

THE REGRESS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN POLITICAL LIFE IN TUNISIA

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1 - Regress and reluctance

Numerous studies and reports issued by research institutions and by national and international institutions and organizations confirm the regress of young people from participating in political life and their growing reluctance to contribute to it.

This regress includes the diminishing contribution to the exercise of civil and political rights by joining parties, civil organizations and associations, voting and running for public office and holding them, participating in election campaigns, conferences and seminars concerned with raising community issues and participating in voluntary activities for the public interest in the political, social, economic, environmental and other fields related to the sphere of public affairs or in the organized implication in political decision-making and the effective exercise of this right.

This growing reluctance is confirmed by many and varied indicators, the most important of which are the participation rates in student council elections in university institutions, and the number of engagements in parties, trade unions, youth organizations and civil society organizations.

This is also confirmed by the participation rates in the municipal, legislative and presidential elections (despite some figures for the presidential elections in 2019) as a general trend of youth's political and electoral behavior.

In addition, the youth regress takes many directions, as it appears in different forms according to the different youth group concerned with it (countryside/cities, universities/institutes, factories/industrial structures, public services/private sector), according to gender, age group, unemployment and social origin; The political reluctance of young people raises different stakes and issues of specificity and refers to intertwined reasons and to multiple meanings.

2- The contexts and stakes of the political reluctance of youth

The participation of young people in political life is fed by the legislative and legal frameworks that encourage this; it is also affected either negatively and positively by the type of the prevailing political culture, the behavior of political

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elites as well as the type of their performance, the type of mobilization capabilities of parties, civil organizations and unions, as well as the attractiveness of their programs and discourse and the ability of leaders to mobilize the youth crowd. All of these are direct factors that normalize, strengthen and weaken participation.

At the same time, reluctance as well as participation is a social production and political-cultural behavior that is rooted and weakened within the framework of social transformations and changes of various depths and also in certain historical, social and political contexts in which the state and the various social institutions play important roles in making youth behavior in general and political in particular. The climate of freedom or tyranny, the degree of enjoyment of individual and collective rights, the nature of the political system, the economic situation, prosperity, welfare, poverty, unemployment, the reality of social justice, fragility, marginalization, education, the type of social structures, the mentality and the value system (urging participation, criticism, suggestion and initiative), the family (the inhibitory or tolerant authority and the distribution of roles), the type of social education (which prepares non-adults to assume future responsibilities by referring to desirable qualities in the individual) and forms mental images and awareness of individuals and their representations. All are, in this regard, overlapping levels, that create social frameworks that encourage and motivate the participation of individuals, that root them as a behavior and as a choice or that hindrance them.

From the independence until the last decade of the last century, Young people in Tunisia represented a distinguished field for political investment due to the significant level of legitimacy of the state and the ruling elites, and the popular acceptance of public policies. Until the end of the seventy's, this official political investment was accompanied by social achievements in terms of

employment, education, access to the university, and generally the social development of several different groups.

With the beginning of the nineties, official policies invested in the youth sector through entertainment, sports, media, and a proliferation of national consultations on the issue of youth participation. The nineties also witnessed a significant regress in political freedoms, while the university represented the most important social space, incubating student's political activities that rejected the state's economic, political and social options.

As for the last decade, despite the increase in the level of individual and collective freedoms, starting in 2011, and the emergence of hundreds of parties and associations, and the accompanying political transformations and legislative and legal changes related to political life; The democratic transition failed to consolidate political youth participation. The "revolution" in Tunisia created a general atmosphere that encouraged a wide range of citizens to engage in political activity through partisan or civic association activity.

The presidential and legislative elections in 2011 were an expression of an important shift in the level of popular participation, especially for youth, in public affairs. Political life benefited greatly from people's desires, aspirations, expectations, and their belief at that time that they had a real opportunity to change their life and living conditions. The new emerging political elites and newly formed parties succeeded in bringing in many sectors of the public, and their discourse managed to attract different groups of youth to engagement and political activism, and even enabled young people to assume party leadership and succeeded in presiding electoral lists, and obtaining seats in the new parliament. All this introduced an unusual political vitality and dynamism into public political life.

However, ten years after the "revolution" in Tunisia, one of the results of the political choices

adopted in the social and economic fields is that a negative image of politics and political elites has emerged, and the participation of young people in public political life has significantly decreased. This means that an important demographic group abandoned its social roles, with what this means in terms of an abnormal condition and the various and negative future repercussions it carries, affecting especially the ability of society and its various institutions to mobilize all its human resources and its ability to benefit from all available expertise, especially from that group as a social actor, influencing the processes of social change and caring for its issues, having the capabilities to suggest and formulate solutions. This also means the inability of young people to achieve and fully enjoy their citizenship.

Another consequence of the youth's reluctance to participate is that public political life is emptied of an important level of ability to pursue burning societal issues, and thus the ability of political institutions and political actors to create appropriate answers to fundamental issues. With the decline in participation, the ability of parties and elites to create legitimacy around their projects and proposals and to establish political action based on broad acceptability also diminishes. From another analysis angle, the retreat of young people and their growing reluctance depleted - in most cases - the political legitimacy of parties and political institutions when electoral participation declines in an accelerated manner, or is at weak rates. Also, a break-down occurs with the entirety of the political life and leads to a kind of acute aversion towards politics in general and towards the political elites in particular.

3 - The most important factors responsible of the regress of youth political participation

Youth political participation is an activity, action and behavior and is not just a circumstantial trend or belief, so it is not isolated from the general contexts of the society. The economic and

social conditions experienced by young people affect the pattern and form of their political participation. Employment, unemployment, education, violence, crime, immigration, the environment, and other current issues have turned into an obstacle to the assimilation of young people into political life, as they are, in general, all factors that affect in different proportions the desire of young people to participate in political life, in addition to the methods of socialization that include obstructive accumulations in the field of political upbringing especially among youth. Therefore, youth political participation is one of the forms of community participation that includes information, experiences, skills, and political trends that are the result of the cooperation of various institutions of the society, and the State and political parties are at the forefront of these institutions influencing this responsibility.

The responsibility of the state :

It seems clear today that the public policies directed at youth and the accompanying options and methods of implementation in the areas concerned with them have failed to formulate successful and effective answers regarding the various problems of youth. These public policies have not been able to create a locomotive that encourages youth involvement in political life, nor have been able to turn into incubating practices for them. Any observer of the political life can notice the disconnection between the "claim" of the official discourse, its extreme concern for youth on the one hand, and the low degree of conviction of the content of this speech, its usefulness and its effectiveness among broad groups of youth. This rupture turns into an engine that nourishes abstinence, rejection and protest, as it creates psychological and behavioral barriers and deepens them each time. The State has not succeeded in properly exploiting the context of democratic transition to formulate a public project in which the youth are involved. This growing failure cast political shadows on many groups of youth with different features, turning

“politics and political affairs” at the bottom of the list of their life concerns.

The responsibility of the Political Parties :

In the early years of the “revolution” the parties benefited from the momentum of the new dynamic of political life, as their number multiplied, and large number of Tunisian youth were involved with them, and this was considered a social gain for them that establishes the permanence of their activity. However, this political gain quickly faded, and the parties’ inability to permanently invest the proceeds of this important transformation was evident. This deficit is manifested in the following points:

- * The lack of real interest in youth problems other than mentioning them as points in party documents or electoral publications.
- * Weak practical interest and the reduction of the youth issue in the youth and women’s affairs department / office without organizational roots.
- * Weak participation of party youth in decision-making, strategy development and goals setting.
- * Dealing with young people as a voting stock and being satisfied with addressing them at election events.
- * Poor communication performance and the use of faint speech with vocabulary that is incapable of attracting the youthful audience to what they consider their issues and needs.
- * The low effectiveness of using modern technologies for communication and media, which affected the true follow-up of the expectations of the youthful audience.
- * The absence of party leaderships that would appeal to the youth crowd and leave a positive impression.
- * The weak performance of the political elites, which deepened the negative image formed among young people around them.

Strategies to address the regress of youth participation in political life

These strategies aim to reduce the lack of interest of young people in issues of public affairs and to encourage the different youth groups to actively and practically engage in political and civic life. These strategies fall under the heading of public policies set by the State, including areas of public intervention, the characteristics of options and the legislative effort. At the same time, youth participation is the subject of parties work strategies, and a priority in the dashboard of their activities and their options.

However, the success of these strategies - regardless of their content - requires attention to:

- * The participation of young people, even if it is political in its dimension, has a social depth par excellence, containing the engines that feed them, the obstacles to blocking them and the obstacles that hinder them, that are of a sociological, historical and economic nature.
- * As participation, it does not affect only the general political issue, but all social affairs, social lifestyle, and the type of coexistence.

Moreover, the effectiveness of these strategies depends on a number of rules, the most important of which are:

- a - It must be based on the real political will of decision-makers and of the political class and the elites concerned, which enables prospects for its adoption as an urgent and certain matter within a societal and political project.
- b - It must benefit from the political consensus of official bodies, governmental organizations and political actors concerned with youth affairs, which will protect them against non-implementation.
- c - It must be managed, implemented, and evaluated in a participatory manner, which gives it the maximum of dynamism and insures it against the crippling bureaucracy.

- d - That experts have real authority to participate in its formulation and in the follow-up of its implementation in a way that protects it from political considerations invested in political profit.
- e - It must take into account the geographical, cultural, urban, and economic characteristics and the nature of the sociodemographic features of youth, and must base them on updated and reliable scientific data, which enables them to have optimal flexibility and feasibility.
- f - Necessary financial resources must be mobilized for it, to be properly laid down, implemented, followed up and reviewed.

The axes of intervention of the strategies

These strategies work on three levels:

- * The first level targets the socio-cultural aspect of participation and everything that matters to mental structures, education and values: Strategies operate at the level of the family, school, university space and other social institutions concerned with upbringing and involved in building the personality of the individual with the aim to work to spread the values of participation, citizenship, equality, coexistence, and freedom of belief and conscience, and to value and root them, and to encourage initiative, criticism and suggestion.
- * The second level targets the political sphere as community activity and frequent activity within parties and civic organizations: These strategies aim to support the actual participation of young people in decision-making, in controlling programs, and in setting goals with what this entails in terms of establishing mechanisms and tools for activating, implementing, monitoring and correcting, in order to make Youth participation part of the management culture within the party or the association.
- * The third level deals with reducing the economic obstacles that prevent or hinder

participation: Strategies work to intervene in issues of employment, launching projects, setting up for self-entrepreneurship, providing appropriate legislative and financing framework, and good governance, paving the way for the success of local youth economic initiatives. These strategies target diverse and specific youth groups, such as unemployed higher education graduates or NEET youth, and other situations of vulnerability, poverty, deprivation and exclusion that prevent social integration.

The strategies operational methodology

These strategies look in the direction of:

- Working to encourage the participation of young people in all societal affairs, in various levels of political life and the democratic process, and towards the actual and practical participation of young people in controlling policies and in approving various programs that have an impact on the life of the youth audience, especially those directed towards obtaining the greatest amount of autonomy and enjoying it effectively.
- Supporting youth political representation at the local, regional and national levels, and legal and political recognition of their right to participate and to independently self-organize.
- Listening actively to the various youth political currents, artistic movements, cultural practices, and various youth skills, and integrating these peculiarities into the various programs accompanying the adopted strategies.
- Supporting action plans and programs aimed at learning participation and imbibing the spirit of democratic practices.
- Adopt and support innovative and alternative forms in the sector of digital technologies and social media spaces, which contribute to supporting democratic youth practices.
- Supporting forms of cultural and youth activities and types of artistic mediation that

aim at valuing initiative and suggestion among children, adolescents and youth.

- Exploiting what social mediation activities offer to spread knowledge of civil and social rights for young people.

Recommendations to motivate youth participation in public political life

Youth strategies need to be participatory and not for political or electoral consumption, but rather directed at and for youth. The state and the various political and social actors seek to preserve and sustain the participatory dynamism in decision-making centers, by establishing “frameworks” for participatory planning and integrated programming for all political activities, taking into account a horizontal approach that seeks to establish foundations and a culture of political engagement of youth in public affairs. It also aims to increase its representation in the elected councils to encourage the political class to regenerate and take advantage of the post-2011 momentum, to use international conventions and enrich legislation that encourages youth participation and activation of their roles.

In this regard, we can suggest the following four mechanisms:

- * A political-structural mechanism with the creation of a “Higher Council for Youth” that aims to empower youth with a political approach that confirms the youth’s self-orientation in participating, in developing plans and following up on their implementation. This Council monitors youth political participation problems, deficiencies and causes thereof, and develops an action strategy for reform. Facing the multiplicity of public structures interfering in youth affairs, this Council coordinates with them and does not compensate them. This structure enjoys legal and financial independence and is subject to financial control laws. This structure consists of a central administration and branches whose members are elected exclusively from youth

from the civil society and operate according to a participatory and innovative approach that breaks down with the bureaucratic culture and protects it from the risk of political investment.

- * A monitoring and follow-up mechanism aimed at creating a national information bank that contains all accurate and updated statistical data in all areas related to youth. The bank is responsible of establishing a database, diagnosing the needs of young people, and conducting field studies and research concerned with all youth issues, with reliable data and updating them continuously, to be invested in shaping youth policies. The bank publishes all its research achievements and provides all political actors with the outputs of its work.
- * A knowledge mechanism to include youth issues, especially political ones, in the various education programs and openness to them as axes for scientific research and to encourage young researchers financially and logistically to keep pace with the scientific approach to these issues. Coordination should take place with various actors in the educational field to adopt kinetic pedagogy in educating adolescents, and permanent evaluation of teaching methods should be set up in the direction of building an open and tolerant personality, possessing the capabilities and spirit of suggestion and able to use techniques of criticism and participation.
- * Establishing a financing line, using 0.5% of traffic violations, various sports bets, environmental infractions, tax evasion violations, the sale of government seizures, and various grants, gifts and legal support. Funds go exclusively to support cultural and artistic activities, mediation and accompaniment activities, and various youth civic initiatives, in neighborhoods, schools and the university space. This line should be subject to close financial control as stipulated by law, and an independent body should supervise its management.