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Has Tunisia's Democracy Failed to Convince its Youth? The Slow-Going of Democratic Socialization

→ Sarah Anne Rennick



Tunisian President Kais Saied speaks during the launch of Tunisia's first satellite 'Challenge-1', which was created by the Telnet telecommunications group, in Tunis, Tunisia, 22 March 2021 (Reissued 25 July 2021). © EPA-EFE/MOHAMED MESSARA



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Tunisia's current political crisis marks perhaps the most faltering moment in the process of democratic consolidation since 2013. Right now, attention is focused largely on the steps being taken by the president, Kais Saied, and the various flirtations with authoritarian tendencies being observed, including not only the amassing of power in his hands but also limitations on press freedoms, increased police abuse, and the use of judicial procedures to try political opponents in the name of fighting corruption. While Tunisia's transition process over the last 10 years has often been viewed by its citizens as inadequate or insincere, the dual economic and health crises over the last several years, along with the election to the presidency of the populist political outsider credited with being above the fray, has created a context in which this soft coup has been popularly accepted – at least for the time being. Now that the 30-day suspension of parliament has been extended, anxiety is growing regarding how the current impasse can be exited in the absence of a Constitutional Court.

Yet, the success of the democratic transition and the prospects for long-term democratic consolidation are not just dependent on whether Kais Saied has the intention or even the ability to find a roadmap out of this crisis of his own making. Nor does it just depend on the resilience of democratic institutions and the application of the constitution. Democratic transitions are by nature tenuous and non-linear processes. One key dimension to their success, beyond the institutional and procedural factors, is mass support for the democratic system itself. In some transitional contexts, such as in the post-Communist regimes in Eastern Europe,¹ this is achieved through economic gains and improved living conditions, where the benefits of a democratic regime are felt in daily life.

In the case of Tunisia, mired by economic deterioration since 2011, tangible day-to-day improvements since the transition have been largely absent for most, and indeed the correlation between the deteriorating economic context and decreased support to democracy has been seen in [Afrobarometer surveys](#) and other studies.² Support for democracy under transition, however, can also occur through processes of political socialization, and in particular the socialization of younger generations who had limited lived experience under previous regimes or systems of government, as for example in the case of East Germany and the consolidation of democratic political culture post-reunification.³ This socialization process of

2 [Has Tunisia's Democracy Failed to Convince its Youth? The Slow-Going of Democratic Socialization](#)



youth can act as a form of “generational replacement,” where democratic attitudes among youth overtime replace those of older cohorts socialized under different regimes.

In looking at a microcosm of Tunisian youth, though, and in particular those in marginalized governorates that have not benefited in socio-economic terms from the transition to democracy, evidence indicates that political socialization over the last 10 years has failed to produce widespread democratic attitudes. Socialization into democracy through institutional vectors – and in particular the public school system – has been deficient; instead, political understandings and values are still largely transmitted generationally within families and through social circles. Youth in marginalized areas – facing a lack of decent work options and persistent geographic and cultural isolation, but also not benefitting from an updated form of political socialization via the school system – continue to have little faith in institutions and the democratic process. As for the concept of democracy, it remains vague in both the abstract and practical sense. This lack of support for the current political system among the youth has important implications for long-term democratic consolidation, and in particular during this moment of crisis. Understanding where marginalized youth are in terms of their political beliefs and values, and where political socialization into democracy is occurring, can shed light on how the next months, and Kais Saied himself, will be popularly viewed and some of the longer-term implications for democratic consolidation.

Values and Attitudes: How Tunisian Youth Understand the Political System 10 Years On

Between January-April 2021, the Arab Reform Initiative carried out 12 focus group discussions, for a total of 109 participants, with Tunisian youth aged 18-35 in six cities representing marginalized areas: Foussana, Kasserine, Hajeb Laayoun, Kairouan, Chebika, and Medjez el Bab. The focus group discussions, which represented a large cross-section of educational and socio-economic backgrounds and gender parity, sought to assess participants’ attitudes towards democracy and how democracy as a concept and a practice is understood; what values



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participants associate with democracy and what democracy ideally looks like in practice to them; how participants' political beliefs and expectations have changed over time; why they do/do not vote and what factors mediate their choice of candidates; and what they identify as key challenges and priorities for their community and for Tunisia as a whole.

More broadly, the research sought to explore the process of socialization into democracy and the impact of the democratic transition process on youth values and political understandings at the 10-year anniversary of the revolution. The research design was based on a simple question: what differences can we observe in terms of political views between the youth of Gen Y (26-35) – the generation that actively led the protest movement, or at least thought of themselves as the revolutionary avant-garde – and Gen Z (18-25), the Millennials, who were still children in 2011 but have gone through the secondary and higher education process, as well as transition into adulthood, under democratic transition? And what differences in the process of political socialization – “learning by doing” vs. institutional socialization – can be observed based on generational cohort?

The discussions revealed an almost universally shared critique of the current political situation (meaning up until 25 July 2021). Political parties and elites, by and large viewed as corrupt and interested in personal gains only, are seen as the main culprits for the state of degradation of the country and its institutions. Likewise, the electoral process with regards to national level politics is viewed in a negative light. Outcomes of elections are called into question not because of procedural misconduct but because elected candidates are perceived as incompetent and/or ineffective. Indeed, for certain youth, the lack of concrete results in terms of economic improvement or standard of living in light of electoral processes has actually diminished the legitimacy of elections as part of Tunisia's democratic transition. At best, some youth conceded that elections are a necessary evil given the country's dictatorial past; however, in no cases was the electoral process for the parliament or the presidency viewed as contributing to true representation. The one exception has been the 2018 municipal elections: local authorities are perceived as being closer to the real issues of daily life, and responding better to grievances, and as such more legitimacy is conferred to municipal elections (this difference in legitimacy and perception of relevancy of



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the electoral process between the national and municipal levels can also be observed in the voter turn-out rates among youth more generally).

While political elites were roundly criticized in the focus group discussions, one political figure stood out: Kais Saied. Perceived as somehow different than other political leaders, interest in the current president is based on a belief in his ability to put forth a “moral rehabilitation” of Tunisian politics. This idea of moral rehabilitation in fact came up repeatedly across all the focus groups when discussing the problems with Tunisia’s political scene today. In assessing, for example, the protest movements taking place in the country’s capital in early 2021 (where groups mobilized to denounce the poor economic conditions, government corruption, and police abuses), many of the youth participants, themselves quite removed from the social and political context of the capital, rejected the legitimacy of this mobilization. As they explained, the protests did not respect the “morals” of the country or address legitimate grievances. These protests in Tunis, which were among other symbols overtly queer-friendly and put forth demands including the legalization of cannabis, were viewed by many focus group participants as disrespectful given protester clashes with the police but also given that demands were not related to the socio-economic conditions of the country.

Indeed, for the youth who took part in the focus groups, the improvement of the political situation is linked to a rehabilitation of morality in politics but also the values of respect, equality, and justice with regards to redistribution and access to services. This moral rehabilitation, moreover, is deemed necessary not only within the political sphere but within the public sphere more broadly (administrations, media, etc.). While for many of the youth participants this moral rehabilitation includes the fight against corruption and the elimination of false political promises, a not insignificant number of participants also identified the inclusion of religious values as necessary for improving the political situation in Tunisia.

When it comes to the concept of democracy itself, however, participants admit that both its practice and abstract meaning remain quite vague. Likewise, when discussing the priorities for the democratic transition, while some participants cited institutional features such as the creation of the Constitutional Court or constitutional amendments, others cited the permanent dissolution of parliament, or the gagging of political party leaders, as means to ameliorate Tunisia’s political



system. For still others, the priorities for the democratic transition lie not in institutions or practices but in the revitalization of the economy.

Perhaps more telling of political attitudes, the views towards the country's past and the question of what has been gained since the revolution demonstrates a certain lack of distinction between the system under Ben Ali and that in place since 2011. For many, and in particular those representing Gen Z, memory of life under Ben Ali or how power was practiced remains either unknown or only vaguely understood. Indeed, for some, the view towards the Ben Ali period is actually favourable, marked by a period of security and stability and prosperity that was overturned by the revolution. And while some, and in particular those of Gen Y who have more memory of the pre-2011 system, do acknowledge problems with the previous regime, including human rights abuses and the lack of freedom of speech, many state that the situation under Ben Ali was nonetheless preferable to the current state of perpetual political deadlock and economic deterioration.

This is not to say, however, that democratic attitudes and support to democracy are entirely lacking among youth in Tunisia's marginalized regions. Discussions at times pointed to a need for citizens to show tolerance of differing ideas, and the necessity of a consciousness-raising not only among political elites but also the public at large regarding the key issues at stake in Tunisia and the political dynamics at play. Likewise, for some participants, faith in NGOs and civil society, as well as syndicates, and the role they place in protecting and extending rights, was expressed (this was particularly expressed by those of Gen Y). Finally, most seemed to acknowledge the need for an independent media as a necessity for the correct functioning of the political system.

The various attitudes and values point to ways in which political socialization into democracy is succeeding, but also importantly, where it is falling behind. Examining how political socialization and knowledge of democracy and democratic practices is occurring among Tunisian youth reveals both opportunities and threats to democratic consolidation.

Vectors of Political Socialization and the Challenge to Generational Replacement



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The process of political socialization of course never produces citizens with exactly the same understandings, values, and attitudes. Differences, at times quite important, in perceptions and interpretations of politics and policy preferences will always exist, regardless of the process of political socialization. Social identities and differences in social location, including gender, geographic setting, social class, religious/ethnic group, but also cultural and social circles and sub-culture belonging, all contribute to the formation of political ideas and values. Moreover, the process of political socialization is complex and involves a number of different and interacting factors, including historical and social context and the dominant political features and socializing agents of any particular moment, and when major socio-historical events occur within the lifecycle. Research on political socialization has shown that late adolescence/young adulthood represents a highly impressionable period when new political values and attitudes can be adopted, especially via participation in socio-historical events,⁴ engagement in organizations outside of work/school, and interaction with media. Nonetheless, primary socialization during childhood and pre-adolescence, which occurs through school and family, creates broad orientations that generally persist over life.⁵

In examining political socialization among youth in marginalized areas in Tunisia, what becomes apparent is that primary socialization through school has thus far failed to contribute significantly to transmitting knowledge of democracy or building democratic attitudes. Given that the two micro-generations of youth under investigation here capture schooling under two different regimes, evidence of differences in terms of political socialization via education would be expected. However, in the focus group discussions, participants revealed that discussion of democracy in the lived and immediate sense, or the changes observed in the political system in Tunisia since 2011, did not figure in any meaningful way in their education. And indeed, while history and civic education programs have existed in the public school system since 1956, the curriculum has not been updated in a significant way since 2002.⁶ On the contrary, the Ministry of Education has resisted making any major updates to textbooks and school curriculum with regards to 2011 and the new political system in place, precisely because the country is still under transition and ideological/political conflicts remain points of distress.⁷ As such, the manner in which concepts of citizenship, rights, duties, and participation

7 [Has Tunisia's Democracy Failed to Convince its Youth? The Slow-Going of Democratic Socialization](#)



Arab Reform Initiative

are taught remains abstract and remote, designed to promote political consensus and an absence of reflection on authoritarianism.⁸

Likewise, the teaching of the revolution of 2011 and the rupture that the post-2011 period represents is largely absent from official curricula. Individual teachers take different approaches to presenting the regime and system of the past and the meaning of the revolution, based on their own interpretations and sensibilities to the current political climate. As a result, there is no broad project through the education system to put forth new notions of democratic citizenship and its practice, or to provide a collective framing for understanding the differences between the past system and the present one, or for understanding the current challenges and opportunities for Tunisia's transition. This, combined with other problems with the public school system in Tunisia's marginalized regions (dilapidated infrastructure, poor quality and relevance of educational programs),⁹ has meant that formal education is not acting as primary vector for socialization into Tunisia's new democratic system. Instead, the focus group discussions reveal that political socialization is still largely occurring through generational transmission within families, along with exchanges in close social circles (such as in cafés and youth centers). As a result, differences in democratic attitudes observed in the focus group discussion are not observed along micro-generational lines but rather social identities.

The longer-term implication is that, barring major changes to history and civics education curricula, political socialization into democracy will continue to be piecemeal instead of generational, which poses a threat to the consolidation of democratic attitudes at the societal level. Yet, even in the absence of democratic socialization via school, the focus groups also reveal that the occurrence of a major historical event during adolescence/young adulthood – here, the 2011 revolution – and participation in organizational contexts related to the revolution are contributing to the adoption, at least partially, of democratic attitudes and beliefs. This is particularly obvious among youth of Gen Y.

The experiential knowledge of older youth of the prior regime and its abuses, as well as their own participation in the mass protest movement of 2011, translates to a greater esteem for freedom of expression and assembly afforded under the current system. Likewise, for those who have become involved in civil society and

8 Has Tunisia's Democracy Failed to Convince its Youth? The Slow-Going of Democratic Socialization



various forms of engagement since 2011, and in particular those who work or volunteer with NGOs or who are involved in syndicates, there is an expanded notion of rights and the importance of active participation in civic life. The flipside of this coin, however, can be seen in those of Gen Z who do not participate in such organizational contexts. Not only do many express a lack of knowledge of what exactly an NGO or syndicate is in theory or practice, but they also express mistrust of any form of organizational structure given their deep misgivings with the current political system.

Nonetheless, participation in such organizational contexts remains limited, especially in marginalized regions, and does not seem to be contributing either to faith in the current political system or to firm positions with regards to Tunisia's democratic transition. In other words, while this secondary political socialization via observation of and participation in major socio-historical processes has allowed for certain democratic attitudes and values to be adopted, we are not yet seeing among youth the widespread adoption of democratic political culture.

Implications for Democratic Consolidation

Studies from other contexts of transition, including post-Communist regimes, demonstrate that political socialization is an important factor in democratic consolidation and can indeed act as a lever to compliment economic gains after transition.¹⁰ Yet, the importance of socialization into democracy may be even more important in cases where economic gains are absent. This may prove particularly true in the coming weeks and months, as the still highly-fluid situation of the current political crisis crystalizes. For youth in Tunisia's marginalized areas, the almost universal denigration of the current political context alongside a lack of both abstract and practical knowledge of the democratic political system means that its maintenance – especially in light of the dual economic and health crises – may not be deemed a priority. Further, the popularity of Kais Saied, based on his break with traditional elites and his ability to imbue a sense of moral rehabilitation into politics, could translate to an acceptance of a prolonging of the current state of exception under his authority. This does not mean that a wholesale return to



authoritarianism would be accepted; on the contrary, youth even in highly marginalized regions share political values of respect, fairness, and redistribution that are themselves indicative of a different discourse on state-society relations that has emerged since 2011. The danger, however, lies in the potential acceptance of the abrogation of the democratic political process.

While it is obviously too early to declare that Tunisia's democratic transition has come to an end, or to see in Kais Saied a new strongman of North Africa, the current crisis demonstrates why an emphasis on political socialization into democracy should figure into transition processes in order to promote democratic consolidation. While youth participation in historical events and organizational contexts that are linked to the transition clearly do lead to changes in attitudes and the adoption of democratic values, these are not in themselves sufficient for promoting mass support to the system itself. There is obviously no magical formula for democratic consolidation, and the dual economic and health crises are certainly important obstacles to building mass support for Tunisia's new political order. Nonetheless, focusing on socialization via the education system should figure into any meaningful reform efforts. Updating the school curriculum and utilizing the study of the country's recent past as well as civics programs to put forth new notions and practices of democratic citizenship should be seen as important steps in this process.



Endnotes

1. See for example Joakim Ekman and Jonas Linde, "Communist Nostalgia and the Consolidation of Democracy in Central and Eastern Europe," *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 21(3), 2005.
2. See for example Ragnar Weilandt, "Socio-Economic Challenges to Tunisia's Democratic Transition," *European View* 17(2), 2018; and the particularly prescient Sharan Grewal, "Tunisian Democracy at a Crossroads," *The Brookings Institution*, 2019.
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4. [4] See in particular Karl Mannheim, *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953.
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