

The Challenges of Young People in Arab countries

Youth Empowerment as a Collective, Bottom-Up and Long-Term Process

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The exceptional youth-led wave of anti-authoritarian protests in several Arab countries in 2010-2011, re-focused the world's attention on Arab youth. In particular, the rapid and unexpected mass mobilisations, anticipated by the development of youth-based activist groups in the last decade and the spread of new communication technologies, brought to the fore the idea of youth as the engine for long-needed change in the region.

The recent negative, if not dramatic, course of events in most countries of the Arab region, should not divert our attention from the fact that youth can, and indeed should, represent "a force of cultural and social regeneration."¹ However, due to the severe political, economic and social conditions regarding youth exclusion in the region, this potential can only be realised through a *transformation* of the systemic inequalities that lead to exclusion in the first place. This can only happen through collective, bottom-up and long-term processes whereby young people gain by themselves the ability, authority and agency to implement change in their own life and in the life of society at large or, in other words, through processes of *youth empowerment*.

Youth Empowerment as a Collective and Bottom-Up Process

Empowerment is a widely used concept, but also one that is difficult to define and use correctly. As

can be derived from the composition of the word itself, the concept has to do with the issue of *power* and implies a *change in power relations*. Youth empowerment should imply an expansion of the ability to make strategic life choices in a situation in which that ability was previously denied, as much as it should imply a challenge and a destabilisation of unequal power relations through a *transformative* process.

However, in a context in which dominant norms and cultural values strongly limit the ability of young people to make strategic life choices, structural constraints cannot be addressed by individuals alone. Young individuals can and do act against dominant norms, but their impact on the general situation of youth is limited and they might pay a high price for their autonomy. The process of youth empowerment depends on collective solidarity in the public arena, as well as individual assertiveness in the private one. Youth organisations and social movements thus have an important role to play in creating the conditions for change and in reducing the costs of individual action.²

Understanding youth empowerment as a transformation process of existing exclusionary power relations implies that it can only be brought about through a bottom-up process rather than a top-down strategy. To deal with social exclusion, young people cannot be 'empowered', but they must empower themselves through forms of agency, although the pre-conditions for this to take place could depend on structural factors or even be facilitated by top-down policies. For instance, giving young people access to better education is unlikely to be automatically empowering, but it creates a

¹ HERRERA, Linda. "Youth and Generational Renewal in the Middle East." *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 3 (2009), p. 368.

² Adapted from KABEER, Naila. "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurements of Women's Empowerment." *Development and Change* 30 (1999), p. 457.

favourable factor for creating the pre-condition for youth empowerment (such as a more critical consciousness). Youth empowerment is also an open-ended process and cannot be predicted at its outset without running the risk of violating its essence, which is to enhance young people's capacity for self-determination.

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It is, furthermore, critical to recognise youth as a diversified category. The expressions, ideas and experiences of being young vary across cultures, classes, genders, ethnicities and other groupings. Young people from different social strata experience important social changes in different ways, and have different needs and demands. However, while it is true that young people cannot be considered a single homogeneous category, it is equally true that schooling, mass media, urban spaces (public parks, shopping malls) and new information technologies have played a crucial role in developing a particular consciousness about being young, which facilitates mutual influence and peer interactions.³ Moreover, youth in Arab countries from almost all social classes have been confronted with an increasingly problematic transition into adulthood owing to economic, political and social failures of the system created by the older generation. This means that being young in the Arab region today is more than a biological attribute: it is the consciousness of a shared experience of exclusion determined by the failure of post-independence development models.⁴

More in general, and beyond the Arab region, certain conditions of the contemporary period have contributed to creating a distinct global political youth culture, thus increasing youth self-awareness and the chances for collective youth agency. For example, new forms of horizontal youth political involvement unmediated by the older generation (social movements vs. the youth section of traditional political parties) and new technologies mastered by youth (with young people playing a larger role than in the past in teaching and acquainting the older generation with new technologies and cultural patterns associated with globalisation) have opened up new avenues of active political, economic and socio-cultural participation for the current generation.

The 2011 uprisings that led to the overthrow of Ben Ali and Mubarak and seriously challenged other regimes in the region are a testimony that youth collective agency has today a great potential in transforming existing power relations, although its impact may be subtle, long-term and often unintended. During the decade prior to the uprisings, youth collective agency in Tunisia, Egypt and elsewhere in the region, brought about broad cultural transformations by affecting values, symbols and political cultures and challenged many of the dominant ideas that sustained the power structure of authoritarian regimes, such as hereditary rule, police brutality, emergency law and corruption.

Within political parties and organisations, a generation of young activists started to openly dissent from the old conservative leadership and to develop a more critical and less subordinate culture vis-à-vis the older generation (the young bloggers within the Muslim Brotherhood; Youth for Change within Kifaya). Young women activists also started to gradually shift the boundaries of acceptable public behaviour for their group, thus transforming power relations both within family and youth groups (for example, a young woman, Israa Abdel-Fattah was the co-founder of the April 6 Movement). In Tunisia, in 2006, unemployed graduates established the Union des Diplômés Chômeurs (UDC) to denounce their precarious situation. In a few months, the UDC, initially tolerated by the regime, was able to establish a

³ HERRERA, Linda and BAYAT, Asef (eds.). *Being Young and Muslim: New Cultural Politics in the Global South and North*, New York: Oxford University Press 2010.

⁴ MURPHY, Emma. "Problematizing Arab Youth: Generational Narratives of Systemic Failure." *Mediterranean Politics*, 17: 1 (2012).

number of small committees in the most marginalised areas of the country, including Gafsa and Re-deyef. These committees were at the heart of the large protest movement that erupted in the mining area of Gafsa in January 2008. The protests, although harshly repressed by police, began to call into discussion the prevailing discourse of Tunisia's economic miracle, seriously undermining the legitimacy of the Ben Ali regime.⁵

Largely unnoticed or underestimated by scholars and analysts working in the region, these ideas started to enter the public debate and gained increasing legitimacy among the masses, thereby laying the groundwork for widespread protests.

Youth Empowerment as a Nonlinear and Long-Term Process

It is also of fundamental importance to consider that, like all social processes, youth empowerment is a complex, contradictory and long-term process. As such, it does not have a linear development: it can make significant achievements and also suffer major setbacks.

As stated above, the wave of youth-led protests in most Arab countries in 2010-11 represented a significant challenge to traditional power relations. Not only were the security apparatuses taken by surprise and, at least in Tunisia and Egypt, temporarily defeated by the unexpected and large-scale spontaneous mobilisation of millions of people, but also protesters subverted well-established patterns of oppositional politics in the region by creating new slogans and symbols and by side-stepping traditional opposition parties and organisations, which did not have a significant role in promoting and sustaining the uprisings.

However, shortly after the revolutionary events, it became apparent that the entrenched structure of power was much more difficult to eradicate than the activists had initially hoped, especially in the absence of organised revolutionary movements that could channel youth energy and demands. This is most evident in the case of post-Mubarak Egypt, but

also in Tunisia, where the voices of youth and particularly those who inspired the popular uprisings have continued to remain unheard in policy decision-making and also excluded from major political organisations. In Egypt, all post-uprising authorities have governed in a top-down manner without any genuine involvement or consultation with youth groups, have been reluctant to discard the old system of power and have increasingly resorted to repressive tactics such as arrests, intimidation, and the use of force to placate youth protests. After the first elected President, Mohamed Morsi, was deposed, the crackdown on youth activists has intensified. Prominent activists of the April 6 Youth Movement were sentenced to three years in jail for joining the "No Military Trials for Civilians" campaign last November against the new protest law, approved by President Adly Mansour on 24 November.

Youth groups who were behind the mass protests against authoritarian regimes have been left out of emerging institutions and parties, both in Egypt and Tunisia, or simply destroyed by the violent turn of events in other contexts. For example, in the first parliamentary elections after the overthrow of Mubarak and Ben Ali, not only did youth groups from traditional opposition forces play a minor role in setting the agenda, but also youth coalitions such as the Egyptian Revolution Continues Alliance coalition, which included a number of youth groups and activists that contributed to the fall of Mubarak, took less than ten parliamentary seats, while al-Adl Party, another force composed of youth activists, only won two seats. Similarly, in Tunisia, despite a number of newly formed political parties (e.g., the Mouvement des Jeunes Tunisiens Libres and Rencontre Jeunes Libres) and independent lists representing youth and the unemployed (e.g., the Afkar Mostaquilla platform and some members of the Union of Unemployed Graduates) as well as the requirement that at least one candidate on each list be under the age of 30, the Constituent Assembly elected in October 2011 was unrepresentative of young people. Finally, the involvement of a few youth representatives in decision-making is likely to reflect the post-uprising authorities' attempts to co-opt young activists into

⁵ ALLAL Amin. "Ici, si ça ne 'bouge' pas ça n'avance pas !" Les mobilisations protestataires de l'année 2008 dans la région minière de Gafsa. Réformes néo libérales, clientélismes et contestation," in Myriam CATUSSE, Blandine DESTREMAU et Éric VERDIER (eds.), *L'État face aux débordements du social au Maghreb. Formation, travail et protection*, Paris, Karthala, (2010).

the existing system.⁶ For example, Ahmed Maher, leader of the April 6 Youth Movement was member of the second Constituent Assembly elected in June 2012, but later withdrew from the assembly criticising the slow pace of drafting, the scarce representativeness of the Assembly and the lack of consideration for proposals made by civil society forces. Much worse is the situation in countries where the initial peaceful uprisings led to immediate harsh repression, foreign military interventions or to the escalation of violence and civil war, such as Bahrein, Libya or Syria.

More in general, the transformative potential of youth collective agency on the existing power system has been weakened over the last three years by a number of factors. Youth activism has been dispersed in myriad groups and initiatives, scarcely coordinated and representing different, albeit not necessarily, conflicting demands. Political youth groups have suffered from ideological and strategic divergences, as well as rivalries and a lack of a clear coherent strategy to adopt in the post-uprisings era. For example, in Egypt, they were unprepared, divided and confused regarding the best strategy to follow ahead of the 19 March Referendum of 2011 and the legislative elections of November 2011. After the military coup that deposed Morsi, youth groups are now even more plagued by contrasts and divisions. As it was for the first presidential elections, they have not reached a unified consensus on a presidential candidate. The leaders of the Tamarrod movement have decided to support the military and the presidential candidacy of Field Marshal General Abdel Fattah Sisi. At the same time, the April 6 Movement and others have expressed their refusal. The same Tamarrod is now plagued by internal divisions, as a number of its activists have announced their support for Hamdeh Sabahi. Ideological and strategic divergences have thus prevented youth groups from elaborating a unified and coherent policy vis-à-vis the post-Mubarak authorities, have diminished their ability to influence Egyptian politics beyond street protests

and have compromised their credibility, causing them to lose popular support. In many Arab countries, the Islamist / non-Islamist ideological divide among youth activists, which has deepened in the wake of the uprisings, is likely to undermine youth collective action. The Tamarrod movement in Egypt, for example, has led to similar movements in other countries such as Tunisia, Morocco and the Palestinian Territories, raising contrasts among young people. In Egypt, the lack of alliance and cooperation between youth groups and independent trade unions has also weakened the likelihood of revolutionary forces having a stronger influence on policy decision-making. Similarly, in Morocco, the 20 February Movement and the unemployed graduates have failed to cooperate.

However, in the face of the current and well-placed widespread pessimism, many observers have underlined the long-term importance of an 'awakened and mobilised society'; one in which a youth component that does not passively accept the long-term authoritarian re-composition of power relations is crucial. After decades of authoritarianism it would be at best naïve to think that bottom-up, well-organised and participatory political actors could suddenly emerge, or that traditional parties and organisation could promptly welcome the active participation of young activists. The renewal of the dynamics of participation in any context is a long and difficult process and could take years or even decades to actually have an impact at the macro-structural level.

Nevertheless, the largely unexpected nature of the 2010-11 mobilisations should teach us a lesson: the importance of looking at below-the-radar dynamics and processes to understand the prospects for change.

In the last few years, some authors, mainly from the field of political sociology, have given new strength to promising bottom-up approaches, paying more attention to subaltern actors (such as youth) and to informal and often unnoticed forms of (political) agency.⁷

⁶ For example, the young blogger and activist Slim Amamou, who was arrested during the early days of the anti-Ben Ali protests, was appointed Secretary of State for Youth and Sport Affairs in January 2011. Probably being aware of the risk of cooptation, Amamou resigned from his cabinet post in May 2011. In Egypt, Mahmoud Badr et Mohamed Abdel Aziz from Tamarrod were appointed in Egypt's 50 member constitution committee to modify the 2012 constitution.

⁷ See for instance: BAYAT, Asef, *Life as Politics. How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Stanford: Stanford University Press 2009; BEININ, Joel and VAIREL, Frédéric (eds.). *Social Movements, Mobilisation, and Contestation in the Middle East and North Africa*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2011.

Although the current structural/policy context is unfavourable to creating the right pre-conditions for youth empowerment and young people are excluded from political processes, we should not overlook the long-term implications of youth agency in challenging existing power relations. For example, in Tunisia, last December, in response to the candidature of old personalities to form a new government, a group of young Tunisians launched a campaign, “Jeunesse Décide” (Youth Decides), on Facebook, calling for youth to take part in decision-making. Young people posted their candidature to prime minister and their CV. Within a few days, many Facebook pages and groups were created drawing thousands of followers. While this campaign did not lead to an immediate visible success, these young people continue to openly challenge the prevailing hierarchical structure of power, which is biased against youth.

More in general, beyond street protests, young activists and groups in Egypt, Tunisia and other Arab countries have been experimenting with new creative ways of doing politics and raising public awareness of political manipulations, based on transparency and participatory democracy. While it is too early to gauge the extent to which these forms of youth agency will effectively undermine existing power relations, they are likely to generate self-identity, confidence and awareness among those involved. In Egypt, with the renewed crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, women, particularly young women, seem to be playing a more central role within the movement. In November 2013, twenty-one female members of the Muslim Brotherhood, many of them under the age of 18, were condemned to 11 years in prison for taking part in pro-Morsi demonstrations. The growing mobilisation of young MB women could have an enormous transformative potential: destabilising existing gender relations within the movement; enlarging the chances for collective agency among young women in a country where the public sphere of political activism remains heavily male; and favouring important psychological transformations among women from being passive subjects to more active

agents of self-expression. In the Palestinian Territories, although most young Palestinians are disillusioned and have abandoned politics, a vibrant, albeit small, youth movement has been emerging that is challenging not only Israeli occupation but also the existing elite, the Palestinian leadership. While the movement is faced with many obstacles such as the Israeli occupation and oppression by Fatah and Hamas, it bears many similarities to the youth activism of the 1980s which eventually led to the First Intifada.⁸ In addition, as Bayat argued, beyond organised collective agency, under repressive contexts, youth continue to reclaim their youthfulness and enhance their individual lives through dispersed actions and with no aim of overthrowing authoritarian regimes.⁹ These non-movements of youth, according to Bayat, probably became part of the 2011 Arab uprisings and merged into a more concerted collective action once they were provided with an opportunity. The transformative impact of youth activism should then be assessed in multiple dimensions, even, and maybe most of all, below the level of real immediate impact on state policies or institutions. The Arab region is rich with forms of political contestation and mobilisation – mostly led by youth – which, while not leading inexorably towards the expansion of civil society or democratisation, still have potential for a long-term transformative impact on the political culture or on forms of participation (although this is less visible). For example, as it was mentioned above and as has already happened, social movements can bring about cultural transformation by affecting values and symbols as well as by reshaping public debates towards key political issues. Other kinds of consequences include movement spill-over effects. Social movements may indeed have an impact in that they inspire other forms of mobilisations. The gains or losses made by one movement can have beneficial consequences for the demands or the strategies of other movements, or their success can encourage further mobilisation (e.g. the labour movement vs the youth movement as happened in 1968 in the US and Europe).

⁸ HOIGILT, Jacob. “The Palestinian Spring That Was Not: The Youth and Political Activism in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 35: 4 (Fall) 2013.

⁹ “Urban Subalterns and the Non-Movements of the Arab Uprisings: An Interview with Asef Bayat.” *al-Jadaliyya*, 26 March 2013. URL: <http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/10815/the-urban-subalterns-and-the-non-movements-of-the->