

Burning Embers: Youth Activism and the Hope for Democracy in Tunisia

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President Kais Saied's suspension of Parliament and firing of Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi called into question Tunisia's leadership and their commitment to democracy. Tunisia's transition to democracy represented a beacon of hope in the Arab world, but Saied's recent actions sparked debates about the future trajectory of Tunisia's democratic institutions. Corruption and political infighting have characterized much of the political scene in the post-revolution era. What is predictable in the aftermath of Tunisia's revolution since 2011 is the civic engagement of the country's youth. Through revolution, transition, elections, and a "constitutional coup," the scholarship on the political behavior of Tunisian youth affirms that this cohort is unlikely to change its course of political action regardless of who is in power. Young Tunisians appear to care less about measuring the democratic progress of the country through elections, representation, and regime change but are more concerned about the presence of corruption, political infighting, and Tunisia's stagnating economy. Looking through the perspective of youth, I think the case of Tunisia calls into question what we measure as democratic "progress."

The remainder of this article briefly outlines the history of Tunisian youth political participation over the past ten years. I argue that increasing inclusion in formal politics means little to a generation that continues to suffer from socio-economic marginalization. Yet, young people continue to persevere as "burning embers of hope" for Tunisia's democratic experiment. Governments (regardless of regime type) ought to take "street activism" as a legitimate form of communication between traditional political spheres and youth.

Active on Street, but Apathetic at the Ballot Box

Scholars link Tunisia's transition to democracy to a pre-existing civil society where youth were active. During the Ben Ali era, political participation in formal politics was severely limited, so young people wanting to become more politically active joined student unions, labor unions, professional associations, and other civil society organizations.¹ Young people's propensity to be civically engaged prior to the revolution was likely connected to their education. Youth in Tunisia enjoyed some of the best educational institutions in the Arab world.² Although

¹ Sabina Henneberg, *Managing Transition. The First Post-Uprising Phase in Tunisia and Libya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 53.

² Margaret Bohlander, "The Youth Unemployment Crisis in Tunisia," Center for International Private Enterprise, Nov. 18, 2013, The Youth Unemployment Crisis in Tunisia - Center for International Private Enterprise (cipe.org).

significant disparities exist among youth in terms of education - Tunisia's youngest cohort in 2011 was more educated than previous generations.³

Yet, this educated youth cohort experienced difficulty finding jobs. Soaring youth unemployment, socioeconomic marginalization, and corruption motivated young Tunisians to take to the streets in the revolution. Youth were disproportionately represented in the protesting coalition.⁴ After the revolution, young people's involvement in civil society flourished after associational rights expanded in 2011 and continued to expand in 2014,⁵ but their participation in traditional politics remained minimal. Youth who participated in the revolutionary protests were not more likely to vote in the 2011 National Constituent Assembly (NCA) Elections than their non-protesting counterparts. Yet, older generations who participated in these protests were more motivated to vote in 2011.⁶

Qualitative studies suggest that youth in Tunisia were drawn more to civil society and informal politics than to the ballot box due to their growing mistrust of the political parties, including Ennahda and Nidda Tounes.⁷ Despite the transition to democracy and the successful implementation of free and fair elections in 2011, 2014, 2018, and 2019, youth viewed that decision-making was still in the hands of old autocratic elites who excluded them. Many young people felt abandoned and marginalized by the debilitating socio-economic inequality,⁸ sentiments exacerbated by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, there is still a significant socioeconomic rural-urban divide. Much like the Ben Ali regime, the post-revolution governments have not overcome the perception that the national government cares about youth in the interior and southern regions of the country.

There is evidence that political elites have attempted to include youth in the institution-building process post-revolution. For example, the Ben Achour Commission, which was tasked with rebuilding the state's institutions leading up to the NCA Elections, decided that each member of

³ Dobbs, Kirstie Lynn. "Active on the Street but Apathetic at the Ballot Box? The Voting Behavior of Tunisian Youth (2011-Present) in a Comparative Perspective" (PhD dissertation, Loyola University Chicago, 2019).

⁴ Mark R. Beissinger, Amaney A. Jamal, and Kevin Mazur, "Explaining Divergent Revolutionary Coalitions: Regime Strategies and the Structuring of Participation in the Tunisian and Egyptian Revolutions," *Comparative Politics* 48, no. 1 (2015): 1–24; Michael Hoffman and Amaney Jamal, "The Youth and the Arab Spring: Cohort Differences and Similarities," *Middle East Law and Governance* 4, no. 1 (2012): 168–188.

⁵ Kirstie Lynn Dobbs, "Civil society as revolutionary diplomats: Foreign policy after the Arab Spring," *Orient*, January 2021.

⁶ David Doherty, Peter J. Schraeder, and Kirstie Lynn Dobbs, "Do Democratic Revolutions 'Activate' Participants? The Case of Tunisia," *Politics* 40, no. 2 (2020): 170–188.

⁷ Alcinda Honwana, *Youth and Revolution in Tunisia*, (London: Zed Books, 2013).

⁸ Zouhir Gabsi, "Tunisian youth: Demands for dignity in the context of challenging socio-political and economic upheaval," *Orient*, January 2021.

the commission needed to have one youth and one female representative on its team.⁹ Before the 2014 Parliamentary Elections, Tunisia's government officially instated youth quotas where every party list was required to have a youth candidate (aged 18-35) among their top four candidates. In practice, these quotas favored young women as parties attempted to 'double-dip' to fulfill both the youth and women's gender parity quotas. These quotas did lead to more representation for young women, but these female representatives were largely excluded from leadership positions. Generally, this formal institution achieved little for young women's empowerment in traditional political spaces.¹⁰

Before the 2018 local elections, the electoral code was rewritten so that every party list had to include a youth candidate in their top three positions and within every sixth consecutive member. The 2018 elections saw a massive increase in the number of youth participating as candidates. About 52% of the candidates were youth, and 37.6% of the seats at the municipal level were allocated to youth. But this increase in youth participation in formal politics at the local level did little to improve turnout rates and trust in government among young people. Experimental research shows that Tunisian youth care very little about the ages of political candidates and are not more likely to vote for or believe that a younger candidate is more likely to represent their interests than an older candidate.¹¹ Instead, younger people are drawn to candidates that are "outside the state" rather than those closer to their age. President Saïed was the favored candidate among young Tunisians in the 2019 presidential elections because he represented the anti-status quo and was a political neophyte.¹²

The predictability of Tunisian youth political behavior

There is some predictability to youth political behavior, therefore. First, youth in Tunisia, like youth worldwide, are almost always more likely to be drawn to informal activism than traditional politics and are almost always less likely to vote regardless of regime type.¹³ Second, despite the conventional wisdom that Tunisian youth abstain from voting due to lack of trust and perceptions of corruption, a large N quantitative study found that the strongest explanatory factors for youth voter abstention in Tunisia from 2011-2018 were socio-demographics, low political interest, and

⁹ Sabina Henneberg, *Managing Transition. The First Post-Uprising Phase in Tunisia and Libya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 27.

¹⁰ Jana Belschner, 2019. "Empowering Young Women? Gender and Youth Quotas in Tunisia," in *Double-Edged Politics on Women's Rights in The MENA Region*, ed. Hanane Darhour and Drude Dahlerouf (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 257-278.

¹¹ Kirstie Lynn Dobbs, "Youth Quotas and 'Jurassic Park' Politicians: Age as Heuristic for Vote Choice in Tunisia's New Democracy," *Democratization* 27, no. 6 (2020): 990-1005.

¹² Salah, Faïrouz ben Salah, "Young People: Kais Saïed's Secret Weapon in Tunisia's Presidential Election," *Middle East Eye*. Sept. 18, 2019.

¹³ Kirstie Lynn Dobbs, Dobbs, "Active on the Street, but Apathetic at the Ballot Box? Explaining Youth Behaviour in Tunisia's New Democracy," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, (2021): DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2021.1962243>.

a perception that voting is unimportant. Tunisian youth voter participation thus resembles youth in various contexts throughout the world. The life-cycle thesis that argues people are more likely to vote when they accrue “adulthood” type of responsibilities- which the state of the Tunisian economy largely denies this generation in “waiting”¹⁴ - applies to Tunisia.

Overall, young people’s political behavior is unlikely to change as long as the grievances still exist. Unemployment and corruption represented significant contributors to why youth chose to protest in 2011. They continue to mistrust the government, are less likely to vote, and are more likely to engage in informal forms of activism like protests and civil society.

Recent efforts have centered on progressing rights for members of the LGBT+ community. The Tunisian government attempted to shut down the LGBT+ rights group Shams, a youth-oriented group, in early 2020, arguing that the work of Shams violated Tunisian law under article 230 of the penal code and went against the traditions of Islam. Despite these arguments, a Tunisian appeals court rejected this case.¹⁵ Shams now has full authorization to continue its advocacy work. This example represents a burning ember for democracy.

Even during the pandemic, young people continue to lead protests demanding more civic freedoms and economic reform. In January 2021, protests broke out in Tunis demanding freedom for political prisoners and social justice. A leading Tunisian feminist and women’s rights activist, Henda Chennaoui, stated that “I have been a witness to every single demonstration since January and noticed a continuity in their attitude towards propaganda from both the government and the media. What is new this time...is the intersectionality of the movement. Slogans about women’s and LGBT+ rights can be heard alongside demands for social justice.”¹⁶

In sum, it is unlikely that young people in Tunisia will dramatically change their behavior if the socioeconomic marginalization of the country’s youthful population does not improve. Tunisian youth will continue to push back on unpopular policies and push forward for civil and political rights using their “choice” forms of participation - keeping the embers of Tunisia’s fledgling democracy burning despite continued corruption, political mistrust, and a “rogue” president.

As scholars, what we need to ask are new questions when it comes to measuring a country’s democratization process. There has been a lot of focus on Tunisia’s elections, but does electoral reform in terms of inclusion matter if the socioeconomic needs of the country are not being met? The fact that Tunisian youth are still active on the street and pushing for civil rights and liberties should represent a burning ember of hope for Tunisia’s democratic experiment. But, have civil

¹⁴ Abbott, Pamela, and Andrea Teti. "A generation in waiting for jobs and justice: Young people not in education employment or training in North Africa." *The Arab Transformations Working Paper Number 19* (Aberdeen: University of Aberdeen, 2017).

¹⁵ “Tunisia: Appeals Court Support LGBT Activist Group Shams,” *Rights Africa*, Feb. 22, 2020.

¹⁶ Henda Chennaoui and Giuseppe Acconcia, “Queer and Feminist Militants Are Shaping Tunisia’s Protests,” *Roar*. March 30, 2021.

society groups and political parties focused too much on building opportunities for youth involvement in traditional political spaces? Should CSOs and parties pivot towards meeting youth where they want to be - which is in more informal spaces for activism? Perhaps the focus should be on strengthening the connection between the informal and formal political spaces - to bring more legitimacy to the voices expressed in "street" activism where youth are already drawn to participation. Creating synergy between elite-centered theories and popular mobilization frameworks will offer novel insights for measuring the vitality of a precarious democracy.