the functioning of democracies play important roles in the emergence of this picture. The solution to remove this adverse picture lies in political institutions’ abilities to restructure themselves in accordance with the requirements and preferences of the public and the formation of more participatory mechanisms that allow citizens to take part in the formulation processes of decisions that affect them. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are an integrated part of this solution.

ICTs, one of the fundamental factors in the background of the economic, social and political transformation being experienced around the world, have an impact on the parliamentary democracy today. In fact, the use of ICTs in parliaments is on the rise in developed and developing countries, and international organizations are making rigorous efforts to encourage this trend. In other words, parliaments as institutions make use of the advantages provided by ICTs just as other public institutions do. In this way, the concept of e-parliament has been added to the concepts of e-democracy, e-voting, and e-participation. These are powerful proofs of using ICTs in political processes and institutions.

E-parliament is defined as a parliament “that is empowered to be more transparent, accessible and accountable through ICT” (United Nations, 2008, p. 12). As the use of ICTs in parliaments becomes widespread, the number of studies focusing on e-parliament in international literature has increased. E-parliament literature becomes richer by the day. One of the basic objectives of this study is to contribute to this ever-growing literature, both theoretically and empirically.

ICTs AND PARLIAMENTS

Today, ICTs used by public institutions to provide the citizens with more accessible, efficient and productive services and to modernize their own administrative procedures and processes, are used intensively in this day and age by parliaments as well. ICTs have proved to be a significant supportive and facilitative power for effectively fulfilling their duties and responsibilities granted to parliaments by the constitution. In this respect, in order to carry out the functions of legislation, representation and inspection more effectively, to connect with the public, to implement the concept of public participation and to improve the image of politics in general and parliaments in particular in the mind of the public, parliaments should exploit the advantages offered by ICTs.

In this day and age when the tendencies of civilization and democratization gain strength and basic human rights and liberties come to the forefront, the expectations of citizens from their public institutions have begun to change as well. With regard to social demands and expectations, emphasis has transitioned from quantity to quality. In this respect, citizens are demanding, in addition to the amount of services from the public institutions to meet their needs, public services offered with higher quality, efficiency and accountability. Parliaments are not immune from these demands and expectations.

The public’s expectations from parliaments include timely answers to the questions directed to parliaments, online access to information, acceptable levels of access to information regarding parliamentary processes and effective interaction with members of parliament (MPs) (Library of Parliament, 2006). In parallel to the expectations on the part of the public, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) has declared the abilities to represent different segments of society and to be transparent, accountable, accessible and effective as the fundamental characteristics of a democratic parliament (Beetham, 2006, p. 7). In fact, parlia-