

Youth, those Anti-Heroes of the Arab Spring

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The Role of Youth as Civil Society Actors During the Arab Spring and Democratic Transitions

This article follows up on two studies on youth policies in Tunisia¹ and Morocco² published by the European Commission in 2009. The great unease and tension among the youth of these countries at that time had been widely discussed and there was already talk of a youth torn between “rebellion and submission,” a situation premonitory of the events of 2010 and 2011.

The aim here, a year later, is to define the place of youth in the South Mediterranean countries, their place in society, in terms of social and political force. We will also emphasise the terms “civil society” and “democratic transition,” for all too often, concepts and analyses from North Mediterranean countries are hastily transposed, in general, with those from the West, comprised of democratic States with parliamentary and pluralist traditions wholly different to South and East Mediterranean States.

The geographic ensemble of the Mediterranean Basin is criss-crossed by tensions and often also misunderstandings between societies on the North and South shores, such that the events that continue to disrupt the established order of the Arab States are read and analysed in Northern countries based on frames of reference often at variance with reality. It seems necessary to us in this article to review all of these concepts and delve into the complex situation

of these young people, who have taken and continue to take the forefront at protests and revolts, who surf the social networks and “put the yeast in the dough without always being able to enjoy the bread.”

A Tangle of Events

On 17 December 2010, young Mohamed Bouazizi immolated himself in the town of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, after the confiscation of his vegetable cart by the police. Less than a month later, on 14 January 2011, Zine el Abidine Ben Ali, who had been in power since 7 November 1987, fled the country, driven out by the cries of “clear out!” chanted by the crowds for weeks on end. Only a month later, on 11 February, it was the turn of the Egyptian rais, Mohammed Hosni Mubarak, to leave, toppled by unprecedented popular protests. In the same period, Yemen, Jordan, Bahrain, Libya, Syria – all of these States were caught up in the same revolutionary fever. In Algeria, the government attempted to stifle the attempts at revolt by purchasing peace via the distribution of petrodollars and stepping up military pressure. The Moroccan monarchy was quick to offer an early reform of its constitution which limited the political prerogatives of the King without undermining his immense economic privileges. By the end of the summer of 2011, Libya, with the intervention of NATO forces, freed itself from Muammar Gaddafi’s yoke after extremely violent armed confrontation. In March of that year, the Bahraini population was crushed by military forces supported by the forces of the oil monarchies panicked by the risk of contagion in their States. The Syrians continue to face, in blood and tears, the fierce repression of Bashar al-Assad’s troops. We do not

¹ www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-1871/09-EuroMedJeunesse-Etude_TUNISIA.pdf?

² www.salto-youth.net/downloads/4-17-1867/06-EuroMedJeunesse-Etude_MOROCCO.pdf?

yet know the outcome of this conflict, which has taken the form of a civil war, but what is certain is that the regime is discredited by now.

This leads us to the following assessment: in less than ten months, the geopolitics of Maghreb, Mashreq and Middle East countries and Gulf States has been either shattered or altered by “revolutions” as sudden as they were unexpected, breaking the image of immobility of Arab societies often circulated by the West and allowing them to “make history.”

Arab Societies Were Experiencing “Social Fatigue”

In the face of these historic changes whose determining factors we do not fully know or control, it is worth remembering how these Arab societies were experiencing a kind of “social fatigue” because of the political, economic and societal factors that contributed to “anesthetise” and even paralyse them. A sort of “cartelisation” of power coupled with tighter security progressively gained ground within State regimes. Nothing portended a renewal of leaders in this frozen plebiscitary system at any time soon. Groups monopolising violent coercion played – and in some cases still play – a considerable role in society.

“The phenomenon of multiplication of armed forces and police is a common feature in many authoritarian states in which the process of institutionalisation remains incomplete. The duplication and sometimes the escalation between armed forces and police, armed forces and intelligence services, State armed forces and State militias and State and private armed forces reveal the regime’s mistrust of its military and security agents.” (Elisabeth Picard, *Armée et sécurité au cœur de l'autoritarisme*).

Recall to what degree Western post-11 September anti-terrorism policies had contributed to strengthening the security complex, a strengthening up that was done at the expense of States’ responsibilities in the social, educational and health spheres. These societies were imbued with fear of repression in all its forms. It was this fear that gave youth the strength to form a “bloc” and advance while regimes expected their retreat.

The security priority in these States had favoured the reduction of their sovereign functions, which were taken up by many NGOs, trade associations or guilds and civil society organisations that stepped in to assuage the collapse of the political regulation of society.

Is it the concentration of power and misuse of common property for the benefit of a few that have contributed to this geographic area, including oil-producing States, being the only area on the planet to have made little progress in recent decades, as evinced by the reports of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)? The figures are staggering: one in five people live on less than two dollars a day. The current period is characterised by significant absolute poverty levels, which are even growing in some States, such as Egypt, where it affects nearly one fifth of the population, and Yemen, with nearly 50% of the population in the category of absolute poverty. The (official) unemployment rate is approaching 20%, 23% of those over 15 are illiterate and more than 17% of the population is functionally illiterate despite the sharp rise in overall literacy, not to mention the high maternal death rate and the underrepresentation of women in the political sphere (parliaments have only 8% women MPs as opposed to a world average of 18%).

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Add to this state of affairs a demographic context that makes public policy difficult in these States: 65% of the population is under 25 years of age and the average age of the population has just reached 22 (as compared to a global average of 28 years of age), despite a sharp, rapid decline in fertility rate in the Maghreb (the rate has gone from six children born per woman in the 1980s to just over two now). All of these factors profoundly modify intergenerational relations and the organisation of society. They shed light on the internal conflicts that endure in these societies, conflicts largely underestimated by Westerners, who are moved by security imperatives, anxieties relating to Islam and economic interests and display a rather condescending attitude towards them.

In light of these observations, we can assert, as Václav Havel does in his political essay “The Power of the Powerless,” that individuals of these societies, in particular young people, were in a position of “sub-

citizens,” which explains why the first word to be chanted at demonstrations was “dignity.”

What “Civil Society” Are We Talking About?

Before discussing the organisation of civil society, we must first refer to a form of *dissent* through the affirmation of the individual and the desire to maintain social ties in truth and transparency despite everything. Although comparison doesn't prove anything, Václav Havel's words on the Prague Spring in “The Power of the Powerless” resound cannily: “Today it is difficult to ascertain when and by which sinuous paths a particular act or genuine attitude influenced a given milieu and how the virus of truth gradually spread through the tissues of life within the lie and began attacking it. One thing, however, seems clear: the attempt at political reform was not the cause of society's awakening but rather the end result.”

It is the young, those active forces of the States, in contrast to politicians considered “professionals” of policy, who take to the streets and squares and who are the expression of the body social as opposed to the body politic. These young people are seeking a social and economic life organised according to the logic of civil society, following a line that would find its dynamic within itself rather than in the role of the State. Václav Havel speaks of “real life” as opposed to lies and the corruption prevailing in authoritarian regimes. “Our revolution is civil – neither violent nor religious” was the slogan wielded by activists on Tahrir Square. It is according to this civil society approach that we will examine the role of youth in societies during the Arab Spring.

“Plural” Youth, All of Them Victims of Downward Social Mobility

First of all, we should consider the place of youth in Arab societies at the time events spontaneously broke out, though it would be more pertinent to speak of a “lack of a place” for youth. “We are, without being nor having,” stated a young Tunisian student on the eve of hostilities during an interview.

These 15 to 24-year-olds comprise nearly a quarter of the population, yet they are fewer than at the time of the “bread riots” (IMF riots) and the apogee of radical Islamism in the late 1980s; as the demographer, Philippe Fargues, observed 25 years ago following

demographic transition, “the 20-30 age group has never comprised a proportion as high as today's among the population over 20, and most probably never will again.” In fact, in Arab countries, the most massive arrival of youth on the labour market is history. We must thus partially rule out the motif of the demographic explosion as a factor in the Arab Spring and turn towards social and economic insights. Young people are still far too numerous for the labour market's absorption capacity, which is why the unemployment rates for this age group (15-24 years of age) are very high, reaching 30% in Egypt and 32% in Morocco, with major geographic disparities in inland areas. In December 2010, young Mohamed Bouazizi's immolation in Sidi Bouzid, where two thirds of the population in the region is unemployed, is symptomatic of the sentiment of despair among youth in many Arab countries. What can be said of the situation of young university graduates? If we consider Tunisia again, 60,000 higher education graduates arrive on the labour market every year, while several dozen millions are already registered with the National Employment and Independent Work Agency (ANETI). According to a study done by Carnegie Middle East, these young graduates experience higher unemployment rates than average for the active population in general. Whereas 13.3% of the population lacks formal employment, qualified youth represent 21.1% of the unemployed. In Algeria, a country that lives off its oil income, young unemployed university graduates are twice as numerous as in other countries with the same per capita income level.

One can speak of a sentiment of despair among these young graduates who had nurtured aspirations of upward mobility through investment in higher education and now share a sentiment of downward mobility due to the dearth of opportunities on the national employment market. In the Gulf monarchies, youth has also experienced downward social mobility, partially due to the real estate boom of the 2000s and the rise in the price of housing. Strong intergenerational tension is generated between these youth, “stuck” at their parents' homes due to lack of financial independence until they are 30 or older, and their parents, who do not understand and resent these “spoiled” children who remain in their charge. This disappointment primarily affects the middle classes, but events following the death of Mohamed Bouazizi allowed contact between disadvantaged youth from both urban and rural areas and primarily young, urban, downwardly mobile intellectuals. Then an unexpected alliance came about

in the Arab States between the various components of this “plural” youth, who shared this sense of downward mobility and exclusion.

Though the youth of Tunisia are not the same as those of Bahrain, Syria or Morocco, they do share certain common features, highly publicised in the media on the North shore of the Mediterranean, with an emphasis on the role of young women in the Arab Spring.

Who Are These Young Women Involved in the Arab Spring?

Television networks the world over showed varied, emblematic figures. There were images of young women sporting veils and black niqabs, waving flags with an attitude of victory during popular protests. There were also images of heroines at the head of the revolt like the one pictured in *Le Monde Magazine* on 5 February 2011, which featured a full-page photo of a young woman, alone before a police cordon, with the caption “*COURAGE. On 26 January in Cairo, this young woman urged protesters to advance towards a police cordon.*” There were also young women who were not religious and proud of it, such as Nadia El Fani, appearing on television. The former represent what the West fears, the latter, the hope for a shift of this youth towards the standards of globalisation: young female bloggers, symbolising women’s struggles against dictatorship and the patriarchy, heroines of the defence of human rights in the Arab world. These two positions, which are quite real, nevertheless remain stereotypical portrayals of the political engagement of young women in the region. Such reductionist readings should be avoided, as for instance, when female political engagement is seen as the prolongation of and/or reaction to male domination, as in the first case, or when young Arab women are considered the only real actors in the Arab Spring, relegating men to the role of followers, as in the second case. In the Western perspective, she can only be either submissive or rebellious, a position widely adopted in representations of young Maghrebi women in France – recall the “neither whores nor submissive” movement.

In fact, women’s engagement in politics did not wait for the Arab Spring and has often emerged for less heroic but also deeper causes such as generalising schooling for girls, lowering the fertility rate and progressively integrating part of these young people on the wage labour market. A growing minority has tak-

en on responsibilities in civil society or political posts, namely elective offices or important posts within party structures. The West’s astonishment at the strong female presence in the protest movements of Tunisia, Egypt, Morocco, Syria, Yemen and Bahrain is due above all to its ignorance of the phenomenon of progressive politicisation of young Arab women and of their place in the public sphere today, an ignorance heightened by a certain complacency among their Western counterparts, in particular young female journalists.

“In France, one can hardly imagine,” states Sonia Dayan-Herzbrun, “that since the turn of the 20th century, there could have been militant feminism in regions of the Near East that sought to both free themselves from the hold of a moribund Ottoman Empire and a European colonisation with many faces. As soon as the issue of women arises in what it has become customary to call the Arab world, Orientalist prejudices and stereotypes abound.”

The very beginning of feminism in the Arab world was rather the doing of men expressing a certain “feminism in the masculine,” as the Tunisian sociologist, Leila Labidi, puts it. They were Muslim reformists who had been advocating the emancipation of women under Sharia law since the 1930s and who greatly inspired the Tunisian Personal Status Code proclaimed in 1956, which remains the most liberal and egalitarian in the entire Arab world, even if this “State feminism” is not enough for the young women who have been taking to the streets in Tunisia for over a year now.

Today, the complexity of understanding the place of women and their political role in Arab societies has been heightened by the manipulation of the feminine issue under authoritarian regimes in the Maghreb and Mashreq, as well as in the conservative regimes of Saudi Arabia, Morocco and Kuwait, in particular since the 11 September 2001 attacks. All these States have implemented a sort of State feminism in favour of women’s rights. They have encouraged women’s NGOs working to promote women in the public sphere and developed an arsenal of measures providing an illusion of democratic progress in the eyes of their Western backers. The most emblematic example is the proclamation of the *Mudawwana* (family code) by Mohamed VI in February 2004, a sort of “Islamic feminism of State” declaring the emancipation of women through a liberal reading of religious texts (*ijtihad*) without questioning the basis of patriarchal society. This State feminism can also be used to

struggle against Islamists, declared “enemies of women,” whereas a few years earlier, the King had encouraged the population’s “Muslim fibre.”

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Feminist movements have always objected to this manipulation of the feminist cause by authoritarian regimes.

Today, Arab feminist discourse criticises a patriarchy no longer conceived as male domination but rather as a social, political, economic and societal patriarchy that prevents both men and women from advancing in life. We are no longer really in a dominant (men) – dominated (women) relation but rather in a power-aspiration to freedom relation.

Young women, like their male counterparts, wish to free themselves of family and social pressure, which has become increasingly restrictive with the erosion of the traditional family model, the urban housing crisis and this group’s major difficulties in finding work. There is even talk of a “Malthusian poverty” (Montenay, 2009). This expression sums up the generational conflict issue of all of these youth “stuck” at their parents’ homes and subject to prolonged celibacy.

What about Youth’s Relation to Islam in Arab States?

On this issue, once again, one must proceed with caution and take into account the complexity of the matter. The same generational divide can be found in Islamism with the opposition of the “old white-beards” to the “young black-beards” as well as to the young beardless. Though the leadership of political organisations remains in the hands of older men, excluding youth and women from party responsibilities, they have shown mistrust of or aloofness from “spontaneous” protest movements beyond their control, in contrast to the youth in their parties, who have joined

protests against regimes, more in tune with the slogans and expectations of their generation than with their elders. The following statements by Patrick Haenni on intergenerational strife within the Muslim Brotherhood can certainly be applied to the Arab world in general:

“The demands of the new generation are: greater transparency, less authoritarianism, recognition of youth, promotion of networking, desire for democracy, rejection of the major catch phrases. These six points are all at odds with the leadership’s positions. What the Muslim Brotherhood did not understand, at least initially, was that the mobilisation of their youth was as much a desire to overthrow the corrupt political regime as a questioning of how the institution they were involved in was functioning. Where they call for transparency, the Brothers maintain the culture of secrecy. Where they think networks, their leaders think pyramidal organisation. Where they think freedom of action, their elders think authority and hierarchy. Where they think democracy, part of the leadership does not necessarily lend this term the same definition.”

It is this socio-political divide between age groups that constitutes the common element among the Arab Spring youth. Young Islamist demands are similar to those of other Arab youth. Like them, they reject paternalist, authoritarian methods; they condemn dictators just as much as the leaders of their own movements or parties. It is the young people’s expression of “the leader’s disgrace,” according to Michel Camau.

This factor should play a major role in post-revolutionary transitions.

These Young Arabs: Actors of Subversion Rather Than Revolution

One of the common characteristics of the great majority of these youth is the use of pacific and/or legal forms of action with a high protest potential and showing major defiance towards the established institutions and regimes in power. The occupation of public squares has been a common denominator in all the Arab revolts, to the point where these squares have become a political actor in their own right, serving as the exclusive voice of the people.

Another characteristic of the Arab revolts is the role played by social networks, and not only the social networks of educated youth, such as Facebook and Twit-

ter, which depend on the population's computer ownership and access to internet connections (less than 10% of the population in Egypt owns a computer and has an internet connection, and the percentage of mobile phone ownership is even lower) and highly differentiated uses of these means of communication. These new means exist in parallel to older networks that have long structured social interaction in Arab countries despite the control and pressure exerted by the regime in power, such as labour unions like the General Union of Tunisian Workers (Union Générale des Travailleurs Tunisiens, UGTT), universities or solidarity networks such as the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, one of the most powerful solidarity networks, targeted by Mubarak.

Another singular approach used in the revolts relates to everyday life: local engagement and cultural passions with no apparent public or political end. This series of practices, qualified as "infra-politics," which youth in Arab countries have been effecting for years, has grown exponentially since a year ago and seems to be leading towards a form of secularisation of Islamism, a sort of "post-Islamism" (Gilles Kepel).

Mark Levine has identified the signs of this "post-Islamism" by analysing heavy metal music. Reda Zine, a Moroccan in this genre, explained to Levine, "We play heavy metal because our lives are heavy metal, that is, oppressive, in struggle against censure, the verdicts of the authorities and the power of the religious establishment. Remember the role of graffiti like the huge stencilled piece by Alaa Abdel Fattah on the walls of an Egyptian military hospital, which he embellished with this furious slogan 'You can kill us, but you will never be able to govern us,' or the Moroccan rapper, L7a9d, imprisoned for his lyrics, in which he demanded his 'rights right now' and for having declared that he preferred "long live the people" to "long live the king."

What Is Left Today?

Certainly, a year later, part of this youth has the feeling of having been little understood or not at all. The need for a return to order was expressed at the polls with the rise to power of the Islamists, but nothing will ever be the same. Several highly significant examples support this observation.

For the first time in the history of Egyptian universities, the deans were elected by the faculty and not designated by the presidents as had previously been the

custom. The largest Sunni university in Egypt, Al-Azhar University, has just added the following four freedoms to its charter: freedom of expression, freedom of artistic creation, freedom of religion and freedom of research. In Libya, the National Transitional Council (NTC) has announced the modification of the electoral law governing the election of the Constituent Assembly. The former electoral law had established a quota of 10% for female MPs, but under pressure from civil society, it has now been set at 50%.

Certainly, the voice of youth has been greatly excluded at elections and repression is often fierce, but nonetheless, nothing will ever be the same. To borrow a phrase from Václav Havel, thanks to youth, "the future is once again open."

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