

From Protest to Participation: Evaluating Youth Political Engagement in Tunisia

By Harry Higginson and Julian Weinberg*

July 2018

1. Overview

1.1 The current generation of young people is the largest in world history. Around half of the world's population is currently estimated to be aged under 30, with this proportion rising sharply in the countries of the Global South. Given the right opportunities, this generation of young people can represent a demographic dividend that spurs global growth and contributes to lasting stability. However, if opportunities do not emerge, this generation could instead be a uniquely disruptive force in global affairs, as the thwarted ambitions of young people has the potential to translate into growing anger, increased conflict, and the spread of violent extremism.

1.2 Disturbingly, current trends in the Arab world, suggest that this negative scenario may be playing out. There are 105 million Arabs under aged 15-29 – a number that is growing still rapidly. However, this generation is coming of age in a region where the average youth unemployment rate is 30%, and which in 2014 accounted for 45% of the world's terrorism, 68% of its battle related deaths and 58% of its refugees.¹ In many countries, young people feel unable to express their opinions, let alone influence the decision-making process, further entrenching a sense of marginalisation and grievance.² This climate is inherently unstable and youth frustrations threaten to eventually explode with unforeseen consequences, as occurred in early 2011.

1.3 Recognising the growing importance of improving the inclusion of young people to maintain international stability, in December 2015 the UN Security Council unanimously adopted resolution 2250. This resolution urges all member states to *"consider ways to increase inclusive representation of youth in decision-making at all levels in local, national, regional and international institutions and mechanisms for the prevention and resolution of conflict, including institutions and mechanisms to counter violent extremism, which can be conducive to terrorism, and, as appropriate, to consider establishing integrated mechanisms for meaningful participation of youth in peace processes and dispute-resolution."*³

1.4 How to implement resolution 2250 poses an important question for countries around the globe. In spite of the current challenges in the Middle East and North Africa, some countries have made concrete steps to improve the economic and political inclusion of young people, reflecting the spirit of resolution 2250. Although much more remains to be done, Tunisia has made particularly notable progress in its efforts to increase the political representation of youth, not least by implementing a quota for young representatives in the recent local elections of May 2018.

1.5 Forward Thinking have worked in Tunisia since 2012, during which time we have been involved in efforts to try and address the marginalisation of young political activists. This paper outlines our experiences, the challenges we faced, and the impact that has been achieved in Tunisia, in order to share our learning that may be of relevance to other countries confronting similar challenges.

* Harry Higginson is Operations and Programmes Manager at Forward Thinking; Julian Weinberg is Political Dialogue Director at Forward Thinking.

¹ <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/11/29/another-arab-awakening-is-looming-warns-a-un-report>

² See UNDP Arab Human Development Report 2016 "Youth and the Prospects for Human Development in a Changing Reality" <http://www.arab-hdr.org/reports/2016/english/AHDR2016En.pdf>

³ <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12149.doc.htm>

2. Development of Forward Thinking Activities

2.1 In June December 2012, Forward Thinking established a high-level political dialogue process in Tunisia upon the invitation of Tunisian politicians. The aim of the process was to support the sufficient consensus needed for effective governance after the revolution of 2011. This process was supported by the EU Instrument for Stability and the Swiss Federal Department for Foreign Affairs, and sought to promote sufficient political consensus among the country's different political parties to avoid conflict and turmoil.

2.2 Through this process, a mechanism was established for young leaders and senior political figures – from parliament, government ministries and political parties – to meet on a regular basis. Politicians asked for this mechanism because they were concerned about young activists who not only did not participate, but also actively rejected the political transition. Our assistance in facilitating such meetings was necessary because – such were the depths of suspicion and mistrust – many young leaders would not come to a meeting if invited by a politician. In these circumstances, third party mediation was essential to bring these two constituencies together.

2.3 The mistrust of some young activists stemmed from their fears that revolution had been “stolen” by an older generation, who were excluding young people from politics. Accordingly, they had come to call themselves ‘rejectionists’ as they publically rejected the political transition. These individuals had been highly active in the revolution, and retained the ability to mobilise thousands of their peers in street protests. The prevailing attitude amongst rejectionist activists was captured by one young member of the Tunisian Tamarod – “rebellion” – movement when they stated to Forward Thinking that “the real crisis in Tunisia is that the young people who made the revolution do not govern.”⁴

2.4 These worrying dynamics underpinned the growing alienation of many young people from the political process, who stated in roundtables with Forward Thinking that they saw politics as “dominated by the same old dinosaurs”⁵ and was unresponsive to the concerns of a new generation. National polls at the time revealed that some 89% of Tunisians claimed they did not know how to contact the office of a parliamentarian that represents their constituency.⁶ In Tunis, polls of young people indicated that 98.8% of young people believed politicians served their own interests ahead of Tunisia's.⁷ With little confidence in the democratic process, over 40% of those polled maintained that demonstrations remained the best way to improve their situation. This attitude was strongly reflected in our meetings with youth activists at this time, many of whom stated that they viewed protest as “the only way to make our voices heard.” Such analysis was grounded in reality – repeatedly since 2011, mass protests by young activists have forced successive governments into U-turns or into granting concessions such as offers of employment in the state sector.⁸ Indeed a number of participants in our activities personally undertook a 35-day hunger strike that forced the government into removing the names of a number of activists from a Ben Ali era blacklist.

2.5 If unaddressed, it was feared that the political disengagement of young people had the potential to be a persistent source of instability for Tunisia, robbing the political process of a vital source of energy and legitimacy.

⁴ Quote taken from Forward Thinking Roundtable Report, 27th September 2013

⁵ Quote taken from Forward Thinking Roundtable Report, 20th February 2014

⁶ http://www.iri.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/tunisia_poll_nov_2015_public_release_0.pdf

⁷ “Experience and Perceptions of Young People in Tunisia: The Case of Douar Hicher and Ettadhamen”, International Alert February 2015
http://www.international-alert.org/sites/default/files/Tunisia_YoungPeopleSurvey_EN_2015.pdf

⁸ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-tunisia-protests/tunisia-gas-field-protesters-reach-deal-production-to-restart-government-idUSKBN197106>

2.6 Accordingly, after our initial project concluded in 2014 – having contributed to the establishment of an environment of sufficient consensus in which successful parliamentary and presidential elections could be held – we sought to focus on the challenge of youth marginalisation. With the support of the of Danish Foreign Ministry of Foreign Affairs we developed and facilitated two projects in Tunisia between 2015-2017 to address the widening gap between young activists and the political system, and to increase the capacity of young people to participate in the country's emerging democracy:

- *Bridging the gap: creating spaces for dialogue between young Tunisians and the political establishment*
- *From Protest to Participation: Incorporating Tunisia's Young Political Activists into the Political Process*

2.7 The common aim of both projects was to develop the capacity of influential, young (aged 18 – 35) Tunisian activists to engage constructively with the country's emerging political process. Activities took the form of 10 full day roundtable workshops that brought together influential young activists from across the political spectrum⁹ with senior politicians,¹⁰ as well as a total of 96 separate meetings with participants in the process.

2.8 Bringing young activists and politicians together into the same space was a challenging process. Many young activists were reluctant to engage political leaders for fear of how it might harm their credibility amongst their peers or of the meeting being exploited by politicians for their own political ends. The depth of disillusionment was such that some activists from the rejectionist trend initially refused to meet with any political figures we suggested no matter how senior, even a post-revolution former Prime Minister. At the same time political figures – while acknowledging the importance of youth engagement in the abstract – were often reluctant to come to meetings due to their busy schedules and out of concern of how young activists might react to their presence. On several occasions, political figures pulled out of meetings at the last minute, reinforcing the cynicism of the young activists and their perception that politicians did not take young people seriously.

2.9 These attitudinal barriers could only be addressed through sustained and patient dialogue over a period of months. The relationships Forward Thinking had established in our previous activities proved essential in providing us with sufficient credibility to convince both constituencies that there was value in direct dialogue. Once the initial meetings took place, on both sides a level of enthusiasm developed that enabled further dialogue on more sensitive issues.

2.10 By overcoming these challenges, the activities established a unique forum where young leaders from across the political spectrum had access to senior politicians and representatives of the Assembly of People's Representatives. This created an intergenerational space where young leaders could debate policy issues and potential legislation. In turn senior politicians had an opportunity to listen, and respond, to the concerns and perspectives of the younger generation. In this way, the process fostered a meaningful policy dialogue in which participants identified recommendations to address national challenges and thereby bring marginalised young leaders into the political debates. Discussions explored a wide variety of themes including, tax reform, youth quotas in local elections, tackling corruption and establishing transparency, encouraging entrepreneurship, freedom of information and transitional justice.

⁹ Individuals aged 18-30 who were active in politics (either formally in political parties or in protests movements) and civil society, who were recognized as leaders within their respective organizations as having considerable informal influence over their peers (e.g. activists with tens of thousands of followers on Twitter).

¹⁰ Including members of parliament, government ministers and members of political parties' political executives.

3. Immediate Impact of Activities

3.1 The projects worked to shift the mindset of young participants, by demonstrating to them that effective alternatives to protest existed and that engaging with and participating within the system – either through politics or civil society – could result in tangible change. For many, the opportunity to meet politicians directly was transformative and challenged the perception that the political class worked only for their self-interest. This changed was reflected in a statement by a young activist from the Popular Front: *“As you know, I have generally been pessimistic about politicians, particularly MP’s and ministers, but this workshop changed my mind. They have shown me that there are young parliamentarians who can, with their critical mind, youthful spirit, and knowledge of what’s going, truly represent me and help promote the case of youth. This really has changed my opinion on MPs.”*¹¹

3.2 This shift in attitudes led to young activists participating in the programme exploring how they could use the tools and avenues provided workshops to influence decision makers and exert pressure to have local challenges addressed.

3.3 A central feature of both projects was the repeated calls of participants to implement a quota for youth representation in the local elections. This was seen as an essential mechanism to overcome the structural impediments that limit political opportunities for youth and thereby increase the representation of young people. Participants advanced arguments, both within meetings and outside, for such a quota to be enacted, and this recommendation was further circulated through Forward Thinking reports shared with parliamentarians, party leaders and representatives of the central government. These efforts contributed to a supportive political environment in which the eventual electoral law for local elections mandated that any party list must include, among the first three candidates, a candidate under the age of 35 and another candidate younger than 35 among 6 other consecutive candidates on the list.

3.4 Signalling how attitudes towards political participation shifted, a number of young Tunisian activists launched their own projects to address the challenges they saw affecting their peers and the country at large. One of these led to the creation of an organisation called Hmetna, based in Medjez el Bab that sought to engage elected officials on local challenges; develop the leadership skills of local young activists; and find youth-led solutions to challenges the community faces, such as low voter turnout. Hmetna has since secured the support of the European Endowment for Democracy, the National Endowment for Democracy and the German Foreign Ministry, enabling the organisation to launch activities in other parts of the country.

3.5 At the same time, other participants have become leading figures in national campaigns such as “I won’t forgive” – a movement that sought to prevent the passage of the national reconciliation law. “I won’t forgive” remain focused on organising protests, sit-ins and strikes to pressure the government. However, many of the leaders participated in our roundtables, providing an important perspective and challenge to policymakers and demonstrating a willingness to engage with the political process, even as they seek to force the system to change.

4. Engagement in local elections

4.1 We have maintained regular contact with the individuals who participated in the programme. The majority remained highly politically active, although some gradually drifted out of politics to focus on finding employment, and others continued to refuse to engage with the formal political process.

¹¹ Taken from feedback email from participant, February 2016.

4.2 There was a general sense of excitement around the local elections which, thanks in part to the youth quota, was seen as a potential opportunity for them and their peers to run for office. Accordingly, in the 6th May 2018 local elections, many of the young activists we worked with chose to run for office.

4.3 While turnout in the elections was low, in the results independent lists finished first with 32% of the vote, finishing ahead of both Ennahda (28%) and Nidaa Tounes (21%). Many of these independent lists were formed of young activists running on a platform of addressing local challenges. Importantly, two thirds of newly elected representatives were under the age of 45 years old, whereby 37% of seats were won by candidates under 35 years old¹².

4.4 We carried out an evaluation of how many of the young activists that had participated in our dialogue process took part in the local elections, either as candidates or as leading figures in the campaigns. We found that they, and the independent lists they either founded or helped lead, were responsible for winning over 100 seats across the country. Several of the young leaders who were elected ran with established political parties such as Ennahda and Nidaa Tounes. But importantly many of those who took part were previously 'rejectionists'. Participants were elected across the country including in: Bizerte, Jendouba, Kairouan, Kasserine, Medjez el bab, Mournagia, Nefza and Sfax.

4.5 In addition to running directly in the elections, former participants in Forward Thinking's programmes undertook a number of steps to support the election process. Hmetna established a training programme in two locations: Medjez el Bab and Mournagia. These worked with young people, regardless of their political affiliation, who were considering running in the local elections with the aim of equipping them with the confidence and skills to run for office. In the local elections, three of the young people that were involved in this training ran on the Ennahdha list and won seats in their local areas. Furthermore, in Medjez el Bab and Mournagia, independent lists were formed by individuals involved in Hmetna's training, campaigning on a platform of addressing local issues. In both constituencies, these lists performed above expectations – finishing second only to Ennahda and defeating candidates from several of Tunisia's largest political parties.

4.6 The results represent a significant development in Tunisia's democratic transition. Young activists across the country have won popular mandates at the ballot box, gaining recognition, not as a result of protest, demonstration, or obstruction, but through campaigning and winning a mandate from their own communities to bring the change for which they have long advocated.

5. Lessons Learned And Next Steps

5.1 The establishment of several NGOs and the success of so many participants in local elections demonstrates the effectiveness that mechanisms of direct dialogue can have in convincing youth activists of the value of political engagement, and helped to equip them with the confidence and skills to run for office. Indeed a former participant, recently elected to office alongside several colleagues, has said *"without the training and the important help Forward Thinking offered to them, they would never be engaged in the democratic process."*¹³

¹² <https://www.tap.info.tn/en/Portal-Politics/10281308-municipal-polls>

¹³ Taken from feedback email from participant, May 2018

5.2 These positive developments should not mask the fact that the rejectionist trend has not disappeared from Tunisia and that many young people remain deeply disillusioned in the political process. This was reflected in the low turnout in elections and the continued high rate of protest across the country. Even amongst participants in the project, not all were convinced of the purpose of political engagement – one rejectionist leader organized an online campaign around local elections called #sleep_the_morning_of_elections, while others refused to take part because they believed that the election was manipulated by the “old regime.” Nevertheless, the election of so many of their peers to office can stand as an important symbol to Tunisia’s youth that participation is a worthwhile endeavor that can translate into assuming responsibility and bringing about change.

5.3 Seizing this opportunity will require channeling support to this new generation of elected officials to help enable them address local challenges and so demonstrate that democratic governance can deliver. The local councillors we engage with are desperate to make a real impact and deliver for their constituents but are aware they only have limited experience. The international community should respond immediately to these needs in several ways: Tunisian local councils could be partnered with counterparts in Western countries, enabling newly-elected Tunisian local officials to understand how local government works in other parts of the world, learn examples of best practice and develop channels through which Tunisian councillors can be mentored and supported as they seek to serve their local communities. Secondly, local councillors across Tunisia would benefit from access to formal training programmes in different experiences of local government and basic management. Through these relatively simple and inexpensive measures, the international community could make a significant impact in shoring up the democratic transition in Tunisia and create a working model of meaningful youth inclusion for the wider MENA region.

5.4 From our experiences in Tunisia, we have identified several core lessons that can contribute to efforts to increase youth participation in decision-making and support the implementation of resolution 2250:

- 5.4.1 The young leaders who participate in such activities must be individuals with constituency for any process to be meaningful and have impact. Constituency takes a variety of forms and can include: holding a leadership position within political parties or civil society, having influence within informal movements that have the capacity to mobilise direct action, or having a substantial media/online presence. The unifying factor is possessing the authority and stature to influence and inform the behaviour of a substantial number of peers.
- 5.4.2 Bringing young activists into direct dialogue with senior politicians is challenging in a post-revolutionary/ post-conflict environment, and will likely meet resistance. However, this can be overcome through sustained and patient dialogue. An external facilitator may be essential in this period to overcome entrenched suspicions and mistrust.
- 5.4.3 Extensive consultations are important to identify individuals with constituency and to establish trust with participants. Roundtable workshops are only one part of the process, and it is vital to spend extensive time with participants in one-on-one discussions to understand their positions, needs and aspirations.
- 5.4.4 Adopting an inclusive approach to dialogue is essential – participants must span the spectrum of political activism to ensure that the process doesn’t replicate divisions that may exist at the local or national level.
- 5.4.5 Continued support for young leaders once they are in a position to influence decision-making is needed to enable them to demonstrate to their peers the value of engagement and to avoid the damage to trust that can occur if expectations are unmet.
- 5.4.6 Meaningful change cannot be achieved overnight. It takes time to tackle entrenched attitudinal challenges and shift mindsets, which can only be achieved through persistence and commitment.