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ARTICLE



Youth and political engagement in post-revolution Tunisia

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ABSTRACT

Tunisia, the birthplace of the 'Arab Spring', has emerged as the only credible story of political transition and democratic consolidation across the region. However, ongoing challenges are tempering the euphoria of the early emancipatory mantra of freedom and dignity. Nevertheless, the political transformation continues to gather assured democratic momentum. And whilst the country's political elite and leading civil society organizations have managed to avoid the chaotic, and in some cases violent, scenarios in neighbouring countries, some significant challenges remain ahead, none less important than enduring corruption, socio-economic inequalities, sporadic but highly damaging security events, and persistent economic problems, most notably high unemployment among university graduates. Based on qualitative insights and quantitative data, this paper shows that many of these challenges are epitomized in the critical demographic cohort of youth who are disengaging from all forms of formal political activities. The paper argues that democratic gains can be fragile and will be jeopardized unless urgent structural reforms and transformative initiatives are introduced in the country to restore, even partially, the youth's capacity to influence the social reform agenda and the overall democratization process.

Introduction

A growing body of literature is attempting to make sense of the seismic events that came to be known as 'the Arab Spring', and their key drivers, that swept across much of the Middle East and North Africa region.¹ The emerging political analysis has tended to focus on the root causes of these events as they manifested in the slogans and political mottos of activists from Tunis and Cairo to Damascus and Sanaa. The two critical drivers relate to (i) the socio-economic dimension, in particular, the chronic unemployment amongst youth and low economic growth;² and (ii) the genuine yearning for freedom and democracy long suffocated across a region bypassed by successive democratization waves, so much so that it has been treated scholarly as an exception in the democratization theories literature.³ But regardless of whether

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¹Donatella Della Porta, *Where Did the Revolution Go? Contentious Politics and the Quality of Democracy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Fawaz A. Gerges, ed., *Contentious Politics in the Middle East: Popular Resistance and Marginalized Activism Beyond the Arab Uprisings* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 1–21.

²Larbi Sadiki, *The Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization*. (NY: Routledge, 2015); Philippa Collin, *Young People Imagining a New Democracy: a Literature Review* (Sydney: Whitlam Institute, 2007).

³Michael Hudson, 'Transition to What? Reflections on the Arab Uprisings', in *The Arab Uprisings: Catalysts, Dynamics and Trajectories*, ed. Fahed Al-Sumait, Nele Lenze and Michael Hudson (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 31–45; Larbi

the former or the latter set of causes was the main trigger for these events, what has emerged post-Arab Spring is the strong, and at times violent, contestation of the new political order and the clear divergence of outcomes in terms of political transitions and regime change across the region.⁴ This divergence is no more evident than in the case of Tunisia, where the country continues to progress its political transformation relatively smoothly in comparison to the chaos and, in some cases, outright civil conflicts of neighbouring countries.⁵ Perhaps in Tunisia's case more than anywhere else, the demand for socio-economic justice was swiftly counter-balanced by the political call for emancipation, freedom and democracy that spread effectively through social media and the internet.⁶

A mixture of socio-economic problems and political conflicts are generally thought to be the primary underlying triggers for the Arab Spring.⁷ The long-term structural problems troubling the region came to a head early in 2011 due to the combination of high rates of unemployment among educated youth, unequal distribution of wealth, widespread corruption, nepotism, and the paralysis of state institutions to respond to the social needs of their citizens.⁸

Yet, despite the overthrow of a number of autocratic regimes in the region, the post-revolution political order that emerged has been confronted with deepening polarization at the regional, sectarian and political levels, generating, in some cases, unparalleled upsurges of mass violence and political instability, which in turn have compromised the transition processes.⁹ Indeed, after decades of political stagnation under authoritarian regimes, post-revolution Arab societies were facing, for the first time, the question of social justice and the nature of political governance.¹⁰ Justice, democracy and peace have proved elusive across the region, where outright civil wars, counter-revolutionary military coups and fragmented social chaos have emerged as the dominant ^{patterns} of political survival.

Against this bleak regional outlook, and despite its own domestic challenges, Tunisia's political transition has thus far defied the so-called Arab exceptionalism to democratization.¹¹ Indeed, the political transition since the revolution has continued to gather momentum and

Sadiki, 'Remaking the People: The Arab Uprisings and Democratization', in *The Arab Uprisings: Catalysts, Dynamics and Trajectories*, ed. Fahed Al-Sumait, Nele Lenze and Michael Hudson (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 261–280.

⁴Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Understanding regime divergence in the post-uprisings Arab states', *Journal of Historical Sociology* 31 (2018): 39–53.

⁵International Crisis Group, 'L'exception tunisienne: succès et limites du consensus', Briefing Moyen-Orient et Afrique du Nord N°37, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/Middle%20East%20North%20Africa/North%20Africa/Tunisia/b037-l-exception-tunisienne-succes-et-limites-du-consensus.pdf> (accessed 16 June 2014).

⁶L. Khatib, 'Social media and mobilization in the Arab Spring and beyond', in *North African Politics. Change and Continuity*, ed. Yahia H. Zouhir and Gregory White (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2016), 114–127; Larbi Sadiki, *Routledge Handbook of the Arab Spring: Rethinking Democratization* (Milton Park and New York: Routledge, 2014); and Benjamin Isakhan, Fethi Mansouri, and Shahram Akbarzadeh, *The Arab Revolutions in Context: Civil Society and Democracy in a Changing Middle East* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Publishing, 2012).

⁷Juan Cole, *The New Arabs: How the Millennials are changing the Middle East* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014).

⁸Asef Bayat, *Life as Politics: How Ordinary People Change the Middle East* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010); Katerina Dalacoura, 'The 2011 Uprisings in the Arab Middle East: Political Change and Geopolitical Implications', *International Affairs* 88 (2012): 63–79, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2346.2012.01057.x; Fethi Mansouri, 'Prospects for Democratization in the Middle East Post Arab Spring', in *The Arab World and Iran*, ed. Amin Saikal (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); and UNESCO, *Social Inclusion, Democracy and Youth in the Arab Region*, (Beirut: UNESCO, 2013).

⁹Imad Salamey, 'Post-Arab Spring: Changes and Challenges', *Third World Quarterly* 36 (2015): 111–129, doi:10.1080/01436597.2015.976025.

¹⁰Ibrahim Fraihat, *Unfinished Revolutions: Yemen, Libya, and Tunisia after the Arab Spring* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016); Isakhan, Mansouri, Akbarzadeh, *The Arab Revolutions in Context*.

¹¹Jean-Pierre Filiu, *Arab Revolution: Ten Lessons from the Democratic Uprising* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Mohammed A. El-Khawass, 'Tunisia's Jasmine Revolution: Causes and Impact', *Mediterranean Quarterly* 23, no. 4, (2012): 1–23; and Nouri Gana, *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution. Contexts, Architects, Prospects* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

remains a source of hope in a region that has been increasingly, and historically, suffering from violence, political instability, and autocratic relapse.¹² The political transition thus far has seen the ratification of a progressive constitution that respects the human rights of all groups, grants the freedom of religious practice and beliefs, provides protection for women's rights and recognizes gender equality. More importantly, the country has had successive rounds of fair and credible elections, namely for the initial constitutive assembly, the parliament and the presidency.¹³ More recently, following the death of President Beji Caid Sebsi on 25 July 2019, the country again managed to ensure a swift and smooth transition of power through constitutional means. Indeed, less than six hours after announcing the death of Sebsi, the speaker of the National Assembly was installed as interim president, as per article 84 of the Constitution. By 13 October 2019, independent candidate Kais Saied was declared winner of the presidential elections and subsequently sworn in as the new president, just a few weeks after parliamentary elections were held and won by Islamist party Ennahda. And in February 2020 and following lengthy negotiations, the government of Elyes Fakhfakh received parliamentary backing. All of this shows that Tunisian democracy, thanks largely to its vibrant civil society,¹⁴ is taking hold, though some serious challenges remain ahead, most notably socio-economic inequalities and meaningful engagement of key demographic groups, in particular youth. A number of factors continue to dominate the political landscape, ranging from the illusion of genuine justice and high rates of unemployment to ideological polarization, widespread corruption and sporadic terrorist threats.¹⁵

These challenges are epitomized by the Tunisian youth, who are generally perceived as the major instigators of the revolution.¹⁶ Indeed, there is a wide consensus that the Arab Spring revolutions were triggered by the Arab youth who realized that 'their generation was living in an undignified liminal state of pre-adulthood'.¹⁷ After the Arab Spring, the Tunisian youth were initially optimistic about the future as they called for dignity, economic justice and political emancipation. But their aspirations turned to frustration as their hopes of socio-economic and political transformation began to fade. They have become increasingly sceptical about the capacity and willingness of the new political elites, in successive governments since 2011, to affect meaningful and sustainable social transformation.¹⁸ This paper argues that many of the challenges Tunisia has faced in the post-revolution transition are epitomized in the way youth have been forced to disengage from political activities as their trust in politicians and political institutions continues to

¹²Fraihat, *Unfinished Revolutions*.

¹³Sebnem, Yardımcı-Geyikçi, Özlem, Tür, 'Rethinking the Tunisian miracle: a party politics view', *Democratization* 25, no. 5 (2018): 787–803.; Fethi Mansouri and Riccardo Armillei, 'The democratic "transition" in post-revolution Tunisia: conditions for successful "consolidation" and future prospects', *Revolutions* 4, no. 1 (2016): 156–181; and Mansouri, *Prospects for Democratization*.

¹⁴Kadambari Anantram, Christopher Chase-Dunn, Ellen Reese, 'Global Civil Society and the World Social Forum', in *The Routledge International Handbook of Globalization Studies*, ed. Brian Turner (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2010), 604–621.

¹⁵Judith Butler, "'We, The People": Thoughts on Freedom of Assembly', in *What is a People*, ed. Alain Badiou, Pierre Bourdieu, Judith Butler, Georges Didi-Huberman, Sadri Khiari and Jacques Rancière (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 49–64; and Mansouri, *Prospects for Democratization*.

¹⁶Isabel Schafer, *Political Revolt and Youth Unemployment in Tunisia* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan); O. Somi, *Youth Policy in Tunisia: The Internationalization of Youth as a Public Policy Issue*, Power2Youth IRIS/CNRS, Working Paper No. 9, 2016; Alcinda M. Honwana, *Youth and revolution in Tunisia*, (London and New York: Zed Books Ltd and International African Institute, Royal African Society, and World Peace Foundation, 2013).

¹⁷Chloe Mulderig, *An Uncertain future: Youth Frustration and the Arab Spring*, (Boston: Boston University Press, 2013).

¹⁸Honwana, *Youth and revolution in Tunisia*.

subside,¹⁹ a situation that ‘may erode the vitality of democracy, or eventually may undermine the democratic process itself’.²⁰

A socio-demographic conceptualizing of Arab youth

There are various understandings and definitions of ‘youth’ set out by international organizations focused on demographic traits.²¹ The United Nations, for example, defines ‘youth’, as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood.²² In this paper, youth is approached more in socially constructed terms than in pure demographic age brackets, defined by specific numbers as outlined above. Indeed, the transitional nature of this period means that this category is inherently fluid and unpredictable. Within the Arab region, even this fluid characterization of youth may not reflect the prolonged period of dependence that often goes well beyond the age of 25, as young people struggle to enter the labour market and gain independence. Honwana calls this period ‘waithood’,²³ this describes young people who have passed the age of 24 but have not yet been able to attain the social markers of adulthood, such as forming families and households, due to financial constraints linked to unemployment.²⁴

In the context of the Arab world, the youth segment can be analysed conceptually in various ways, as Murphy explains: ‘as a demographic “bulge”; as a human resources issue; as a stage of transition into adulthood; and as a constructed identity’.²⁵ This so-called demographic ‘bulge’ is a common phenomenon in the Arab world, though recently Tunisia’s demographics, in comparison with other Arab countries, tilted towards an intermediate age structure, with only 13.99% of the population being under 25.²⁶ However, if we consider the demographic age of youth as stretching beyond the 15–25 age bracket, then Tunisia’s overall demographic age structure remains noticeably young.

In general terms, the youth bulge can bring with it political and economic challenges to authorities, in particular concerning human resources.²⁷ An example is the increasing rate of unemployment in countries with a high proportion of youth.²⁸ Indeed, ‘one in three young men in rural Tunisia (33.4 percent) and one in five in urban Tunisia are not in employment, education or training’.²⁹ Graduate unemployment is a common

¹⁹Pierre Bourdieu, ‘“Youth” is just a word’, in *Sociology in Question*, ed. Pierre Bourdieu, trans. by Richard Nice, (London: Sage Publications, 1993), 94–102.

²⁰Russel J. Dalton, *Democratic Challenges, Democratic Choices: The Erosion of Political Support in Advanced Industrial Democracies*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

²¹Valeska Henze, ‘On the Concept of Youth—Some Reflections on Theory’, in *Youth, Revolt, Recognition the Young Generation during and after the ‘Arab Spring’*, ed. Isabel Schäfer (Berlin: MIB, 2015).

²²UN HABITAT, ‘Youth’, <https://unhabitat.org/urban-themes/youth/>.

²³Honwana, *Youth and revolution in Tunisia*.

²⁴Nur Laïq, *Talking to Arab Youth: Revolution and Counterrevolution in Egypt and Tunisia* (New York: International Peace Institute, 2013); Samir Khalaf and Roseanne Saad Khalaf, *Arab Youth: Social Mobilization in Times of Risk*, (New York: Saqi, 2011).

²⁵Emma Murphy, ‘Problematizing Arab Youth: Generational Narratives of Systemic Failure’, *Mediterranean Politics* 17 (2012): 5–22.

²⁶Index Mundi, (2018), Tunisia: country profile. <https://www.indexmundi.com/tunisia/>.

²⁷Murphy, ‘Problematizing Arab Youth’; Emma Murphy, ‘A Political Economy of Youth Policy in Tunisia’, *New Political Economy* 6 (2017): 676, doi:10.1080/13563467.2017.1311848.

²⁸Carolina Silveira, ‘Youth and Politics in the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean’, in *Youth Revolt and Recognition*, ed. Isabel Schäfer (Berlin: Mediterranean Institute Berlin, 2015), 17–26.

²⁹World Bank *Tunisia: Breaking Barriers to Youth Inclusion*, (Washington: International Bank for Construction and Development, 2014).

phenomenon across the Arab world that reflects the intersecting failures of various social and economic policies.³⁰ This structural problem is due to the failure of the Arab higher education systems to teach the skills and knowledge needed for the contemporary workplace, as well as the inability of the job market to generate a sufficient number of new jobs across multiple sectors. In Tunisia, specifically, the development model has encouraged over-reliance on the public sector for employment, meaning that the private sector only recruits one-fifth of those seeking work and an even smaller number of university graduates. The European Commission's report on youth social exclusion suggested that lack of employment can lead to 'long-term social and political marginalization of young people, deepening feelings of dependence, powerlessness and distress'.³¹ Though difficult to establish a relationship of causality here, nevertheless, young people's transition to adulthood has been largely affected by the chronically high rate of unemployment in Tunisia. The struggle of Tunisian young people to transition from youth to adulthood reflects failing educational, economic and social policies that have ultimately resulted in a state of suspension between childhood and adulthood, what Alcinda Honwana refers to as 'waithood'. A period that affects a whole generation requires their mobilization to facilitate this transition into adulthood to transform their lives and achieve full citizenship.

But the categorization of Tunisian youth as 'sub citizens'³² explains why the first slogan articulated by youth during the Arab Spring demonstrations was 'dignity'. The widespread dissatisfaction within the large youth cohort was undeniably motivated by the failure of successive governments to address the high rate of youth unemployment, state corruption, political repression, and a lack of investment in the underdeveloped central and western regions of the country.³³ But years after the revolution, overall youth unemployment in Tunisia has not fallen but instead risen to 36%, making the country's youth unemployment rate the 25th highest in the world.³⁴ The Bertelsmann Foundation's report on Tunisia estimated that one-third of university graduates were jobless and unemployment was the highest in the country's northwest and the southern interior, though it remained unaffected in the relatively well-developed coastal areas.³⁵ This indicates that the enduring socio-economic inequalities continue to constrain youth as they seek to transition out of economic and social disempowerment towards independent adulthood.

Active citizenship and democratic transition

While building on the conventional understanding of citizenship as a declaration of contributory rights, recent approaches to citizenship theory have advanced this further by highlighting the role of civic participation and engagement in the life of the political community.³⁶ As such, while conventional approaches refer to the rights and duties

³⁰ Amin Allal, 'Becoming Revolutionary in Tunisia, 2007–2011' in *Social movements, Mobilization and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Joel Benin and Frédéric Vairel (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013), 185–204.

³¹ European Commission, *Youth Social Exclusion and Lessons from Youth Work*, (Brussels: European Commission, 2013).

³² Sylvie Floris 'Youth, those Anti-Heroes of the Arab Spring', Dossier (2012), pp. 103–108.

³³ Honwana, *Youth and revolution in Tunisia*.

³⁴ World Bank, *Tunisia: Breaking Barriers to Youth Inclusion*. (2014).

³⁵ Bertelsmann Stiftung, *Tunisia Country Report*, (Gütersloh: Bertelsmann Stiftung, 2016).

³⁶ Fethi Mansouri and Liudmila Kirpitchenko, 'Practices of active citizenship among migrant youth: beyond conventionalities', *Social Identities* 22 (2016): 307–322, DOI: 10.1080/13504630.2015.1119680.

ascribed to citizens, vis-à-vis the state, participatory citizenship stresses the active engagement of individuals in accessing and appropriating these rights to shape their societies, their communities and their identities. Participation in civic activities reinforces active citizenship while promoting commonality, both of which are integral to a functional democratic social system. Moreover, civic activity can encourage individuals to become ethical and responsible citizens, and therefore allow the formation of interpersonal trust, reciprocity and mutuality.³⁷ Furthermore, active participation and engagement can engender a fundamental form of social agency and 'empowering' of individuals that can extend to communities and societies at large.

The idea of active citizenship being the foundation of democratic society is not an altogether new one; indeed, it arose in the 1980s in many Western societies, particularly Great Britain. A few decades later, the active participation of citizens became even more closely connected to issues of representative democracy and good governance.³⁸ The active citizenship discourse has been linked to neo-liberal policies that sought to reduce the size of political governance and shift responsibilities from government to 'active citizens' that engage in 'activating' and 'responsibilising' processes.³⁹ In this neoliberal context, young people are encouraged to think of themselves as 'autonomous agents' who must constantly reconstruct themselves through a sense of personal responsibility.⁴⁰ In such conditions, civic engagement can be perceived as a core outcome of positive youth development. Programmes and policies aimed at upholding a strong system of democracy must therefore incorporate the understanding and enhancement of youth civic engagement.⁴¹

In Tunisia, recent studies have found that a large percentage of Tunisian youth are not politically or civically engaged.⁴² The Final Report on the 2014 Legislative and Presidential Elections in Tunisia pointed to a high abstention rate among youth. Low voter turnouts raise important issues for the sustained success of Tunisia's continued transition to democracy. The low level of participation in voting is attributed to ongoing high levels of distrust in politicians among younger voters and disillusionment over the lack of change in their daily lives since the revolution.⁴³ The situation of youth civic engagement is even worse in the under-developed regional and rural areas of the country. Indeed, as the National Youth Observatory in Tunisia reported, only 3% of rural youth participate in civil society organizations (CSO).⁴⁴ With both low voter turnout and low levels of civic

³⁷Robert D. Putnam, 'Social Capital: Measurement and Consequences', *Isis* 2 (2001); Kai Eriksson, 'Self-Service Society: Participative Politics and New Forms of Governance', *Public Administration* 90, no. 3 (2012): 685–698.

³⁸Eriksson, 'Self-Service Society'.

³⁹Thomas P. DeGeorges, 'The social construction of the Tunisian revolutionary martyr in the media and popular perception', *The Journal of North African Studies* 18, no.3, (2013): 482–493; J Clancy-Smith, 'From Sidi Bou Zid to Sidi Bou Said: A Longue Durée approach to the Tunisian Revolutions', in *The Arab Spring. Change and Resistance in the Middle East*, ed. Mark L. Haas and David W. Lesch (Boulder: Westview Press, 2013), 13–34.

⁴⁰Valerie Walkerdine, H. Lucey and J Melody, *Growing up girl: Psychosocial explorations of gender and class*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001).

⁴¹Jonathan Zaff, Michelle Boyd, Yibing Li, Jaqueline V Lerner and Richard Lerner, 'Active and engaged citizenship: Multi-group and longitudinal factorial analysis of an integrated construct of civic engagement', *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 39, no.7 (2010): 736–750.

⁴²Zouhir Gabssi, 'Tunisia's youth: awakened identity and challenges post-Arab Spring', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 46 (2019): 68–87, doi:10.1080/13530194.2017.1371000; Sarah MacLewin Kincaid, 'Exploring Collaborative Civic Leadership Among Young Tunisians: Inviting Despair, Creating Hope', *DOMES* (2017), doi: 10.1111/dome.12102.

⁴³Kincaid, 'Exploring Collaborative Civic Leadership'.

⁴⁴Siheem Drissi, 'Citizenship Education Reconsidered in the Era of Democratic Transition', *Citizenship, Social and Economics Education* 13 (2014): 93–103.

engagement, Tunisia's youth seem to be pushed to the margins of social and civic engagements as they struggle to make sense of the new political landscape. The October 2019 presidential elections saw an overall declining voter turnout of 45.02% in the first round, considering it was 62.9% in 2014. Comparing the presidential election turnout to the parliamentary election shows it was also lower; at only 41.3% where it was 67.7% in 2014 parliamentary election. Although the turnout in the second round of the presidential election increased to 57.8%, the overall voter turnout was low'.⁴⁵

Furthermore, and as a way of contextualizing this negative trend of political participation, according to the results of the 2016 Arab Barometer, just one-fifth of Tunisians trust the institution of parliament, while only 12% trust political parties.⁴⁶ Public trust in key political institutions is vital in any democracy, in particular a nascent one, as trust is a key condition for bolstering the legitimacy of a democratic regime, even if it is faced with challenges. Unlike authoritarian regimes, democratic regimes require minimal levels of legitimacy, public support and trust if they are to provide good governance. This is different from the autocratic regimes that governed Tunisia before the Arab Spring, which could suppress public dissatisfaction through military/security control or political manipulation.⁴⁷

The current study

To gain fresh and nuanced understandings of the complex Tunisian context, this paper reports on the empirical findings of a mixed-methods study that examined the overarching research question for the study, namely: what drivers and constraints (if any) shape political engagement among Tunisian youth post revolution?

Sampling and recruitment of participants

The study reported in this paper used mixed methods to generate both qualitative and quantitative data from semi-structured interviews and online surveys. The data collected from both elicitation procedures were intended to evaluate levels of and attitudes towards political engagement among a cohort of Tunisian youth.

A total of 115 participants took part in this study, made up of 105 respondents to the online survey and 10 participants who took part in both individual interviews and a focus group discussion. The survey respondents were recruited through online platforms and social media accessed through relevant partner CSOs in Tunisia. The participants in the interviews and focus group discussions were selected and recruited from a number of sources, including through a non-governmental organization (NGO), namely the Institute for Democratic and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) based in Tunis, as well as through researcher contacts and snowballing techniques. Selection of interview and focus group participants was facilitated by these local partners and finalized using purposive sampling techniques to account for key socio-demographic variables. For the purpose of this study,

⁴⁵Hafijur Rahman, 'An analysis of Tunisia's electoral results'. Daily Sabah, 9 October 2019.

⁴⁶Michael Robbins, Arab Barometer Report: Tunisia, Five Years after Revolution. [https://www.arabbarometer.org/countries/tunisia/\(2016\)](https://www.arabbarometer.org/countries/tunisia/(2016)).

⁴⁷Natalia Letki, 'Investigating the Roots of Civic Morality: Trust, Social Capital, and Institutional Performance', *Political Behaviour* 28 (2006):305–325, doi:10.1007/s11109-006-9013-6.

the key variables taken into consideration were age, gender, level of education and employment, and geographic location, so that participants from under-developed regions were also recruited. To maintain anonymity, all participants in this study were assigned pseudonyms.

Data collection

Qualitative data were collected through in-depth individual interviews, a focus group, and individual reflective reports. During the interviews, the participants were asked their opinions on the current political and socio-economic situations in Tunisia. In particular, the interviews and focus group discussions provided the opportunity for participants to discuss issues pertaining to the political transition and ongoing socio-economic challenges, including the high rate of unemployment, stark regional inequalities and enduring corruption. The involvement of young Tunisians in civil society activism and their preference to remain outside the formal political sphere were also discussed. Here, a distinction was made between engaging voluntarily in civil activities that have predominantly social and humanitarian goals and political activism within political parties or formal political institutions.

The study focused on youth participation, as the youth cohort remains an important group within the Tunisian population, especially since the revolution. Tunisian youth continue to experience major challenges to re-building their lives and realizing their ideals within the parameters of the new political climate. The participants in this study represent broader segments of the youth cohorts who, as discussed above, go beyond the conventional age bracket of 15–24.⁴⁸ The complex classification of this demographic cohort echoes UNESCO's characterization of 'youth' as best understood as being in a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood, along with becoming interdependent members of a community. It also reflects the fact that 'youth' has become a more fluid category than a fixed age group and therefore is not simply limited to demographic age transition but rather to social, economic and political autonomy and empowerment.⁴⁹ Indeed, as the analysis of the survey data shows, a number of participants were aged above 25 and, in some cases, even over 35.

The qualitative data (interviews and focus group discussions) were analysed using thematic content analysis; the survey data were analysed using SPSS with an initial descriptive report, then some more complex correlational and regression analyses.

Data analysis and key findings

The data analysis in this paper will focus first on the quantitative data collected through the online surveys, which will be complemented thematically by more contextualized qualitative insights from the individual interviews. Given the snowballing techniques used for collecting this data set, it needs to be stressed that this is not a randomized sample, but rather a representative cohort that was accessed based on certain characteristics of

⁴⁸Gabsi, 'Tunisia's youth'; Silveira, 'Youth and Politics'.

⁴⁹UNESCO, 'What Do We Mean by Youth', <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/social-and-human-sciences/themes/youth/youth-definition>.

Table 1. Demographic data for survey participants.

Variable	Number reporting (n)	Percentage reporting (%)
Age (n = 104)		
18–24	29	27.9%
25–34	48	46.2%
35+	27	26.0%
Gender (n = 90)		
Male	43	47.8%
Female	47	52.2%
Highest education achieved (n = 105)		
Less than Bachelor degree	27	25.7%
Bachelor or postgraduate degree	78	74.3%
Full time employment (n = 103)		
Yes	53	51.5%
Part-time/casual employment (n = 83)		
Yes	29	34.9%
Full- and/or part-time employment (n = 102)		
Yes	75	73.5%

relevance to this project, most notably interest in civic activities and participation in NGO activities.

Overall, participants that completed the survey exhibited variable levels of education and types of employment. Demographic characteristics are summarized in [Table 1](#), where, in some cases, the total number of responses to particular questions vary, as not all respondents answered all questions, including biographic questions. Therefore, the reported data relates to actual responses that reflect the number of ‘no responses’ recorded against specific questions. Compared to females, males were more likely to be older and in fulltime employment.

The percentages of reported findings for particular questions relate to actual answers but do not include the ‘no responses’. As can be seen in [Table 1](#), the group of respondents was highly educated, with 74.3% indicating bachelor or postgraduate qualifications, which is generally indicative of Tunisia’s broader population, which enjoys good education outcomes in comparison to other countries in the region. Yet, the figures relating to employment are also indicative of the structural challenges shaping the labour market in Tunisia, with only half the respondents having fulltime employment (51.5%) and a further 34.9% having part-time work. This leaves almost a quarter of all respondents with no employment; this high unemployment was one of the key triggers of the Arab Spring and remains a main challenge for the new political leadership.

Youth engagement in political processes

Tunisia’s post-Arab Spring achievements are significant according to international observers, with important progress in political, electoral and constitutional matters that stand in stark contrast to other Arab Spring countries in the region. This assessment of the political transition in Tunisia is shared to a degree by participants in this study, who appreciate the country’s political evolution, in particular when compared to the civil wars scenarios of Syria and Libya and the return to pre-revolution military authoritarianism in other countries, including Egypt. Indeed, since 2011, Tunisia has succeeded in managing political disagreements peacefully, has conducted credible elections and adopted a

progressive constitution that respects human rights, personal freedom of practice and beliefs, provides protection for minority rights and further strengthened women's rights and gender equality. Key to its transition to democracy was the four rounds of fair elections, held in 2014 and 2019, and the first-ever democratic local elections held in May 2018. One of the interview participants, Hatem, who is in his early 30s and works for a local NGO, spoke about these and other positive elements of the Tunisian revolution:

Well, the Arab Spring, I think, Tunisia is still [the] only successful example, since in the other country, like Egypt, or Yemen, Libya, it didn't go so—to democracy. Egypt, now it's not really democracy, civil war in Syria and Yemen, and Libya, so in Tunisia we were successful in organising elections in 2011 and 2014. We gained the freedom of speech, we have a constitution that guarantees a lot of rights and liberties.

Public trust in government and its institutions are vital to any nation's democratic sustainability, but particularly in a post-autocratic country's transition to democracy, such as Tunisia. Public trust is key to ensuring that political structures and institutions enjoy a level of legitimacy in governing, particularly when faced with challenges.⁵⁰ Unlike authoritarian regimes, democratic regimes are concerned with legitimacy, public support and confidence in the system—the former can suppress public dissatisfaction through military control and political manipulation.⁵¹ Data from the participating Tunisian youth show that a declining level of trust in the political class is affecting overall faith in democracy. Minimal or no communication between political elites and the public, especially the youth, has resulted in increasing political distrust, as Randa, a female, late-twenties activist, explained:

There's a lack of communication between the decision-makers and the normal citizen and youth and all of the stakeholders, there's a big issue of communication. But then, when you keep seeing that all of your efforts are going down the hill and no one cares . . . this is why a lot of youth now don't really show interest in elections. This is what they say 'Youth don't really have trust anymore', so it's all related.

Other research has also highlighted that the hopes of the Tunisian youth for democracy have started to fade, attributing this to the failure of both interim governments and political parties to address youth concerns as a priority, in particular the worsening economic situation and the stagnant job market.⁵² Tunisian youth's disillusionment may also be explained by the failure of the government to fight corruption. According to the 2016 Arab Barometer, corruption remained a widespread issue in the country, with 90% of the population indicating that corruption was also present in government institutions to a great or medium extent. This is reflected in the present study's findings, as Taieb, a communication and professional development trainer in his mid-thirties, indicated:

No, I don't trust them [governments] because what they are doing in many cases is against democracy. They want, for example, to protect corrupted people.

Corruption and lack of a systematic pursuit of transitional justice, as exemplified by the presence of old-regime elites in government and in the leadership of major political parties, were viewed by participants as obstacles to a deeper and transformative

⁵⁰Jurgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998).

⁵¹Letki, 'Investigating the Roots of Civic Morality'.

⁵²Honwana, *Youth and Revolution in Tunisia*. Gabsi, Tunisia's youth.

democratization process. The following two extracts, from Farida, a female civil society activist in her late twenties, and Hatem, further illustrate these concerns:

The hopes were really high and I think if we didn't get rid of the ancient personalities, the regime, et cetera ... It's about all the ancient persons who all collaborated with the dictatorship ... The fact that the people that are now leading the country is a coalition between the ancient regime and ... They used to be really enemies ... Before, the presidential and the parliamentary elections was based on insulting each other. And after the election, they made a coalition. So that created a lot of disappointment. (Farida)

... we have the legacy of the past ... and I think the old regime is still present, even in the new political party. So there is some opposition to the change ... after the elections, the first thing that they did is to enter into coalition, the government with the same party that they were against, the other party ... I think that sent a very bad message to the people, that politicians are not to be trusted. (Hatem)

The type of consensus governance described by some of the study's participants as 'bargained competition', which is a hallmark of the Tunisian exception, was paradoxically also blamed for a failure to tackle corruption and political crimes committed under the old regime.⁵³ In particular, Nidaa Tounes, a party that includes a number of old regime members, including some of its leaders, has been dismissive of the work of the Dignity and Truth Commission (DTC)—established in 2014—first by not attending the commission hearings and later by pushing for the Economic Reconciliation Bill, initiated by the late president Sebsi.⁵⁴ The bill granted amnesty to those accused of financial corruption so long as they repaid any illegitimate money, as a means to inject more cash into the economy, however, it was opposed, as it would practically offer protection from prosecution to those accused of corruption. Chayma (female, late-twenties), who works in media training for new parliamentarians, asserted that passing this bill was '... corruption ... It's a social problem and it's an economic problem and this bill is making these people get away [without] punishment'.

This lack of trust has turned the hope of the youth into disenchantment and outright political apathy, as indicated by Kareem, a male programme officer for a local NGO in his mid-twenties: 'Those young people who went and risked their lives to obtain the freedom for this country, politicians who are older than them are taking decisions for them'. The failure of the political class to address youth aspirations and to meaningfully include them in the decision-making process has led youth to feel excluded from the transitional process, despite their leading role in the revolution itself. Therefore, political participation for the youth, as Murphy suggests is, 'considered to be less a matter of political party affiliation⁵⁵ and more of a struggle for change through CSO activities and volunteer work, using street protests and social media to effect social change. The individual narratives of the youth interviewed for this study, and corroborated by the survey findings, show that they preferred to be active in spaces that exist outside the political realm in order to achieve meaningful change. Informal spaces created by young people were independent platforms that supported the 'emergence' of an authentic 'youth

⁵³Amel Boubekeur, 'Islamists, secularists and old regime elites in Tunisia: bargained competition', *Mediterranean Politics* 21, no.1 (2016): 107–127, doi:10.1080/13629395.2015.1081449.

⁵⁴Sumaya Almajdoub, 'Transitional Justice in Tunisia: challenges and Opportunities', *Maydan, Politics and Society*, 29 May 2017. Accessed 23 August 2019.

⁵⁵Murphy, 'Problematizing Arab Youth'.

culture⁵⁶ to develop an autonomous community to deepen democracy and change politics, as described below by Taieb and Randa:

Yes, 100% of my time is [spent] on civil society. I'm a trainer on some themes or topics like advocacy, human rights, project management, and communication. I'm not politically engaged ... they [political leaders] don't represent me, I don't see myself on, like, at any level of them. We see that they are not representing what we want from government and also they didn't achieve their goals if we talk about the economic growth, they didn't ... I prefer to keep this civil society position, which allow me to be more critical toward the government and toward what is happening. (Taieb)

We're using social media to deliver our perception, to advocate for the identity and the future and the vision that we have for the country. So, we're using the means that we have in order not to fall in the trap of victimhood and desperateness and just stepping back and let them do whatever they want. (Randa)

While most participants interviewed for this study were involved in civil society activities and related civic groups, they maintained that despite this high level of civil society engagement, they remain powerless and lack agency. Indeed, as Imen (female, mid-thirties), who was active within local district associations, suggested: 'a high percentage of youth today are hopeless. I don't think they're engaged in any [formal] political process'. Chayma explained further that there is also a critical regional disparity in overall youth engagement. Indeed, youth participation in civic activity for Chayma also 'depends on the regions. The youth in the interior regions are more frustrated than the youth in the north'. This is consistent with other studies that found that only a small percentage of Tunisian youth was active in CSOs and these were predominantly from the more prosperous coastal cities.⁵⁷ Regional disparity and social inequalities, which were key triggers for the revolution, have remained the main reason behind the socio-economic and political crises currently affecting Tunisia.

Youth perspectives on politics and democracy

As discussed above, the qualitative insights show that the perceived post-revolution political apathy among youth should not be seen as an aversion to politics altogether but a deliberate choice by Tunisian youth to show 'their disapproval of the political system as a whole'.⁵⁸ This is an agentic act that directs youth voices and their practices away from formal political processes towards more informal local social activism, with this shift impacting negatively on engagement with political institutions and in political processes, in particular elections. This recalibrated youth agency is framed in oppositional terms vis-à-vis the post-revolution political system, which is perceived as replicating certain characteristics of the old autocratic regime, as Taieb described it: 'something like the old regime, but with democratic image'. Therefore, in this highly fluid context, the disengagement of youth from politics, and their diminishing trust in political figures, can at least partially be linked to 'a narrative of the failure of the system, its exclusionary practices, its inability to reconcile traditional social values and the realities of modernity'.⁵⁹

⁵⁶Drissi, 'Citizenship Education Reconsidered'.

⁵⁷Drissi, 'Citizenship Education Reconsidered', Gabsi, 'Tunisia's youth'.

⁵⁸Honwana, *Youth and Revolution in Tunisia*.

⁵⁹Murphy, 'Problematizing Arab Youth'.

These findings will now be explored quantitatively based on the survey data analysis. In relation to questions on political engagement, the overall trend shows a high proportion of participants disengaging from formal political processes in favour of non-political local social activism (Figure 1).

Indeed, as the findings show, a majority of those surveyed indicated that they had not voted in elections, in particular local elections, with less than 20% voting participation, as opposed to national elections, which recorded a higher, if still low, voter turnout of just over 50%.

Though not randomly selected, some basic analyses, including Pearson Chi-square tests and cross-tabulations, reveal marginally significant ($p \leq 0.1$) associations, with people who voted in national elections more likely to have voted previously or engaged in some form of political activism. This includes voting at the school/college/union level, or having engaged in peaceful demonstrations. However, overall, a very small proportion of the cohort (around 10%) indicated that they are likely to see themselves taking an active role in political leadership through membership of political parties. This apathy towards formal political affiliation seems to have spread to other domains of political activism including membership of youth and civic organizations.

The issue of political engagement is dealt with in more detail in the data reported in Figure 2, where a little over half ($n = 58$) of the participants identified as having good knowledge and experience of the democratic process in Tunisia. The remaining participants were either neutral in their knowledge and experience ($n = 32$) or had low or very low knowledge and experience ($n = 15$). Overall, the participants reported a high level of disengagement of Tunisian youth from the country's political system ($n = 78$; around 75%) compared to 14.4% who were neutral ($n = 15$) and 10.6% who described political engagement as satisfactory or very satisfactory.

When asked about level of trust in the country's political leadership, an overwhelming majority of the participants (more than 90%; $n = 96$) described it as low or very low, compared to 6.7% ($n = 7$) and 1.9% ($n = 2$) who rated it as neutral and high, respectively.

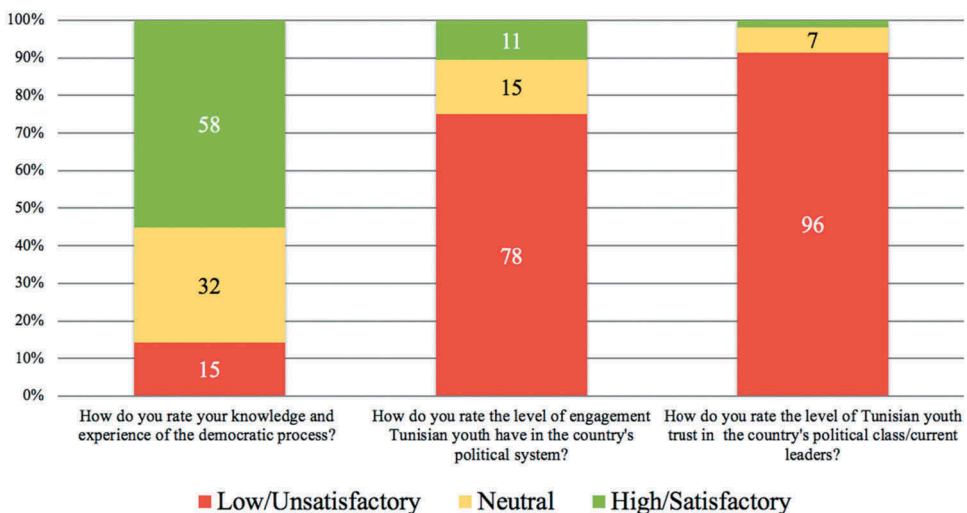


Figure 1. Political engagement.

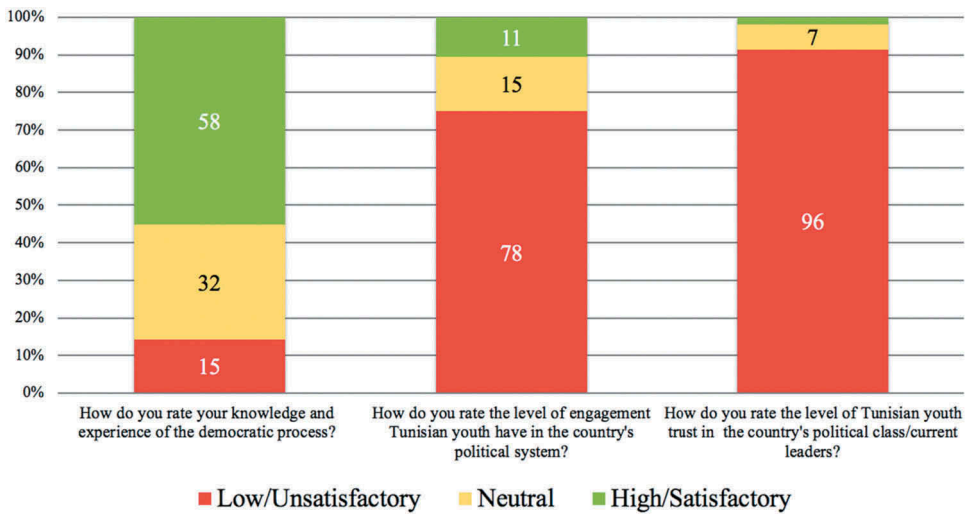


Figure 2. Political knowledge and trust.

Reasoning behind this common perspective was further explored within the interviews, which provided opportunities for contextual analysis for some of these findings. Indeed, participants indicated that although Tunisia's remarkable progress stands in stark contrast to the many tragic and chaotic developments elsewhere in the Middle East and North Africa region, a significant degree of distrust in the state endures. Despite having hopes for a prosperous and democratic future, the youth expressed their concerns that the future for Tunisia's nascent democracy remains challenging, with specific fears that the government of the day was attempting an almost counter-revolution with its socio-political agenda.

Further findings relating to challenges to political engagement, reported in [Figure 3](#), shed more light on this growing chasm between political leaders and formal institutions, on one hand, and youth, on the other. Indeed, nearly half the respondents ($n = 47$) affirmed that knowledge and experience (or lack of these) can serve as obstacles to political engagement. A similar response rate was found regarding other potential challenges to political engagement, including elitist leadership ($n = 46$) and social exclusion ($n = 41$). More than half of those surveyed ($n = 68$) cited political exclusion as a challenge.

More telling, perhaps, is the finding that a high proportion of individuals (around 85%; $n = 86$) indicated that Tunisia's democratic transition is still in need of support and improvement. These respondents provided a long list of ways that the transition could or should be supported. The three areas that respondents discussed most often were economic and financial support, encouraging youth participation, and providing various forms of education and training. On economic support, one of the survey participants (anonymous) asserted in the open-ended question that:

As for economic assistance, the Tunisian government is struggling on different levels, as reflected in the controversy surround the proposed 2018 financial bill. A support for economic reforms and a better tax system is essential to face the growing public dissatisfaction

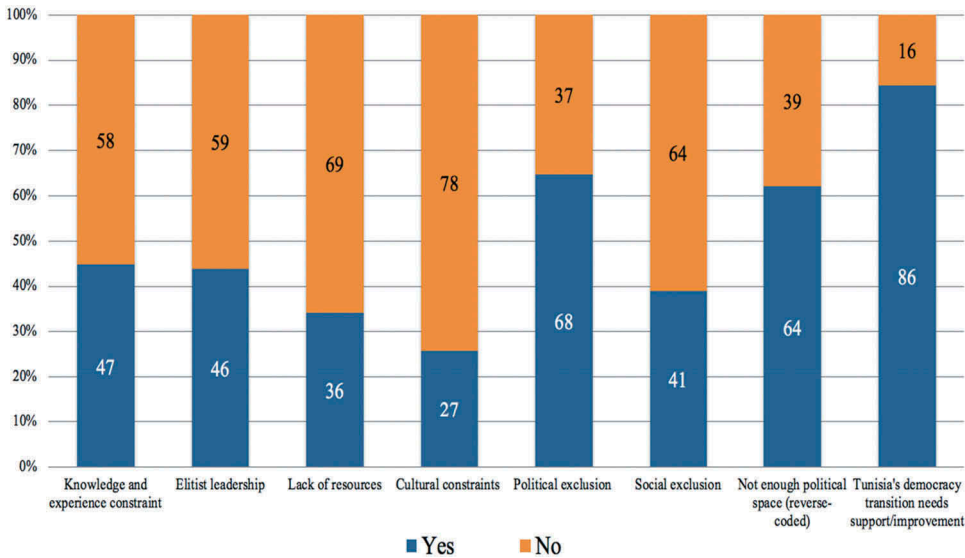


Figure 3. Challenges to political engagement.

and avoid imminent social unrest that will distract the government from pursuing necessary reforms and establishing democratic institutions.

Other themes that have emerged include the need to readjust, if not change, the political system, as it has not allowed elected governments to govern with authority or a clear mandate, the need to reform law enforcement agencies and the need to strengthen the constitutional bodies charged with fighting corruption (sometimes discussed hand-in-hand with accountability). Respondents also indicated that there is an urgent need to support the important work of various actors within civil society who are acting on behalf of those marginalized socio-economically or excluded politically.

When asked about the role participants see themselves playing in the Tunisian political transition (Figure 4) more than half ($n = 56$) said they see a role in the area of democracy education and training, to ensure that the quality of democratic practice improves overall. This direction was further explored with the interviewed cohort, where all participants agreed that Tunisia's democratic consolidation requires the gradual adoption and implementation of a culture of democratic ethos as an alternative to a political culture that reflects decades of repression and exclusion. To achieve this, more education about democracy and citizenship and more training around civic activism and political engagement are greatly needed. Taieb further explained the importance of democracy education:

Democracy education and training are very important to sensitize citizens and give them knowledge about every aspect of the democracy system. This education should be provided to different ages, at different levels, using different channels and tools.

Interestingly, the respondents did not attribute the relative success of the Tunisian democratic consolidation to, nor do they place a high premium on, the role of political leadership, with only around 22% ($n = 25$) indicating positive answers to this question.

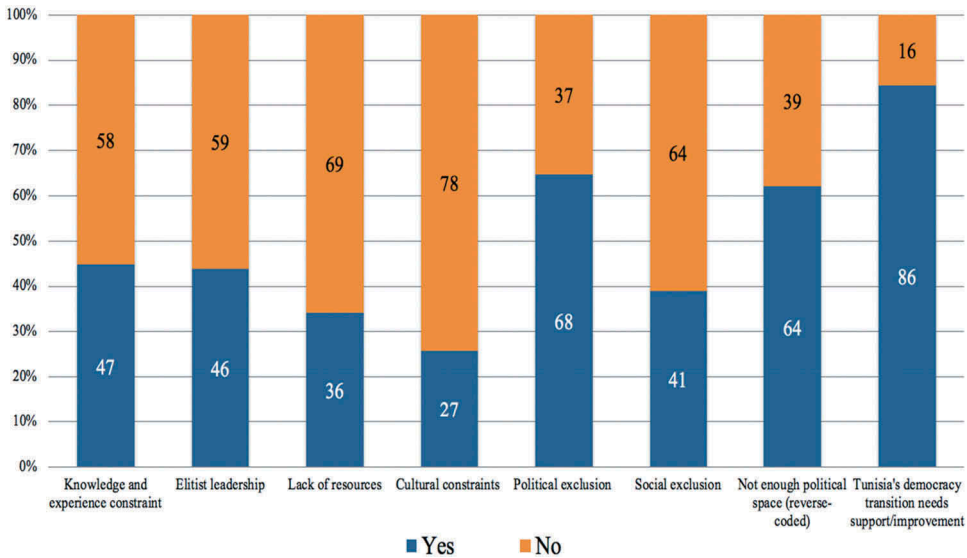


Figure 4. Role in the Tunisian political transition.

This perhaps reflects deep disillusionment, given the failure of successive governments since 2011 to address the main concerns of the revolution, most notably dignity, employment and social justice.

Yet, despite all of these challenges, most of those surveyed indicated that overall, the political transformation in Tunisia thus far has at least created a space for personal freedom and democratic practice. Many respondents' evaluations of Tunisia's post-Arab Spring state of democracy highlighted some positive aspects of the democratic transition, in many cases mentioned in comparison to the total failure of such processes elsewhere in the region. But the chronic economic challenges, in particular social inequalities and regional disparities, mean that for most, the current situation is still described in terminology such as 'fragile democracy', 'poor', 'catastrophic', 'deceiving', 'insecure' and 'unclear'. Several survey respondents noted that the process is 'on track' and had promising and hopeful prospects. A few suggested that challenges and slow progress were normal and could be overcome, as exemplified by one anonymous participant, who said:

It is on the right track, even though it is facing different challenges. It takes time for a nascent democracy to reach its objectives, especially with the difficult internal factors combined with external geopolitical ones. Compared with other Arab Spring countries, Tunisia definitely stands out as an exception, but the mission to establish a solid democracy is far from over, as there are constitutional institutions still yet to be established, local elections constantly being delayed and also political parties in disarray.

As this quote demonstrates, Tunisian youth continue to show a unique capacity to understand and define key terms of national debate in relation to political and social challenges. Though their growing political disengagement and voter apathy are certainly unwelcome developments, even these reflect an agentic capacity to define the terms upon which they want to engage politically and civically.

Conclusion

Tunisian youth were the main driving force behind the events of 2011 that led to the overthrow of the old autocratic regime and the commencement of the democratization process. They have been at once resilient and creative in utilizing alternative spheres to develop new narratives around agency, dignity and social justice. The fact that Tunisia has emerged as the only viable success story in the Middle East and North Africa region after the tectonic events of the Arab Spring, is in itself a testament to the vibrancy and creativity of Tunisian civil society, in particular its youth cohorts. Yet, as the post-Arab Spring transition process continues to unfold, largely in successful terms, politically and electorally, the youth have unfortunately been excluded from key decision-making processes and, in many cases, have been left deeply disappointed that the new-found freedom is not coupled with socio-economic empowerment, a key demand of the revolution.

Tunisian youth, as the findings in this study show, continue to face endemic structural problems that go back to the post-colonial authoritarian regimes of presidents Bourguiba and Ben Ali, which suffocated political freedoms and entrenched socio-economic and regional inequalities. Experiencing social exclusion on a national scale, the growing chasm between the political class and the general public, as well as the entrenched corruption, which were key triggers of the revolution, continue to shape the political landscape of post-revolution Tunisia, in particular key demographics, such as youth, women and regional communities. The youth in particular are displaying signs, as reported in this study, that lack of political accountability is translating into decline in trust which in turn is manifesting in a deep sense of apathy vis-à-vis political processes and political institutions. Considering the significant role that Tunisian youth played in the revolution, their ascribed status as youth in perpetual 'waithood' is a problematic reflection of the current limitations of the political transition. This suspended period of ongoing 'waithood' is symbolic of the country as a whole as it continues to transition from its colonial and authoritarian past to a free, independent and truly democratic society.

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