Arab Reform Initiative

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# Youth participation in Tunisia's elections: Some possible solutions

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Tunisian Chamber of Deputies ©Wikimedia/Moumou82

Tunisian youth's limited participation in political life is nothing new. It dates back to before the January 2011 revolution. Tunisian youth did indeed play a major role in driving the revolution, whose main slogan was "Freedom, Dignity, and Employment", but have reverted to political objection and aversion when it comes to participating in public affairs due to several factors. Party conflicts and the collapse of economic and social indexes have further widened the gap between Tunisian youth and their aspirations, and the directions and choices politicians made during the first decade of the democratic transition.

The recent elections provide clear examples of the lack of youth participation, reflecting their limited presence – both as voters and as candidates:

- The 2008 National Youth Consultation showed that 83% of Tunisian youth are not interested in political life and that 64% of youth are not interested in participating in elections or engaging in associations.
- A study by "Moraqiboon Network", which specialized in observing the elections in 2018, showed that 47% of Tunisian youth are not interested in political life and local affairs.
- Based on the results of the Constituent Assembly elections in 2011, it was confirmed that people aged between 23 and 40 accounted for only 10% of the total elected representatives – although this age group represented 52% of the population, according to the 2010 census.
- Youth were represented in the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP) during the 2014 elections with 28 elected deputies under the age of 35, all of them women.
- During the 2018 municipal elections, 52% of the candidates were young people aged between 18 to 35, and 24% were aged between 36 to 45. The winning candidates from these two cohorts accounted for 35% of all candidates for the municipal elections.
- Newly registered youth in the electoral roll in 2019, in preparation for the legislative and presidential elections, reached 56%, although only 6.17% of them voted in the presidential elections that same year.
- According to the statistics by the Ministry of Communication Technologies, 534,915 people participated in the National Youth Consultation on the dedicated digital platform between January and March 2022 out of a total

of 7,065,628 voters registered in the electoral roll and 2,946,628 voters in the 2019 presidential elections. 46.3% of participants in the Consultation were aged between 30 and 50, noting that participation in the Consultation was open to young people aged 16 and above.

In terms of legislation, Article 133 of the 2014 Constitution stipulates that the State guarantees the representation of women and youth in elected bodies. Chapter 19 of the 2019 Tunisian Electoral Law No. 76, also stipulates that every Tunisian man or woman voter has the right to submit his/her candidacy to the Assembly of the Representatives of the People, provided he/she:

- has been a Tunisian national for more than 10 years,
- Is aged at least 23 at the time of submission of the candidacy
- Is not convicted of a crime by judicial ruling that prohibits him or her from running in elections

Chapter 25 also stipulates that every list of candidates running for elections in a constituency with four or more seats must include among the first four a male or female candidate under 35 years old; otherwise, it will be deprived of half of the total value of the public funding grant.

Chapter 40 indicates that any Muslim female or male voter with Tunisian nationality since birth may stand as a candidate for the presidency of the republic. On the day he/she submits his/her candidacy, they must be at least 35 years of age. If they hold a nationality other than Tunisian citizenship, they shall include in their candidacy file a pledge to renounce the other nationality when declared President of the Republic.

Chapter 49 (bis) of the Electoral Law provides for a penalty for disqualifying the lists of candidates running for municipal elections that fail to ensure a young candidate among the first three names, for a total of six candidates. Chapter 117 also stipulates that in case of a tie in the results of the municipal elections, the younger candidate would be considered the winner.

In this context, it is worth noting that the Palestinian electoral system states that the eligible age of candidacy for presidential elections is 40 years old (Article 12,

Paragraph 2) and the eligible age for candidacy for parliament is 28 years old (Article 15, Paragraph 2).

The Moroccan general regulations for elections and referendums have provided for automatic youth registration by including them directly in the electoral roll as soon as they obtain their identity cards. In contrast, the Independent High Authority for Elections (IHAE) in Tunisia conducted time-limited campaigns during the 2014, 2018, and 2019 elections, to enable young students to register immediately after obtaining their national identification cards, through IHAE teams going to colleges to register students eligible to pass the baccalaureate exam.

Therefore, youth disinterest in elections is not an isolated phenomenon. It has been surging in many countries with well-established democratic processes. The issue could be explained by several historical, social, and economic factors. These are factors that impede any meaningful engagement by youth in public life, especially political life.

As shown in practice, during the Tunisian revolution, some organizations and associations failed to play an effective role in educating youth to participate in the elections in several places. This contrasts with the efforts made by Moroccan associations which launched a motivational campaign entitled *"Taala Ennakheb"*(Come Vote) by targeting young people in the recent parliamentary elections, where they organized awareness-raising campaigns and field activities. However, in Tunisia, the active associations in this field did not launch an explicit campaign and limited their action to comprehensive awareness campaigns, except for some associations for persons with disabilities but the scope of their campaign remained limited.

Furthermore, some reasons for the rejection of politics are subjective and shared by many young people who believe that the visions and programs advertised by the politicians do not represent them nor reflect their choices and concerns. This might explain much of their disinterest to participate, as they see elections as the process that establishes the system they reject. The lack of family motivation and opportunities for political discussions underlining the importance of participation in the elections should not be ignored. These reasons are further confirmed by the

absence of public spaces for regular dialogues with youth, be it directly through dedicated platforms and forums or via the online networks most popular among youth. Moreover, the current educational and cultural system does not respond well to elements of modernization, be it technologically or cognitively, while at the same time not opening real areas for dialogue and civic participation, or offering theoretical and applied concepts of democracy, elections, public affairs and involvement in associations.

The negative, repulsive, and opportunistic behavior of some politicians and decision-makers in positions of authority also plays a role in youth's lack of political participation. The same applies to their mistrust of political parties and their leaders for many complex reasons, namely party elites staying the same without any new blood, and lack of democratic processes to manage parties and renew leadership structures; this combined pushed youth to further shun from party politics.

While the youth in the diaspora clearly do not share the same concerns and interests as those residing in Tunisia, candidates do not make speeches that address these differences. This makes diaspora youth's reluctance to participate in the elections – both as voters and candidates – even stronger because they feel that there is no real interest in their concerns.

In terms of communication, youth are not given the opportunity to participate in televised discussions or other forums during the electoral period. Media outlets favor well-known political figures to ensure a greater reach of viewers and listeners. There are also no field studies that include the regions with the least participation rates in the elections and that identify and analyze the causes, demonstrate the peculiarities, and present ways to address them. Effective mechanisms to stimulate youth participation in party action have not been established. No budgets have been allocated to support youth participation in public life or in the activities of the elected bodies, whether as members or as an active civil society through recommendations, project development and delivery.

The electoral process is very complicated, especially the rules regulating the activities, public funding, and calculating the funding cap of electoral campaigns. These are all issues that require a certain level of commitment and follow-up, since

negligence or the lack of understanding of some aspects may expose the candidate to criminal liability and financial sanctions. The same applies to the existing voting methods that require vertical and horizontal parity and the presence of a certain number of young people in the lists, also known as the quota system. However, in practice, it has failed to guarantee the presence of either women or youth in the elected bodies: a quota for candidacy and not for the awarded seats.

It should be noted that although some believed that the quota system would safeguard the representation of a social group through a certain number of deputies in elected bodies, several experiences have proven that this method would yield limited results unless paired with other legal and field measures. The results of the Moroccan experience in this regard are perhaps the best evidence: young voters under the age of 40 were granted 30 seats out of a total of 395 parliamentary seats in the Chamber of Deputies. However, this regulation was later amended by securing additional seats for youths to enhance the representation of women, thereby preserving a quota of 90 seats for women. This amendment was justified by the fact that establishing a youth quota system had not achieved its desired outcome of increasing youth participation in the elected bodies. On the contrary, granting the youth the seats seemed like handing out gifts. Similarly, young voter turnout had not surged following the adoption of the quota system targeting them. According to a study by law and press experts: “The National Youth List presented young people who were unable to innovate to achieve political representation and interaction, to find new ways to redirect their potentials to achieve the broader goal and realize that consolidating democracy is a long and arduous process that forces young partisans, instead of rent-seeking, to work on creating a movement within their parties, by calling for new ways of organizing and horizontal structures that would make young partisans most competent to drive a sound democratic transition”. (Al-Quds Al-Arabi newspaper, 18 January 2021)

In this context, youth participation is not officially framed in a national participatory strategy for youth in public life and elections. However, this is could be one of the basic solutions to truly motivate youth participation in elections. It could also aim to find mechanisms and programs to help youth change their views

of the stereotype of participation in political life, thus helping refute that political participation depends on age on the pretext that political action is only for the elderly. The State can contribute to this effort by setting up training programs for public life, developing educational curricula with theoretical and practical approaches, or partnering with relevant ministries, such as the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Communication Technologies, and the Ministry of Interior, as they are currently in charge of local communities.

Another possible solution is to change the electoral system to allow greater representation of youth by adopting a voting system that gives them a real chance to engage in elected bodies and not only in candidate lists, by merging different voting methods. For example, this could include voting based on the choice of lists and on people at the same time, provided that the minimum number of young candidates who are selected should be within appropriate limits to achieve wide representation in the seats acquired after the elections. This is achieved through fit-for-purpose legislation, likely resulting from partnership with associations specialized in the electoral field, especially youth associations.

Considering the specificity of communicating with youth, it is also possible to rely more on social media. The Independent High Authority for Elections has organized campaigns on elections held since 2011 on various social media pages, but no studies have been undertaken to gauge youth responsiveness or to assess the impact of the electoral period on their responsiveness. It should be noted, however, that the Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication has conducted some studies related to the presence of women in debate platforms during electoral periods.

Furthermore, efforts should be made to help youth go from participating virtually in protests behind digital devices to participating physically in the field as citizens. Although most movements in the streets during the revolution and the first stages of the democratic transition were carried out mainly by the youth, there was no continuity in these movements. Youth movements related to public affairs became linked to the occurrence of specific events and were predominantly social.

Actions are being taken to encourage youth to participate in the associations that supervise elections monitoring because their assessments and positions regarding

the elections would be more informed and closer to reality compared to other youths.

The Independent High Authority for Elections should play a more effective role by developing activities, training, awareness-raising programs, and movements targeting youth to educate them on the electoral system and how to manage the electoral campaign.

It would be useful as well to establish legal frameworks that motivate parties to build up their young base with aligned principles and choices, to train them on meaningful engagement in political work, build knowledge in this field, and expand the scope and effectiveness of the Child Parliament by changing its voting method and bolstering its prerogatives. This would thereby make it a recommendation powerhouse in several fields, such as early childhood development and the environment.

The different electoral experiences at the international level, the diversity and complexity of the adopted systems at times to ensure an effective and efficient presence of youth in public life, particularly to participate in elections as voters and as candidates, do not fall under a fixed formula with a clear starting point and clear results. Some systems have adopted the quota system in elections and others left the choice to the voters, while others have relied on motivation by providing financial incentives through public funding allocations. Others still have sought to find mechanisms where all candidates participate without affirmative action in the name of enshrining equal opportunity for all candidates running for elections.

Certainly, all these different legislative options alone cannot produce successful experiences that would achieve the best representation of youth unless they are paired with a multi-dimensional methodical and participatory action in which the State, with its official institutions, parties, organizations, and associations are all active partners.

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