International Republican Institute
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CHYARAA-MACHREK ECHAMS, TUNISIA

VULNERABILITIES TO CORRUPTION ASSESSMENT REPORT

AUGUST 2018

I. INTRODUCTION

The International Republican Institute (IRI) is a non-profit, non-partisan organization headquartered in Washington, DC. IRI works with civil society and governmental partners throughout the world to strengthen democratic practices and empower democratic leaders. With support from the National Endowment for Democracy, IRI has created a Vulnerabilities to Corruption Approach (VCA) to assist local governments in identifying risks to corrupt practices as a first step for improving transparency and accountability at the municipal level.[1]

As the sole democratic success of the Arab Spring, Tunisia has made considerable democratic and economic progresses since the end of its revolution in 2011. However, corruption continues to be a serious challenge that weakens the rule of law and acts as a driving factor for violent extremism in the country.[2] On July 9, 2018 INLUCC and IRI expanded their existing Memorandum of Understanding to include and implement the VCA program in the municipality of Chyaraa-Machrek Echams (Chyaraa,) validating and reflecting the municipality's commitment to transparency and open government. Chyaraa was among the earliest municipalities to partner with INLUCC on local transparency reform and was deemed an appropriate partner given its track record in promoting open government initiatives and the commitment by the municipal council to advance an open government agenda.

Chyaraa is one of 86 new municipalities created in 2017, following the expansion of Tunisia's local administrative units. Located in the governorate of Kasserine, one of Tunisia's poorest and least developed regions, Chyaraa was formerly part of the neighboring Sbeitla municipality. Unlike Sbeitla, Chyaraa is mostly rural. In fact, it has a population of approximately 24,000 inhabitants that spread across 640 square kilometers and its economy is based largely on agricultural production of olives, pistachios and almonds, and herding. According to some estimates, unemployment in the municipality may be as high as 30 percent. One of the greatest challenges for the new municipal council will be to integrate all quarters of the municipality into a cohesive administrative unit and to provide citizens in farther towns access to municipal services.

II. METHODOLOGY

The VCA assessment in Chyaraa was conducted by two IRI staff, representing the Washington, DC, and Tunis offices on a two-day site visit to the municipality from July 30-31, 2018. To gain a comprehensive perspective on the challenges, reform efforts, and opportunities for collaboration in Chyaraa, IRI's VCA focused on stakeholders' perceptions to assess vulnerabilities to corruption within government processes and practices. The assessment team conducted semi-structured interviews with 16 individuals, four (4) of which were women. Interviewees included the newly-elected mayor, five other council members, four municipal staff and six members of local civil society. For each interview, an introduction clarified what kind of information was sought, the origin of the IRI team, the purpose of the evaluation and the benefits that the final report would bring to the municipality. IRI used a local facilitator to acquire contacts and informants for the assessment primarily from the municipal council, prominent civil servants and local civil society leaders.

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[1] The VCA is a methodology that IRI created that bolsters anti-corruption efforts by partnering with local stakeholders through a steering committee comprised of representatives of both government and civil society. The VCA identifies corruption-related risks and gaps in government processes and supports government responses to these issues. It comprises four steps: explore, assess, enact and showcase. This report represents the outcome of the assessment step.

[2] http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/2017-6-1_vea_report_-_beja.pdf

The number and type of interviewees selected was intended to find a representative sample of Chyaraa civil society and community leaders, elected officials and municipal staff. All interviews were conducted in Tunisian Arabic and later translated and transcribed by a translator who was also present in the various field meetings. The interview protocol used for this assessment was based on similar VCA assessments conducted in Mongolia, Ukraine, Indonesia, Cambodia, El Salvador and elsewhere in Tunisia.

Through the exploratory phase of the VCA process, IRI determined the scope of this assessment in partnership with local stakeholders. Prior to the assessment mission, IRI conducted a basic political economy analysis of Chyaraa to preemptively identify windows of opportunity and potential bottlenecks for reform. The interviewees identified additional transparency-related challenges, and these are reflected in this assessment report. The report is structured around two primary findings: the limited understanding and awareness of the roles and responsibilities of local government and the lack of transparency practices in municipal service delivery processes.

III. PROGRAMMATIC CONTEXT

IRI conducted the VCA during a political decentralization process and following the country's first democratic local elections on May 6, 2018. Nearly seven years after the Tunisian Revolution, the municipal council elections were another step towards elected, representative governance at the subnational level. Tunisians democratically elected municipal councils that are mandated to oversee and regulate the economic growth and public service delivery functions in respective municipalities. While this presents an invaluable opportunity for Tunisians to be more directly represented on the local level, the structural changes also create certain institutional challenges. An additional challenge for Tunisia's democratic consolidation has been the rise of violent extremist organizations (VEO). To diagnose the local drivers of violent extremism (LDVE), IRI conducted a violent extremism (VE) assessment in five governorates, one of which was the Kasserine Governorate. IRI's VE assessment identified vulnerabilities on the local level with a specific focus on how undemocratic and insufficient governance leads to greater violent extremism vulnerability and VEO recruitment. This research uncovered local-level corruption as a dominant source of grievances among VE-vulnerable populations.

Such result from the VE assessment on corruption as major source of grievances was consistent with IRI's ongoing polling as well. IRI polling data from December 2017 shows that Tunisians are in support of tackling corruption and that Tunisians perceive the need for democracy to meet expectations and produce tangible improvements in their living conditions. However, only 24 percent of Tunisians say they are either satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of public services in the country, revealing a tremendous gap between expectations and reality. Concurrently, one of the primary recommendations from IRI's *Understanding the Drivers to Local Extremism Report in Tunisia* was the need to "address corruption by introducing measures to make municipal processes more transparent, publicize information on these processes and job opportunities, and provide information on public grants and funding."

To help bridge the expectation gap and address challenges in government services, IRI focuses on training political parties, strengthening civil society, conducting public opinion research and providing technical advice to the national government. By supporting decisive action against corruption, IRI is complementing its existing work supporting democratic consolidation in Tunisia in a way that is responsive to the priorities expressed by Tunisian citizens and democratically elected authorities.

IV. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Lack of understanding and awareness of the roles and responsibilities of local government limits accountability

Problem Statement

The current mandate for municipal governments in Tunisia is narrow. Newly-constituted municipal councils are responsible for basic legal, administrative services such as birth, death and other certificates, authorizing construction permits, maintaining roads, collecting waste, environmental protection such as drainage, and supervising urban parks, cultural and sports facilities and food markets. Yet few citizens in Chyaraa have a clear understanding of these basic responsibilities, especially vis-à-vis national authorities that also regulate local operations such as access to agricultural water. Lack of awareness limits proper accountability of local government and disincentives public engagement and oversight.

Key Strengths

1. **Local civil society is ready to collaborate with municipal authorities to inform residents about the municipality's roles and responsibilities**. Local civil society activists are aware of the lack of public understanding about decentralization and the role of municipal councils in the everyday life of Chyaraa residents. Moreover, local activists interviewed believe their job is to help the new municipal council "being more active" and to make sure the public is properly informed on municipal projects. One individual reported that his organization has already planned an anti-corruption initiative. Some interviewees suggested that the new municipal council in Chyaraa should prioritize citizen engagement and consider the adoption of public awareness campaigns to educate citizens about the municipality's work.

2. **Citizens are optimistic about the new municipality's prospects**. Both local activists and municipal councilors had a positive outlook. In their opinion, having their new, independent municipality would grant citizens in Chyaraa greater autonomy and a better quality of life because the new municipal council would be more representative and responsive to their needs. Indeed, one interviewee reported, "I'm 46 years old and this is the first time I've elected a local representative." Further, several interviewees were adamant about the role of citizens and their responsibility to stay engaged in local government and press the municipal council on the business of the district.

Key Vulnerability

1. **The public lacks mechanisms to effectively engage municipal authorities**. Outside of attending municipal council meetings, which are often challenging to reach for residents in the mountainous quarters of Chyaraa, there are few formal structures to integrate citizens into the local governance process. The municipality does not yet have mechanisms to communicate information about its work and services or—in the words of one interviewee, "to be close to the citizen." Deficient reciprocal communication is likely to perpetuate low levels of public awareness about the role and responsibilities of the municipality. Moreover, the absence of communication mechanisms may undermine the unique opportunity the new council has to engage citizens in the local governance process and ensure transparent and accountable government.

Recommendations

1. **Establish district offices to expand citizen access to municipality authorities and services**. Both the mayor and residents discussed the need for the new municipality to establish 'satellite' offices around the large, rural municipality. District offices would offer citizens easier access to basic information about the municipality's work as well as bring municipal service delivery, such as document legalization (notarization), closer to residents. Expanded access to municipal authorities through district offices will also strengthen citizens' ability to hold municipal authorities accountable and for newly elected representatives to engage with traditionally marginalized citizens.

2. **Conduct a municipal council listening tour**. Expectations in the newly elected Chyaraa municipal council are high. Even if citizens who may not fully understand the role of the council, they nonetheless look forward to a constructive relationship with it. To introduce the new council to Chyaraa residents, educate citizens about their roles and ideas for the municipality and promote a culture of civic engagement and participation, the new municipal council should consider organizing a listening tour across the municipality. For new councilors, the tour may be a valuable opportunity to learn about constituents' needs and priorities as they will have to decide on municipal development projects once the municipality receives it first budget.

3. **Develop a municipal awareness initiative to educate citizens about the role of the council**. A challenge noted throughout the assessment was the ambiguity regarding the regulatory purview of newly constituted municipal councils and national and governorate-level authorities. In conjunction with a listening tour, the new municipal council should consider developing a municipal awareness strategy that supports ongoing education and engagement with citizens about council responsibilities, services, and business. This initiative should leverage the municipal headquarters and district offices to advertise the specific services offered by Chyaraa municipal authorities and list relevant administrative staff (general secretary, technician, clerk, etc.), council commissions and commission members who are responsible for these functions.

Lack of transparency in municipal service delivery processes may create opportunities for fraud

Problem Statement

Residents lack information about basic services in the new municipality. Most importantly, residents often mentioned that they did not know how to apply for the notarization of documents or how to apply for personal construction permits. Information on the evaluation and selection of contractors for public bids is not readily accessible and available to the public, perpetuating a common assumption that the process is nepotistic. Some interviewees believed that information about services and public works will be made available once the municipality received its first budget, expected in fall or early winter. However, municipal staff had already begun processing construction permits.

Key Strengths

1. **The mayor is eager to make Chyaraa a model for open government**. Committed to fostering a "new municipal culture" based on citizen engagement and participation, Chyaraa's new mayor wants the district to be a pioneer in open and accessible government. Specifically, he wants to make information about the process of selection for contractors fully transparent and he wants to change the current frequent practice of procuring most public bids "under the table." The mayor also stated his eagerness to collaborate with local civil society to help disseminate information about the

municipal council's work, especially to remote corners of the municipality. Moreover, he recognizes as part of his job the duty to train and recruit competent administrative staff.

2. **Experienced municipal administrators have been assigned to Chyaraa**. Four administrative staff have been assigned to Chyaraa from other municipalities. Together, they have over 59 years of municipal service experience in Sbeitla, Kasserine, Monastir and Tunis municipalities. Given their experience, these individuals will be able to serve as an example of efficiency and professionality to the new municipal staff. Additionally, two members of the municipal council (the mayor and the mayor's first assistant) will attend a Ministry for Local Authorities mandated municipal training program.

Key Vulnerabilities

1. **Lack of accountability over the evaluation and selection of contractors for public projects.** Information about bids is accessible at the *baladiya*, however, information about applications received and the evaluation process is not readily available, and the municipality may be vulnerable to fraud. According to municipal staff, only the municipal technician, secretary general and president of the engineering and planning commission evaluate applications and select a winner. According to each municipal staff interviewed, the winner should be the bidder that presents the lowest estimate. Only after the initiation of a project, information such as the selected contractor, cost and completion date, becomes available. However, the municipality is not the party responsible for releasing information and detail on the project life, but the contractor is.

2. **Absence of information on basic service delivery processes**. The *baladiya* does not display any kind of information to the public. Several individuals interviewed for the assessment complained about the lack of clarity regarding processes such as requesting the notarization of documents or acquiring personal construction permits, even when Chyaraa was part of the Sbeitla municipality. Interviewees often complained that citizens have to make multiple trips to municipal headquarters to be provided with all the documentation necessary to request public services. The new municipality of Chyaraa has not yet made available information about the process to request construction permits, but it has already begun processing them. Applicants may then be vulnerable to extortion or other forms of corruption when they seek information about application procedures.

Recommendations

1. **Provide clear instructions on accessing municipal services**. The municipal council should consider advertising step-by-step instructions for each of the services it offers, both at the *baladiya* and around the municipality. Making this information available in multiple public places across the new municipality will save residents time by reducing the number of trips to the *baladiya.* In addition, it will promote transparency regarding service application and delivery processes and it will reduce opportunities and citizens' vulnerability to corruption.

2. **Adopt oversight mechanisms for the public projects process.** The greatest complaint about public projects was the lack of public knowledge on the selection criteria for contractors, fueling the perception that projects were becoming opportunities for nepotism. The municipal council should consider the adoption of regular public meetings to discuss current public project bids and allow Chyaraa residents an opportunity to provide input, ask questions, and express concerns. The municipal council, and not the contractor, should oversee the releasing of information about public projects so that residents and municipal council staff can hold contractors accountable to budgets

and timelines.

3. **Centralizing and releasing documentation on past public projects.** The municipal council's engineering and planning commission should consider collecting and centralizing documentation of past public projects applications and contracts for future reference. Information from previous contracts, such as bidders, budgets and timelines, can be used to inform future decisions on the selection of contractors and promote public awareness and transparency about the use of municipal resources.