Arab Reform Initiative

YOUTH TRAJECTORIES SERIES

YOUTH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN POST-2011 TUNISIA:

EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF THE YOUTH QUOTA SYSTEM THROUGH THE PRISM OF LOCAL MUNICIPAL COUNCILLORS

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About the Author

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Executive Summary

Introduced as way to induct youth into institutional politics, Tunisia modified its electoral code in 2014 to include a youth quota, with a mandatory representation of youth on electoral lists for local elections. In April-May 2018, Tunisia held elections for local councils, representing the first mandatory iteration of these youth quotas in practice. The mandatory character of the quotas has theoretically meant that a greater number of young people ran during these elections and are today participating in institutional politics at the local level. What has been the impact of these youth quotas in stimulating youth meaningful participation in the political process?

To answer this question, the Arab Reform Initiative conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with ten young local councillors at the municipalities of Kasserine, Foussana, Medjez El Beb, Kairouan, Hajeb Laayoune, and Chebika. The research sought to understand what distinguished these young councillors from the rest of their age cohort, and in particular to understand what factors led them to become active in the political realm. The research also sought to explore the impact of political socialization on them, as well as their own values and understandings of politics. Finally, the research explored the difficulties they have encountered or are still encountering as young councillors working in public institutions that are new to them.

The research has found that primary and secondary socialization are behind youth's political participation. Young councillors entered politics with the "help" of their primary socialization (family) and secondary socialization (civil society, volunteering, etc.); nonetheless, all of the councillors we met were solicited by older people in their environment (family, friends, professors) looking for young people to add to their list. In other words, none had initiated their own electoral bids, and only a couple were thinking of running for the elections before being solicited.

The research has also found that for these young councillors, age difference and gender are perceived as sources of tension. Age difference among the councillors, as well as with the mayor, are perceived as having a negative impact on the youth's work at the council. This age difference can also take the shape of an experience gap that plays to the detriment of young councillors, as many of the older councillors held the same positions during the Ben Ali era. Likewise, gender intersects negatively with age for young women councillors. Most women councillors noticed that older male councillors adopt certain attitudes to belittle them during the meetings. Moreover, they state that men tend to take advantage of women's temporal and spatial limitations (their inability to stay out late at night or sit in men's cafés, for instance) to take decisions in their absence. Yet, alliances based on age are difficult to create, and the only alliance formed was between three young women in Chebika.

Despite the difficulties they encounter because of their age and gender, most councillors are gaining experience and self-confidence, leading them to consider running for re-election. Learning, understanding, and ultimately seeing one's impact in the local environment have been raised as the most motivational aspects of being a councillor. Nonetheless, youth councillors still harbor distinct ideas regarding electoral politics: all of the councillors reject political parties, even those who ran under party banners. They see the "country's interest" as their main political compass, yet some consider their mandate to be to fight against their region's historical marginalization. Currently none of the councillors interviewed is affiliated to a political party, and most expressed clear rejection of parties. They perceive them as inefficient and detrimental to the "country's interest" which held a central place in the councillor's evaluation of the political landscape. Political parties

were mainly depicted as going against the “nation’s interest,” a notion that transcended political affiliations, ideologies, or social class.

The youth quota system thus appears to be efficient in inducting youth into institutional politics to the point where most of the councillors we met are considering renewing and deepening (as in running for legislative elections, for instance) their participation in the political landscape. However, the youth quota reaches a limit given the lack of diversity of the youth whose entrance it permitted. The quota opens the way to the most educated portions of youth, that is university graduates, but does not reach young people who left school early. Moreover, these young people have been for the most part socialized into politics through their family or through affiliations such as student unions and local NGOs. Given this, the youth quota – still in its nascent stage – has only a limited impact as it exclusively reaches young people who have predisposition for entering the political realm in the first place.

The Evolution of Youth Policies in Tunisia and the Persistence of Paternalistic Attitudes

During Ben Ali's era, the discourse on youth was double-edged. As Murphy writes, "youth were portrayed as 'virtuous citizens and hope of the nation' on the one hand, or 'as problem and threat to the nation', on the other." The "hope of the nation" being "those 'responsible' young citizens, who were hailed as 'being at the forefront of the forces of progress embracing noble universal values.'"[1] "Bad youth" was "lost" youth, tempted by extremism out of desperation, a youth that needed to be paternalistically brought back to the right path. Within this dichotomization, Ben Ali positioned himself centrally, as the person responsible for ensuring youth stayed on the straight path and, as part of this, became the vector through which youth political and economic inclusion could be achieved. Indeed, youth policy for political participation under Ben Ali was designed less to encourage meaningful engagement than to co-opt youth through a variety of bureaucratic and associative structures, and channel their forms of participation to reinforce the existing structures of power. Ben Ali established a series of dialogue processes with youth through formal, top-down venues (including a National Youth Observatory established in 2002 and a series of dialogue processes in 2010 under the banner "Year of Dialogue with Youth") as a means of showing his responsiveness to youth needs but also a means of placing himself as the central arbiter in terms of providing policy responses. Meanwhile, associative life outside of co-opted NGOs was severely restricted, monitored, and subject to threats, leaving little space for youth independent participation. This also included changes to electoral law: "the voting age was lowered from 20 to 18, the minimum age for standing for parliament was lowered from 28 to 23, and the political parties were encouraged to increase the representation of youth in their higher committees."[2] However, given the stranglehold of the regime over the electoral system and political parties, even these laws ultimately were designed to channel youth into complying with the Ben Ali regime and its limited acceptable pathway for political participation.

Such policies belie the underlying reality of Ben Ali's strategy towards youth: rather than a series of coherent policies and programs, youth policy making was scattered over a series of disparate ministries, including the Ministry of Youth, Sport and Physical Education but also the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Women, Children and Family and the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment.[3] Since the revolution, we have witnessed an increased fragmentation of initiatives in youth policy: NGOs, state agencies, foreign donors, and projects and programs have multiplied, creating a "youth market" where organisations compete with each other and with the Tunisian state. "The Tunisian State's monopoly on the design of youth policies is now being replaced by many more multilateral interventions."[4] Since 2011, youth policy has been characterized by the absence of continuity between different governments.[5] This absence of continuity has given more space to international donors, embassies, and foreign-funded local NGOs to take initiatives, thus fragmenting youth policy at the national level, making it depend on the agendas and interests of different organizations with barely any coordination or global vision directing them. Moreover, these agendas and interests can sometimes be in opposition to the youth's political demands. For instance, Somi remarks that European-funded youth policy in Tunisia has been characterized by a security-oriented and anti-immigration agenda.[6] This agenda goes against the clearly expressed desire of Tunisia's youth to migrate.[7] This heterogeneity of agendas has reached the state's very own youth policy: in fact, according to one of Somi's interviewees, certain projects launched by the Tunisian Youth Ministry with foreign funding have been designed by the donor rather than by the government. [8]

In this youth market in the post-2011 period, policies to encourage youth political participation have also been subject to a lack of coordination or cohesiveness.[9] Scattered projects have been executed by NGOs and international organizations to promote youth's political participation through capacity building and values promotion. At the state level, however, the only encouragement to youth political participation has been the introduction in 2014 of youth quotas to the electoral code as a means of inducting youth into institutional politics and consolidating the transition and the process of decentralization.

The introduction of youth quotas as means of consolidating democratic transitions is by no means unique to Tunisia; on the contrary, such steps have been seen in a number of transitional contexts around the globe as well as in several post-2011 Arab countries, including Egypt and Morocco.[10] Scholarship on the subject has tended to focus on the results of youth quotas on electoral and policy outcomes; yet, less attention has been paid to how such quotas are perceived by youth themselves and their impact on consolidating the concept of democracy within youth cohorts. In the case of Tunisia, this seems particularly pertinent given that, according to Belschner,[11] the Tunisian youth quota was not the result of advocacy conducted by youth groups themselves, which stands in contrast with the gender quota that was strongly pushed for by well-established feminist organisations such

as the Tunisian Association of Democrate Women (known as the ATFD). Rather it was strategically pushed for by domestic political elites, both in power and in opposition, who saw through the quota system a way to "grant youth political inclusion and representation, as well as to enable them to circumvent disadvantageous recruitment structures within the political parties" in a context where youth's role in the revolution could not be ignored.[12] The influence of international organizations and international partners (especially those who have entered the "youth market") may have also had an impact on pushing Tunisian legislators to adopt youth quotas. It is for instance interesting to note that an amendment to Article 8 of the constitution proposed by Nadia Chaabane (Al-Massar party, part of the opposition) stipulating "youth's integration and representation in professional, political, and decision-making bodies shall be facilitated" was rejected by the majority of the Constituent Assembly.[13] In fact, the very quota system adopted by the same assembly in the electoral code demonstrates a certain persistence in paternalistic attitudes. The local and regional elections are the only elections where youth quotas in electoral lists are mandatory for a list to be eligible. The 2014 electoral code sees youth's participation in a gradual, progressive, and rather controlled fashion: whereas youth quotas are mandatory in local elections (Article 49 of the 2014 Electoral code) and optional but encouraged in the national legislative elections (Article 25 of the 2014 Electoral code), youth below thirty-five years old are simply barred from participating in presidential elections (Article 40 of the 2014 Electoral Code). To put it simply, the more important the election, the less welcome are youth.

The youth quota has been installed to relatively increase youth's participation in traditional politics in a context where youth has been marginalized by most political parties, yet the rejection is reciprocal: only 12% of people between the ages of 18 and 29 have a great deal or quite a lot of trust in the political parties.[14] The youth quota thus has to run against the current of a very largely shared distrust. Given this, this paper seeks to contribute by assessing the impact of the youth quota system on the direct beneficiaries themselves: youth local councillors.

A Framework for Understanding Youth Interest in Politics

Since 2011, the academic interest for Tunisian youth has exponentially increased. The 2011 revolution was, of course, the detonator of this surge of interest. Led by disfranchised young people of what is awkwardly called "the interior regions" and the marginalized suburbs of the capital, Tunis, the revolution was later joined by large portions of the middle class and bourgeoisie, leading to the fall of Ben Ali's rule. Unemployment, poverty, and marginalization are seen as the main causes that led to the youth's uprising; yet, this instance of mass movement also challenged the trope of a politically apathetic youth.

The democratization that Tunisia has undergone since 2011 has raised hopes for a radical change in the place of young people in the country, particularly in terms of political representation. Ten years after the uprising, research on the political participation of youth concludes that young people are excluded from the traditional political landscape, that is, from political parties.[15] Reciprocally, the degrees of trust and interest in the political system are very low among young people. According to a survey commissioned by Heinrich Böll Stiftung in 2018, 47% of Tunisian youth do not care at all about political life and local affairs.[16] The World Bank, on the other hand, presented very low figures of trust in the political system among Tunisian youth: only 8.8% of rural youth and 31.1% of urban youth trust the political system.

Yet this double movement of exclusion-indifference/lack of trust does not mean that youth has left the political landscape altogether. Young people were at the forefront of important social movements such as Manich Msemah.[17] Moreover, the election of Kais Saied in November 2019 and the role youth played in his campaign[18] invite us to nuance youth's absence from the traditional political realm.

Researchers often counter youth's lack of interest with traditional politics with their growing engagement in civil society.[19] A very common idea is that engaging in civil society - whether through volunteering or through employment - "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."[20] And in the case of Tunisia post-2011, the explosion of the civil society sector with the opening of civic space did indeed lead to much more youth associative participation.[21] Yet this idea needs to be nuanced. Civil society is not a realm where any youth is welcome. Researchers have shown that civil society volunteers, activists, or employees are, more often than not, more educated, richer, and more at ease with foreign languages than the majority of Tunisian youth.[22] Thus, civil society activists are not representative of Tunisian youth.

Additionally, the figures presented by the World Bank 2014 report on youth inclusion show that civil society activism suffers from a very clear rural/urban divide as only 3% of rural youth are active in CSOs. Similarly, a coast/interior regional divide is at play, as the majority of volunteers in

CSOs are active in the coastal regions (72.5%).[23] Moreover, participation in civil society activities can lead youth to express forms of contempt for youth they consider politically inactive, i.e., those who do not participate in civil society activities.[24] Far from encouraging a democratic or egalitarian culture, activism within civil society can, on the contrary, lead to forms of capitalization of activism for purposes of social distinction that naturalize social reproduction in a neoliberal context. In this sense, youth is encouraged to empower itself regardless of the structural limits and inequalities in access to resources among young people.[25]

Given this, we propose two concepts that are key to understanding differences among youth participation and interest in politics in Tunisia: political ecology and class inequality. Given the history of regional inequality in Tunisia,[26] youth cannot be understood as one coherent group. The concept of political ecology "highlights the importance of exploring interrelationship between environment and politics."[27] Many studies on youth political participation focus on primary and secondary socialization,[28] yet environment, access a young person can or cannot have to resources, and the cultural references one is exposed to produce differences that often become inequalities among the youth. These inequalities produce disparate groups of young people that can express the same discontents with the state of political affairs but who are yet unlikely to recognize a collective grievance as youth. Inequalities, both between individuals and between regions, thus prevent youth from becoming a class-in-itself, with its own political interests and demands.[29] In the case of Tunisia, our understanding of political ecology has everything to do with regional disparities. As Cimini writes "spatial differentiation would provide a more comprehensive and detailed account of the situation facing 'youth' in Tunisia. Regional divides have a greater descriptive and explanatory power than the generational divide tout court."[30]

These two concepts will be useful for us to understand why, while "youth" is often perceived to be a coherent group with similar interests, (a belief that can be found among young activists from the capital), regional and class differences play a great role at dividing youth as they create resistance to youth solidarity at the national level. This bears out in our research. Young councillors feel different from certain groups of young people who are defined by their geographical location: "youth in the capital" or "youth in the coasts." Their insistence on differentiating between youth from the coasts or the capital and youth from the interior regions (a differentiation which seems perceived as geographic and, also, in a more subtle way, class-based) prevents the creation of a coherent group of youth, which would share similar interests and political values. It also points to conflicts on the definition of what is a legitimate and an illegitimate youth political demand. In this case, demands coming from the capital as well as the form they take (riots or protests against the police through art and irony) are perceived as illegitimate by most young councillors. Yet similarly, the research also reveals that some councillors criticize youth from their locality for their unwillingness to participate in politics, blind to the fact that their class belonging and their higher education level has an influence on their ability to run for elections, read and understand laws, write proposals, etc. Finally, this has an impact in the councils themselves, as young councillors seem unable to create alliances among themselves.

Methodology

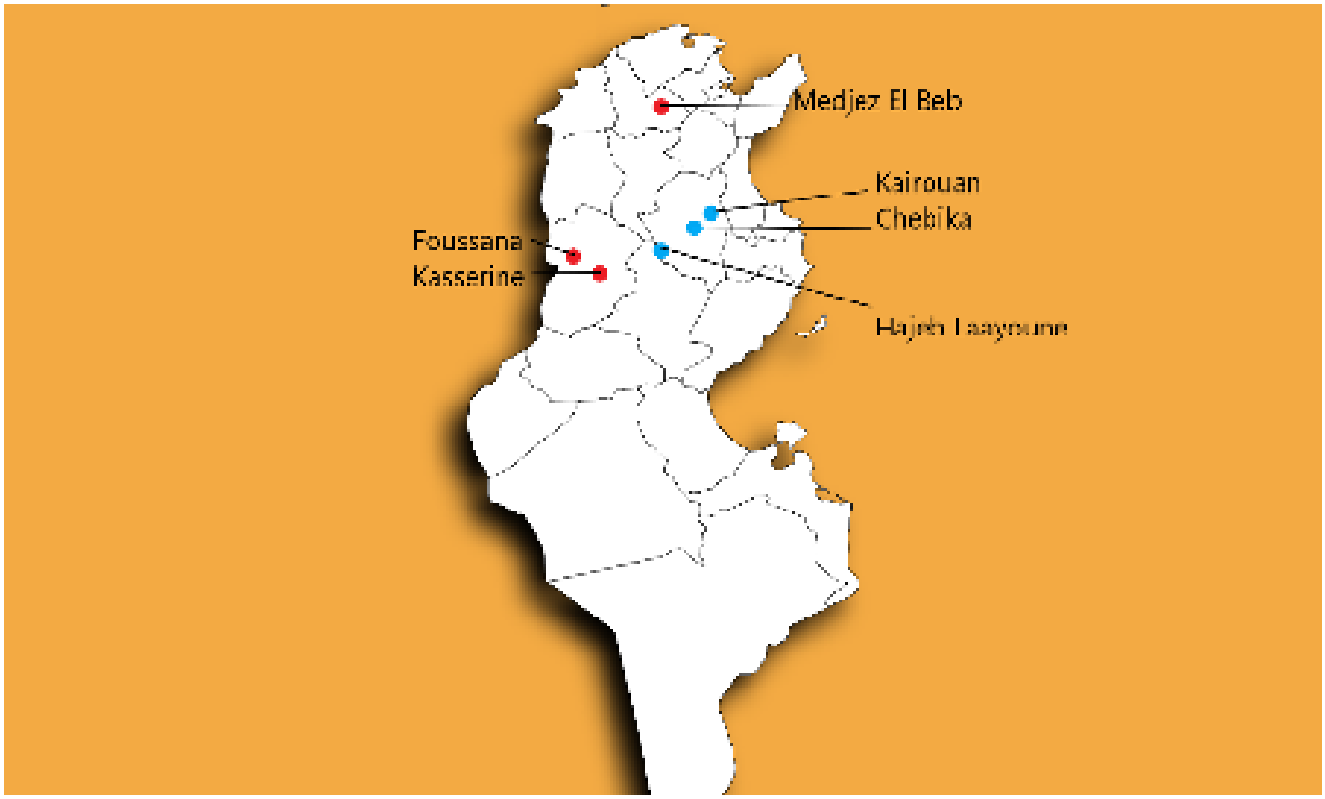
The research team interviewed 10 young local councillors and one mayor (six women and five men, 28 -35 years old). These interviews had two objectives. First, understand the factors at play that made these young councillors active in the institutional political realm, putting them at odds with youth's general apathy and disengagement in this arena. Second, understand the difficulties these councillors have encountered or are still encountering as young councillors working in public institutions. The overall objective was thus to draw conclusions on the impact of the quota system among those directly benefitting from it. The interviews are distributed as follow:

- One female and two male councillors in Foussana
- One male councillor in Kasserine
- One female and one male councillors in Medjez el Beb
- One female and one male councillors in Kairouan
- One female councillor and one female mayor in Chebika
- One female councillor in Hajeb Laayoune.

The interviews varied in length from 40 to 80 minutes. They were recorded using a Dictaphone. The local councillors answered questions as per an interview guide prepared beforehand by our team. The questionnaire was slightly amended for the interview with the mayor of Chebika as she held a more powerful position.

The interview guide consisted of 42 questions. The interview guide covered the experiences of the councillors at several stages of their electoral journey: candidacy, elaboration of the electoral program, electoral campaign, elections and then municipal work. For the campaign as well as for the municipal work, the interview guide asked the councillors to evaluate the influence, positive or negative, of their age and gender on how they were perceived by their interlocutors (voters, fellow councillors, mayor, administration). We also asked them to assess their relations with their colleagues, the mayor, the administration, the citizens of their constituency and more specifically the youth. In addition, the interview guide asked councillors about their political vision, their understanding of democracy, the values they hold, and their future political ambitions, as well as how their relationships with those around them have changed since they took office. Finally, the interview guide sought to elicit their perceptions of the former regime and the current political situation.

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic content analysis. Keywords were used to classify what has been said by the councillors. These keywords included both information they gave us which answered the questions asked, and interpretation by the researchers themselves about what was being said.



Findings

Entrance to Politics

All of the councillors we interviewed belonged to Generation Y. The youngest was 28 (elected at 26), the oldest 35 (elected at 33). It appears that engagement in a political career starts at a later stage of youth, that is, in the case of our cohort, after graduation from university.

All of the councillors we interviewed were university graduates. Specialisations included engineering, trade, and tourism. Considering the national and regional statistics (12% of Tunisian adults went to university; in Kairouan this figure drops to 6%, 7% in Kasserine, and 7.75% in Beja), the fact that every single councillor we met had a university degree is a remarkable yet unsurprising feature. It tends to show that university graduates are more likely to participate in political life. Some councillors themselves pointed to the fact that they were "educated" (metthaqef/metthaqfa) and that their electoral list was composed of local "educated" elites (teachers, managers, engineers, etc.) to justify their candidacy to the municipal election. These kinds of declarations incline us to agree with Heggli and al. when they declare that "education and career plays a strong[er] role as markers of social identity and status in Tunisia."[31] One councillor we interviewed in Foussana, who spoke openly about the positive impact of his education and professional career in his political mandate, tried to nuance the impact of education, saying that anyone could participate in politics, no matter the degree of education attained: "A metthaqef is someone involved in society, someone who can add things. That's what it means to be someone metthaqef. I can be someone who didn't go to school for long and yet present a better input to society than someone with a master's degree." Yet he later criticized young councillors around him for not being educated enough to work efficiently at the council.

Primary socialization has an impact on councillor's interest and willingness to participate in politics. Out of ten councillors, two mentioned their families, and specifically their father's political affiliation as an explanation for their interest in politics. What is interesting is that each one of those two councillors stand on opposite sides of the political spectrum before 2011. One councillor in Chebika had a father who was part of the RCD ["Rassemblement Constitutionnel Démocratique" Ben Ali's party, dissolved in January 2011] and who then became the local coordinator for Nidaa Tounes [A political party created in 2012 by Béji Caïd Essebsi. Many of former RCD members joined this party], while the other had a father from the opposition. Both councillors claimed that they would have participated in politics under Ben Ali, following their father's respective banners. In fact, the former ran for the local elections after her father asked her to.
Civil society is the other door to enter politics. If primary socialisation had an impact for these two, for the majority of the rest, it was civil society at large which participated in their political socialization: one councillor in Kasserine mentioned the UGET (student union) during Ben Ali's era while another mentioned her activism within the UDC (Union of the Unemployed Graduates). After Ben Ali's fall, two mentioned their activism in local civil society. For one of them, her activism within civil society was the reason behind the fact that a political party asked her to run in the elections.

None of the young councillors initiated their running for elections. All the councillors we met were solicited by either family members, friends, or professors looking for young people to add to their list. None of the councillors we met initiated his or her own electoral list and only a couple of them were thinking of running for the elections beforehand. They were all solicited by older family members, friends, or acquaintances (party members, professors, etc.). The municipal elections are the only elections which impose a youth quota to be respected by each list. The fact that all the councillors we met received solicitations to run for election tends to demonstrate the impact of the youth quota. List initiators had to look for young people and specifically young women to have their lists validated by the ISIE (the official election authority in Tunisia). This shows that an educated youth with strong political socialization can participate in politics when asked but he or she does not feel comfortable enough to initiate political participation in elections. As one of the male councillors of Foussana put it: "I have a lot of ambition, but I didn't want to be the head of a list, I felt like it was too big for me. If I suddenly find myself mayor, I honestly think it would be a difficult responsibility for me."

Difficulties and Barriers

Employment is a strong demarcation among councillors. At least three councillors were unemployed when we met them. For two of these councillors, unemployment was a strong burden in their lives and impacted their work as councillors as they didn't have any income (none of the councillors are paid) nor any stable job on the horizon. As one of the councillors in Foussana put it when asked about her professional future: "I can't see it. I can't see anything. I live day by day: food, clothes, needs. Inshallah things get better." All three unemployed councillors were females. Two of them expressed the wish to be paid for their activity as councillors. Being unemployed is all the more distinguishing as some of the employed councillors strongly brought to the fore their employment and their professional skills as a positive distinctive trait in their activity as councillors. That

was strongly the case for the two male engineers we met who both claimed that their skills as engineers made them better equipped to work at the council than the rest. One of those engineer-councillors explained that one of the reasons he ran for the election was that the Order of Engineers officially encouraged its affiliates to run. He said, "The people who run the state are not engineers. We do the work yet we don't have power," a situation that he described as being unfair to engineers.

Age had a strong influence on the candidate's campaigns. With the exception of one female councillor in Foussana, all of the councillors we met pointed to the influence of age in voter's perceptions of their candidacy (perceptions which only partially bear out when compared with statistical regressions at the national level).[32] Age was described as a strong feature to judge the candidates. However, this judgement played differently, both among candidates and voters. Voters' perception of the future councillors' age was both positive and negative: according to most of the candidates, some voters considered "youth" a strong asset for a candidate, as "youth" is associated with things such as "technology," "knowledge," or "creativity," etc. However, for other voters, young age was perceived as a handicap as it is associated with "lack of experience," "immaturity," etc. In Hajeb Layoune, the female councillor quoted voters she has heard during her campaign: "You have no experience. Old people couldn't achieve it [change], why would you? Those who understand politics haven't dared before you [being a candidate], you are still young, what will you do?" Youth here is associated to "lack of experience" and, more specifically, lack of political experience in comparison with candidates that are not only older but who also have local political experience. Indeed, many of the councillors we met mentioned the presence of colleagues who occupied the same mandate during Ben Ali's era, and who regained it democratically in 2018. Yet, voting for "youth" could also be seen as a good strategy for other voters, who saw it as a way to get rid of the older politicians, expressing their distrust of older political elites, counting on the belief that having "new blood" in the municipalities may improve the political situation. For the candidates who saw the influence of age on their potential voters, proving those who didn't believe in them wrong was important: "You need to show people that you are the kind of person who rips her rights. They know I am active and stubborn" said the councillor in Hajeb Layoune in response to the opposition she met among older voters.

Gender is also influential on voters and can intersect negatively with young age. At least two female councillors mentioned that their gender was influential during the campaign. For one female councillor in Kairouan, her gender did not allow her to enter certain spaces, such as male-only cafés during the campaign. She declared that it bothered her a bit, yet she associated it to Kairouan specifically saying that her inability to enter male-only cafés could do with the fact that Kairouan is more conservative than the rest of the country. She mentioned however than in smaller towns and villages, she and the other candidates from her list entered male-only cafés to speak with potential voters. The mayor of Chebika pointed to the intersection of both gender and age as utterly detrimental to her candidacy: "They see you as a young woman, thus they think you won't make it." Men on the other hand did not perceive their gender as influential in the way voters perceived them or evaluated them during the campaign. That most likely means that they benefited from male privilege, meaning, that being perceived as a male gave them an advantage as they had less things to prove to voters who tend to trust men's competence over women's.

At local councils, age difference is a source of tensions. Just as age and gender have an influence during the councillor's political campaigns, at local council meetings these two variables are both perceived as strongly influential for the young councillors we interviewed. Age difference among the councillors as well as with the mayor can often have a negative impact on the youth's work at the council. This age difference can also take the shape of an experience gap that plays to the detriment of young councillors. At least four councillors mentioned having difficulties with older members of the council who used to occupy the same functions during Ben Ali's regime: "I still don't understand everything [about the municipality]. The majority of the councillors were already there under Ben Ali, and they are older, thus, they monopolize the files so that you don't understand anything," said the female councillor of Hajeb Laayoune. The male councillor of Medjez el Bab made a similar remark saying: "Young people are always belittled, those who are at the council were there before, they were with the RCD and they have experience. I was not at the RCD, so they are like 'We understand, and you, you are nothing.' They don't let you speak; they don't give you a chance, they interrupt you and don't accept what you are saying." More generally, lack of experience combined with older councillors' unwillingness to explain, share knowledge, or specific files, marginalizes younger councillors. Many of the councillors we met were unsatisfied with their impact at the municipality, an unsatisfaction they most often explained with their lack of experience and older councillor's unwillingness to help them fill the experience gap. However, depending on the local context, the tensions between older and younger councillors are described as gradually more appeased: some councillors described having better relations with the mayor for instance than at the beginning of their mandate. The female councillor we met at Medjez el Bab mentioned, "Now, when I make a proposal, I am more heard than before. Even if the mayor and others are retired people from another generation, ultimately, younger people are more numerous."

Gender intersects negatively with age when you are a young

woman councillor. All of the women councillors (except one in Foussana) noticed that older male councillors adopt certain attitudes to belittle them during the meetings, including interruptions and clear demonstrations of inattention. The councillor we met in Hajeb Laayoune was the most vocal about it: "We are three female councillors under the age of 35. Not only are we young, but we are also women. When you are given the floor to speak, you will see them checking their phones or leaving the room to smoke a cigarette. And that is because you are young and a woman." She added that older male councillors call her and her two young female colleagues "nissab" (scammers). The female councillor in Kairouan felt that her appearance had an influence of the perception of older male councillors of her abilities: "There are prejudices unfortunately. They see that you pay attention to your appearances, and they immediately think: 'She must be a hairdresser, she does not understand anything.'" She added however: "When you are wilful, when you don't let anything go, you are going to be heard." Young women, perceived by male councillors as less competent than young males, must constantly demonstrate their abilities to be taken seriously.

Chebika's mayor for instance, declared: "When I was elected mayor, [it is important to note that she was not elected right after the elections, only after the resignation of seven councillors from the winning party who wanted to repeat the elections to further their majority], everyone was afraid, they wanted someone more experienced. They were afraid I was manipulated. This pushes me to do better. I need to prove them wrong, show them that I know how to work, that I'm going to make it." Moreover, men tend to take advantage of women's temporal and spatial limitations to take decisions in their absence. The female councillor in Medjez el Bab pointed to the fact that certain decisions were taken outside the council: "The repartition of abandoned municipal land near the oued (river) was decided among men. We were excluded because these meetings were taking place at night during Ramadan. But we imposed ourselves, personally, I didn't miss any of them." At least three young male local councillors agree that women were given less attention and faced more difficulties in meetings than men.

Alliances based on age are difficult to create, despite age's impact on young local councillors' work. While most young councillors complained about the tensions with their older colleagues, few alliances based on age within the council were formed. For the male councillor of Foussana (the youngest of our pool), that has to do with the fact that some young councillors have not properly "earned" their place in the council, thus expressing distrust for colleagues belonging to his own age group: "We are nine young councillors. But there is a problem. Some youth have no will. They were just put on the lists so that they are filled. Often, it is because a father or an uncle should have been on the list but cannot run for some reason, so they replace him with someone young in the family. I don't forgive them [these young councillors] although they are my colleagues. Things can't work that way, either you come to be a decision-maker, or you don't come at all." The young councillor in Foussana seems to share the same assumption on young councillors as older councillors: young people are influenceable, they are manipulated, etc. The female councillor of Kairouan has tried to create alliances among her young colleagues yet she failed: "I did my best to create a nucleus of youth solidarity, especially among the women, to create a counterbalance, but I failed. I wanted us to bring innovation to the council, to bring something new, because right now, all we do is manage the everyday. I told young councillors: 'As youth, we have something to bring, we can offer things that were never proposed, that never occurred to anyone before. But I could not do it. And I am not blaming my young colleagues: some of them work, some of them are in the opposition.'" It is interesting here to note that, in this small political microcosm, despite tensions based on age with older councillors and belonging to the same stigmatized group, "youth" could not produce solidarity. This brings us back to our initial conceptual remarks on the difficulty of forming "youth-as-class." Only the female councillor in Hajeb Laayoune seemed to have been able to create solidarity with the two other young councillors, both females. That may suggest that dual affiliation, gender and youth, may create stronger links and thus stronger solidarity.

Difficulties and Barriers

Despite the difficulties they encounter because of their age and gender, most councillors are gaining experience and self-confidence, leading them to consider running for re-election. Learning, understanding, and ultimately seeing one's impact in the local environment have been raised as the most motivational aspects of being a councillor: "I was motivated, but now I'm even more motivated. I've solved problems, and solving a problem is super cool psychologically. I'm doing three projects and three studies. When people thank you in the streets it feels good," said the male councillor in Medjez el Bab. This finding is all the more remarkably perceived with Chebika's mayor, who used to be a councillor: "There is a difference. It's not the same as councillor and mayor. Before, I proposed but I didn't see any follow-up. As a member, I asked for something once and I didn't find it, it was in the minutes but it was never implemented. Now I'm here every day. Before, I used to ask why such and such a project is late. Now I know that such and such a project is late because of a study or because there is a problem in a local administration. Before I didn't have the solution, I couldn't go to the administrations, now I can go to the local

administrations and get what I need." Despite difficulties, some councillors are thus gaining confidence in their own work and impact, which increases their motivation and makes them consider the possibility of running for re-election in 2023 and, for at least two councillors -both males-, running for national elections. On the contrary, those who did not yet feel their impact in their local communities, whose initial motivation has been stopped short when confronted with the reality of their councillor's work, are more doubtful of their political future: "If I do things right at the council, if I achieve things, I will continue, otherwise I will leave. If I can work and understand how it works, I will present myself again. If not, I will leave," declared the female councillor in Foussana.

The discourse on youth adopted by the councillors is ambiguous. Whereas "youth" is seen as a quality in comparison to old age, especially at the council, outside the council, fellow young people are often perceived by the councillors as immature or irresponsible. What struck us as researchers was the ambivalence councillors adopted when talking about "youth" as a category or a concept. All of them adopt a positive conceptualization of "youth" when compared to older generations. Youth is perceived as more modern, more efficient, more open minded than older generations. This often appears as a discourse associating backwardness with older age. For instance, one of the male councillors in Foussana said, "Some old people, really, their minds are shut. They are insensible to innovation. You give them a new idea as youth they either look at you weirdly or refuse it straight away. Because their minds cannot accept it, their brains cannot process it. The age of technology and globalization has not reached them yet." He perceives himself as more knowledgeable than others because he is young, and they are old. This comment perfectly illustrates a tendency we have met on several occasions when speaking with councillors. Whether they talked about the council or their jobs, many councillors saw age or "generation" as an important feature to define and judge the people around them. They saw older people as a weight, as people who are against innovation, creativity, initiative, and success, while their youthhood made them intellectually sharper and faster at learning than their older counterparts.

Yet, when young people in Tunisia were brought up as a demographic category, the discourse was more ambivalent. Some "young people," and it is important to note, specifically those of the capital, are seen as immature, dangerous, and irresponsible. Our interviews coincided with protests in Tunis, that involved queer activists and activists pushing for marijuana legalization. Many of the interviewees immediately associated the category "youth" to those groups, and in a negative manner. When asked about her opinion on protests in general, the female councillor of Foussana answered: "Protests like the one asking for the legalization of weed? [Laughs]. There are movements (taharouket) for something that needs to happen to the country for it to improve. There are protests like those of people who are looking for a job, for a better life, not like those who go out to ask for weed. What do they need? What do they want to do?" These divisions within youth are better understood when we bring up the concept of political ecology. Here, differences in political attitudes and values are identified by the youth themselves as something that has to do with location, geography, and the belonging to a certain region, a regional belonging that can also come to mean a certain conception of class differences among the youth, with the coasts being richer than the interior regions, thus having different priorities. The picture drawn in this case is that of poor, underprivileged youth that demand jobs to live decently, while others, having these needs already covered, demand marijuana legalization for "fun."

All of the councillors reject political parties, even those who ran under party banners. Seven of the ten councillors were running in lists affiliated with political parties. Five never joined the party and ran as independents, one joined the party and left it shortly after her election, and one joined her father's party which later was dismantled. In sum, none of them is currently affiliated with a political party. All of them except one strongly reject political parties, see them as inefficient and uninterested in, if not, detrimental to, public interest. The only exception is the female councillor in Kairouan who still supports the party but always refused to enter its ranks due to her attachment to independence, including in the municipal council. Yet, as the male councillor in Kasserine points out, "It is difficult to speak of opposition in municipal councils as we speak about it in general, in all the country. The political mosaic of different parties creates a decentralization of power within the council. Plus, you have citizens' demands on the other hand. This weakens the authority of a particular party." Parties do not weigh the same in parliament or in councils. Still, the general rejection of political parties is consistent with the research that has been produced on Tunisian youth's political participation while taking it even further as it shows that even young people who run for elections are rejecting political parties.

The "country's interest" is the main political compass for councillors, yet the feeling of one's region being discriminated against is present. The idea of the "nation's interest" held a central place in the councillor's evaluation of the political landscape. Political parties were mainly depicted as going against the "nation's interest." What was striking was the easiness with which this notion was brought up, as if there was indeed something clear called the "nation's interest" that

transcended political affiliations, ideologies, or social class. Some councillors associated themselves directly with the notion, saying that they worked for the national interest and nothing else. For instance, the female councillor in Chebika declared, "Young people understand quickly and better. There are people who worked with Ben Ali and Bourguiba and they stayed with their old ideas. We work with a lot of transparency. We only seek the interest of the country. We work with the Local Councils Law," associating herself as "youth" with national interest. This tends to show that thinking in terms of conflicting interests does not appear to be a given in Tunisia today as a certain conception of "national interest" is seen as something that should transcend all political and ideological affiliations. Yet for some councillors, regional affiliation was important, especially since they considered that their region (Kasserine or Kairouan) was disadvantaged and discriminated against by the central state: "Coming from a marginalized internal region, I carried with me demands and grew up with this feeling of marginalization," said for instance a male councillor from Kasserine. A female councillor from Kairouan declared that the main reason she ran for the local elections was because, "Our regions have been marginalized. Kairouan has been forgotten." As we can see from these two examples, the feeling of belonging to a marginalized region runs along that of acting for the "country's interest." Political ecology is at play here, as councillors shape their politics around the feeling that their immediate geographical environment has been deprived in comparison to other regions.

Conclusions

We gather from our analysis of the 10 interviews with local councillors that youth quotas have allowed young people to run and win seats for municipal elections, as they were sought after by older people who initiated electoral lists for the municipal elections, most likely to fill the mandatory quota. If quotas allow entrance to the traditional political realm of representational politics, it does not protect the youth from the prejudices and negative attitudes of their older colleagues. However, from what we have gathered, the experience is mainly positive for the elected councillors as most of them seem to have now a better grasp of local political affairs and institutional mechanisms. Yet, it is important to point out that the youth that ran for the elections is not representative of their local counterparts: all of the young, elected councillors we met belonged to Generation Y and all of them had university degrees. The quotas benefited the most educated, whether they had a job or not, those who were already involved in civil society, or those who had relatives active in political parties. Moreover, if the councillors clearly identify themselves as youth and see it as a quality, they did not show a strong sense of belonging and common political interest with young people in Tunisia more generally. In fact we have noted that regional divisions, awareness of one's region's marginalization when compared to the coasts or the capital, played a strong role in dividing the "youth" category, a division revealed if we take into consideration the concept of political ecology in the building of these young councillors political values and discourses. Thus, "youth" does not constitute a coherent class at the national level, as senses of belonging and political values are often antagonistic between young people.

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