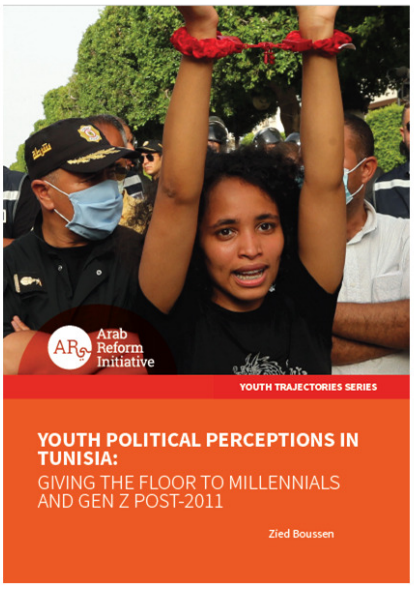
Arab Reform Initiative

Press Release, 23 June 2022

Tunisia: What lessons for effective youth participation in politics?





Tunis, 23 June 2022 - The Arab Reform Initiative (ARI) is releasing today two reports entitled: "Youth political participation in post-2011 Tunisia: Exploring the impact of the youth quota system through the prism of local municipal councillors" and “Youth perceptions of politics in Tunisia: Giving the floor to millennials and Gen Z post-2011”

These reports are the outcome of a project conducted by ARI from January 2021 to June 2022 in partnership with Tunisian associations We Start and Houmetna and aimed at consolidating the political participation of youth in the governorates of Kairouan, Kasserine and Beja. This work comes in a context where youth trust in the political system is low, with 8.8% in rural areas and 31.1% in urban areas, according to the World Bank's 2014 Youth Report. This lack of trust is reflected in the low representation of young people in political spheres: the average age of the 2019-2024 parliament is 51.8 years, according to data from Marsad Majles. These trends feed and reinforce each other, leaving an increasingly small space for young people in politics.

"These reports seek to understand why young Tunisians particularly those from regions that have been marginalized have not found their way to the political space that opened up after the 2011 revolution," says Zied Boussen, a research fellow at ARI. "This issue is all the more urgent today given the crisis the democratic transition in Tunisia is experiencing."

What impact for youth quotas in municipal elections?

The report "Youth political participation in post-2011 Tunisia: Exploring the impact of the youth quota system through the prism of local municipal councillors" is the first qualitative research work to thoroughly explore the participation of elected municipal officials under the age of 35 in local politics. From the act of candidacy to the political future of these local elected representatives, through to the 2018 electoral campaign, this research explores the different stages of youth participation in the municipal elections where they obtained 37% of the seats. The study also questioned elected officials about their backgrounds and their entourages to better understand what distinguishes them from young people not involved in politics. Ten individual interviews were conducted with young local councillors elected in the 2018 municipal elections through the mandatory youth

quotas imposed by Article 49 of the 2014 electoral law on candidate lists.

The report shows that young people who entered politics thanks to the youth quotas for municipal elections are highly educated and benefit from primary (family) or secondary (student unionism, civil society) socialization that facilitated their entry into politics by familiarizing them with the public sphere. None of these elected officials initiated their own candidacy; they were co-opted by lists led by older people (former teachers or family members involved in political parties). The work of these young elected officials in municipal councils is often made difficult by other elected officials' perception of their age (synonymous with inexperience) and, for women, their gender. However, by intersecting age and gender, the research shows that youth is not a strong enough identity to create age-based alliances within a city council.

"Mandatory quotas are quite effective in bringing young people into the spheres of representative politics. However, they can do nothing to diversify the origin of local elected officials beforehand, which requires a more thorough work of democratic socialization through school programs to give better opportunities to all," said Malek Lakhal, researcher fellow at ARI. "Quotas are also insufficient unless supported by measures to accompany young elected representatives in familiarizing themselves with municipal work and the laws governing it, since they are often faced with people who have already occupied these positions during the time of Ben Ali."

Generations Y and Z: Is there a difference between the youth who made the revolution and those who grew up during the democratic transition?

The report "Youth perceptions of politics in Tunisia: Giving the floor to millennials and Gen Z post-2011" is one of the first research studies on youth in Tunisia to explore the hypothesis of a difference between young people belonging to Generation Y (now aged between 26 and 35), who lived through and participated in the 2011 Revolution, and Generation Z (now aged between 18 and 25), who grew up during the democratic transition.

To test this hypothesis, twelve focus groups were organized in six localities: Kairouan, Hajeb Laayoune and Chebika in the governorate of Kairouan, Kasserine

and Foussana in the governorate of Kasserine, as well as Medjez el Bab, in the governorate of Beja. In each locality, two focus groups were organized: one with young people of generation Z and one with young people of generation Y.

The study shows that the differences in political perception are quite significant when it comes to the Old Regime: Generation Z, which did not experience the Ben Ali rule, has a more positive perception of it than Generation Y. However, both generations agree on an overall negative assessment of the transition while recognizing the benefits of a democratic political life. The report highlights the demands for the moralization of the public sphere emanating from young people from both generations, in a context where political life is shaken by daily scandals while economic and social issues are left on the sidelines. Access to health services, transportation, and a good education are all demands that transcend generational affiliation. In fact, it is the socio-political environment of young people that shapes their understanding of politics and determines their allegiance. The "youth" does not constitute a homogeneous or politically coherent group: generations, territorial affiliations, class affiliations, and values are all necessary segments to understand the way young Tunisians think 11 years after the revolution.

Recommendations

The two studies call on the Tunisian authorities to maintain and strengthen the mechanisms for including young people in representative politics. On the front end, a revision of school curricula, particularly in civic education, should make democracy a more lasting cornerstone of political life in Tunisia. Looking forward, the Tunisian authorities must put in place mechanisms to assist young local elected and familiarize them with their functions. ARI further call for strengthening youth quotas on electoral lists, making it mandatory for legislative elections and lifting the ban on running for president that weighs on those under the age of 35. These reforms would send a positive message to young people by removing the paternalistic principle that has prevailed until now: the more important the election, the less welcome young people are.

This research also allowed ARI to accompany young participants in the focus groups in Kairouan and Foussana, and help them put forward one of the public policy

problems they face as young people and to provide a concrete response. This materialized in Foussana through the organization in March 2022 of the Foussana theatre days, and, in Kairouan through the organization of an advocacy campaign reinforced by a qualitative study conducted by the youth on the state of transportation in the Kairouan governorate. This support showed that involving young people in the early stages of a project, particularly through familiarization with the research methods used, allows for a better targeting of the problems encountered by young people. Initially, workshops were organized to better identify the needs of youth and to find answers. Then, the youth themselves executed these projects with the assistance of the associations Houmetna and We Start, which allowed them to become more familiar with the execution of projects and advocacy of public policies.

Our work on Youth Political Participation in Tunisia:

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

Tunisian Youth and Political Life: From Stagnation to Revival? By Zied Boussen and Islem Mbarki

More about the Arab Reform Initiative:

*The **Arab Reform Initiative** is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, gender equality and social justice.*

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- We produce original research informed by local experiences and partner with institutions to achieve impact across the Arab world and globally
- We empower individuals and institutions to develop their own concept of policy solutions
- We mobilize stakeholders to build coalitions for positive change

Our aim is to see vibrant democratic societies emerge and grow in the region.

Founded in 2005, the Arab Reform Initiative is governed by a Plenary of its members and an Executive Committee.

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