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LESSONS LEARNED: THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG FEMALE LOCAL COUNCILORS IN TUNISIA

Nadia Jmal

About the Author

Nadia Jmal is a Research Assistant at the Arab Reform Initiative. Before joining ARI, Nadia was a program officer at the International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ) and a trainee at the North-South Centre Council of Europe (NSC). She holds a Bachelor's degree in English Literature and Contemporary Civilizations and an MA in Cross-Cultural Studies from the University of Carthage.

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Introduction

In 2018, Tunisia held its first municipal election since the revolution, which enforced for the first time mandatory youth quotas, formally adopted in 2017 following amendments to Tunisia's electoral laws. Youth quotas were not part of civil society movements' agendas, but rather a top-down initiative proposed by a group of deputies in the constitutional assembly.¹ The law ensured youth representation as each electoral list must include an individual under 35 among the first four candidates. If lists do not meet that requirement, they are still allowed to compete for election but are deprived of 50% of their state funding for their campaigns. According to Tunisia's Independent High Authority for Elections, 52.1% of candidates were individuals under the age of 35.²

Youth won about 37.16% of the seats at the municipal level.³ Nevertheless, the election revealed a high level of abstention among the same group, especially those between 18 and 21 years old. This was not surprising, given various contributing factors. Tunisians' disengagement stemmed from intense frustration exacerbated by severe economic difficulties, political stagnation, and social unrest. They understood that a municipal election would not reverse the years of unjust regional development without a strong political commitment that was lacking during that time.⁴ Among other factors, the repeated postponements of the municipal elections and the fact that the local collectivities code was only ratified by parliament 10 days before the elections explain part of the lack of interest.

Given that Tunisia was one of only a few countries in the Arab region with a youth quota system, assessing the impact of this institutional reform in stimulating the meaningful participation of young people in the political process and in building inclusive democracy is critical for building a body of knowledge on the effectiveness of such policies. To this end, in 2021, the Arab Reform

Initiative (ARI) conducted a study exploring the impact of youth quotas through the perspectives of a group of local councilors. The study showed that they faced new hurdles when stepping into the traditional realm of politics and working with unfamiliar public institutions. However, they were gaining experience and self-confidence, leading them to consider running for re-election.⁵

On 8 March 2023, three months before the first municipal mandate was set to end, Kais Saied announced the dissolution of municipal councils. The abrupt decision has sparked mixed reactions among civil society organizations and the public. Municipalities are the local institutions most closely connected to citizens and directly affect their everyday experiences, which has cast more doubt around this move. Citizens have been facing difficulties accessing certain municipal services, including the inability to finalize marriage contracts.⁶

Municipalities have been under pressure from President Kais Saied's hostile political discourse for a while as he continues to impose his vision of bottom-up construction. This move appears consistent with his previous efforts to take decisive action against those institutions or individuals he has identified as corrupt or hindering the reform process he is pursuing. In 2021, Saied dissolved the Ministry of Local Affairs and shifted control over municipal councils to the Ministry of Interior—a foregrounding on the fate of local authorities and the various decentralized structures.

Since the 25 July coup, there has been no discernible progress in involving youth in formal politics; on the contrary, the situation has only deteriorated. The new electoral law simply eliminates all the quotas and parity requirements in candidacies put in place after the revolution. Candidacies for the legislative elections are now individual. Quotas were set for sponsorship of candidates where they must gather 400 nominations from registered voters within their

1 Jana Belschner, "The adoption of youth quotas after the Arab uprisings," *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 2018.

2 Brian Braun, *Three Things to Know About Sunday's Elections in Tunisia*, May 2018, available at https://www.iri.org/news/three-things-to-know-about-sundays-elections-in-tunisia/?utm_source=www.democracy-speaks.org (Brian Braun, *Three Things to know About Sunday's Elections*)

3 Brian Braun, *Three Things to know About Sunday's Elections*

4 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, *Tunisia's Municipal Elections*, May 2018, available at <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/76299>

5 See Malek Lakhak, *Youth political participation in post-2011 Tunisia: Exploring the impact of the youth quota system through the prism of local municipal councillors*, May 2022, available at <https://s3.eu-central-1.amazonaws.com/storage.arab-reform.net/ari/2022/05/23142325/2022-05-Arab-Reform-Initiative-Youth-political-participation-in-Tunisia-local-councils-EN-1.pdf> (Malek Lakhak, *Youth political participation in post-2011 Tunisia*)

6 Tunisian law stipulates that only the municipal president and deputies can officiate marriage contracts. The dissolution of the municipal council has left a legal gap that remains unresolved.

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constituencies, 50% of whom must be women and 25% youth under the age of 35.⁷

Considering the present context, ARI remains committed to evaluating the experiences of young local councilors, after the dissolution of the municipal councils. It is essential to see how their experiences have evolved since the last study in 2021 and how they reflect on their roles now that the municipal experiences have brutally ended. It is crucial to extract lessons and grasp the challenges regarding participating in local democracy that can be applied in the future. We conducted three interviews with young women local councilors from historically marginalized areas. We delved into the challenges and the significant moments that marked their municipal experiences, their perspectives on decentralization, the future of their political participation, and the current political context, among other themes. Female local councilors faced various forms of gender and age-related exclusions that created tension between them and other members of the local council. Regrettably, the underlying tensions persisted without a collective resolution, which led to the resignation of two of the interviewees. With the end of the decentralization process and considering the prevailing restrictive political climate, female councilors are no longer interested in traditional politics as the country is backsliding towards authoritarianism. Nevertheless, all three councilors confirmed acquiring knowledge and a new form of self-confidence as political actors that they did not have before their municipal experience.

Overview

Breaking up with the Past: A Move Towards Decentralization

The 2014 constitution devoted an entire chapter (Chapter 7, Articles 131-142) to local authority. This was deemed “revolutionary” as it was a radical departure from the highly centralized framework in Tunisia, and much of the Arab world.⁸ Chapter 7 recognized elected local and regional authorities as independent bodies with financial and administrative independence and substantial powers.

7 Alessandra Bajec, “How Tunisia’s new electoral law sets back women’s political rights,” *The New Arab*, 16 November 2021, available at <https://www.newarab.com/analysis/tunisias-electoral-law-sets-back-womens-political-rights>

8 Janine A. Clark, Emanuela Dalmaso and Ellen Lust, “Not the only game in towns: explaining changes in municipal councils in post-revolutionary Tunisia”, *Democratization*, Vol.26, 2019. (Janine A. Clark, Not the only game in towns)

Since independence, municipalities and regional councils have been under the central government’s close control. Municipalities and regional councils were under the tutelage of the governor (el wali), a civil servant appointed by the Prime Minister or formerly by the President of the Republic. The governor acted as both the representative of the central state and the president of the regional council. They reported directly to the Ministry of Interior (MOI).

Municipal councils were subject to a priori control, meaning that their documents, decisions, and budgets only became legally valid after approval by central authorities. The secretary general, who is the head of a municipal administration and a civil servant of the MOI, and the MOI prepared the budget and the municipal council merely voted on it. Most municipalities were in debt, unable to hire qualified staff, and highly dependent on the state for funds.⁹ In 2013, a total of 18 municipalities, including Tunis and its surrounding areas like La Marsa, La Goulette, Sidi Bou Said, and Carthage, held 51% of the state’s municipal budget, with the remaining 49% distributed among 246 other municipalities.¹⁰

With the adoption of the local collectivities code in 2018,¹¹ local government possessed its legal standing and independently oversaw local matters. It drafted its financial plans and independently managed its budgetary matters. The code also attributed extremely diversified powers to local government in all domains of regulation, law and order, economic development, urban planning and development of the territory, and so forth. Another pivotal principle outlined in the code is the elimination of all a priori control by the central government over the decisions made by local or regional authorities. The sole form of supervision allowed under this framework is a posteriori oversight by judicial authorities and the Court of Auditors.¹² The local government departs from the previous situation in which it was under the constant supervision of the governor and the MOI.

Political decentralization was the code’s most substantial form of decentralization.¹³ It was guided by a well-defined constitutional requirement to establish elected local and regional council. Moreover, the inclusion of women, youth, and disabled people in local government strengthens the political foundation of decentralization. Tunisia’s first democratic municipal elections took place in May 2018.

9 (Janine A. Clark, Not the only game in towns)

10 Yassine Bellamine, When is the decentralization bill?, available at Nawaat ,January 2015, <https://nawaat.org/portail/2015/01/22/a-quand-un-projet-de-loi-de-decentralisation-1e-partie/>

11 The local collectivities code is the legal framework governing all aspects of local governance.

12 Marwa Shalaby, Chagai Weiss, Ellen Lust, Kristen Kao, Erik Vollmann, Sylvia I. Bergh, Ezra Karmel, Miriam Bohn, Intissar Kherigi, and Zeynep Kadirbeyoglu, “The Dynamics of Decentralization in the MENA : Processes, Outcomes, and Obstacles”, *The Program on Governance and Local Development at Gothenburg*, 2020.

13 (Marwa Shalaby, The Dynamics of Decentralization)

The 2018 Municipal Election: Setting Expectations Too High

The 2018 municipal election opened the space to reevaluate the Tunisian political landscape and the citizen's perception of the political elite amid the ongoing political and economic crisis seven years after the transition to democracy.

Among the positive outcomes of the election was **the victory of independent lists** with 32.2%.¹⁴ The result was a strong indication of public disillusionment and discontentment with the performance of the two dominant parties, Nidaa Tunis and Ennahdha. They were progressively viewed as out of touch with the average citizens and their day-to-day challenges. Another highlight was the **elections' diverse candidate pool due to the youth quotas and gender parity**. Electoral lists were obligated to include an individual under 35 among the first four candidates, and a person with disabilities had to be among the first 10 candidates. Additionally, the lists must have equal numbers of both male and female candidates, with men and women alternating as the head within those lists to strengthen the representation of women in local government. As a direct consequence of election law quotas and constitutional non-discrimination principles, female candidates secured 45% of the total municipal seats, while 52% of the candidates were under the age of 35.¹⁵

Although the youth quotas were adopted and mandatory for the municipal election, a high level of abstention among the same group was revealed, especially those between 18 and 21 years old. The steady loss of voting appetite was due to various assumptions. On the one hand, youth organizations and movements in Tunisia were not actively advocating for implementing youth quotas. It was primarily motivated by middle-aged politicians who saw youth quotas as an effort to seek legitimacy from international donors and actors during the democratic consolidation.¹⁶ Young individuals might equate these quotas as a mere symbolic attempt to “buy in” youth approval rather than an effective form of engagement. Youth were unlikely to believe that politicians, whether young or old, would adequately address their interests. And for these quotas to work in practice, young people must view these younger candidates as being effective politicians who can represent their interests.¹⁷ On the other hand, the turnout gap

between presidential and local elections is more pronounced as voters prefer to participate in national elections but not in their governorates. In France, which has a similar power structure to that of the 2014 constitution, voters prefer to vote in high-stakes elections, such as the presidential election. However, the local election is seen as a second-tier vote¹⁸. This logic can also be applied in the Tunisian context, where presidential elections are more like “a show” that is given way more attention by voters, media, and political parties than the local elections.

An additional assumption, which could have contributed to the unusually high number of non-voters, was the adoption of the local collectivities code only 10 days before the municipal elections. It left little to no time for political parties to disseminate information about the law's impact on municipal elections, hindering their ability to campaign and engage young voters effectively. Most importantly, many citizens had doubts regarding the motives behind decentralization. Specifically, there is an apprehension among some individuals that decentralization might merely replicate the autocratic structures and patronage networks of the previous regime.¹⁹ They found it difficult to see how this new project of decentralization could break with the legacy of authoritarianism and help overcome regional disparities.

Findings

ARI conducted three in-depth qualitative interviews with a former female mayor and two former female local councilors from historically marginalized areas where youth political participation has remained low over the last decade. Two interviews featured one councilor and one mayor, whom we interviewed in the previous edition of the ARI-Porticus project (2021-2022) from the Kairouan governorate. The follow-up allowed us to understand the recent political changes and how they impacted young political actors' relationship with institutional politics. We have also included another local councilor from Sidi Hassine, a peri-urban area of Tunis. The present study emphasizes the importance of involving female local councilors due to a limited focus on documenting and highlighting their experiences and challenges in local governance.

The interviews followed a standardized questionnaire created during the first edition of the ARI-Porticus project (2021-2022). New questions were incorporated to address the municipal council dissolution and the prevailing political context. We

14 The Tahrir Institute For Middle East Policy, What Will Change After Tunisia's Municipal Elections?, June 2018, available at <https://timep.org/2018/06/19/what-will-change-after-tunisias-municipal-elections/> (The Tahrir Institute For Middle East Policy, What Will Change)

15 The Tahrir Institute For Middle East Policy, What Will Change

16 Jana Belschner, “The adoption of youth quotas after the Arab uprisings,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities*, 2018.

17 Kirstie Lynn Dobbs, “Youth quotas and “Jurassic Park” politicians: age as a heuristic for vote choice in Tunisia's new democracy,” *Democratization*, 202

18 Centre de l'observation de la société, L'évolution de l'abstention sous la Ve République, Mars 2020, available at https://www.observationsociete-fr.translate.goog/modes-de-vie/vie-politique-et-associative/participationvote/?x_tr_sl=fr&x_tr_tl=en&x_tr_hl=fr&x_tr_pto=wapp

19 Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Decentralization In Tunisia Empowering Towns, Engaging People, 2018, available at https://carnegieendowment.org/files/CP_334_Yerkes_Decentralization_FINAL.pdf (Carnegie, Decentralization In Tunisia)

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delved into the highs and lows that influenced their municipal experiences, their perspectives on decentralization, the future of their political participation, and the current political context, among other themes. The interviews varied from 45 to 90 minutes. The number of interviews was limited as many individuals were hesitant to engage in such discussions due to the ongoing democratic “de-transition” in the country – consisting of dismantling many of the institutions that have been built over the last decade and weakening the judiciary and civil society.

Linking Direct Political Experience with Increased Understanding and Rising Self-Confidence

We began the interviews by asking the ex-councilors and an ex-mayor about the most fulfilling aspects of their roles. The three expressed how they acquired experience and self-assurance as they progressed on their respective paths. The key driving force that kept them engaged in their municipal duties has been the process of learning, gaining insight, and ultimately witnessing the positive impact of their work on the local community.

“My favorite part about the job is the relationship you create with people. I learned a lot from these interactions. I got to know people’s problems and what they go through daily that I may not have known otherwise. On the other hand, how laws and administrative decisions took place. There is a vast difference between being an observer on the outside and being involved in the work of the municipality. Your vision changes 180 degrees.” (Female, 36, Kairouan)

The councilor previously representing Sidi Hassine shared that her role challenged her preconceived perception of the area. Initially, she resided in Bardo but later relocated to Sidi Hassine with her husband, where they both decided to run for municipal election. Sidi Hassine is one of Tunisia’s largest working-class neighborhoods, known to grapple with challenges such as limited infrastructure, healthcare access, and housing options. Government institutions in the area offer minimal social and cultural services, and the neighborhood faces a persistent issue with high crime rates.²⁰ Her dream was “to work in the municipality so [her] kids grow up in a beautiful area.” This experience has also broadened her understanding of the operational aspects of Tunisian administration, which was previously unfamiliar territory for her.

20 See International alert, Young people, violence, school Dropout and Art in Tunisian Working-class Neighbourhoods, August 2023, available at <https://www.international-alert.org/publications/young-people-violence-school-dropout-and-art-in-tunisian-working-class-neighbourhoods/>

“Getting to know Sidi Hassine well. I used to see it on a very superficial level. Now, I know its corners and best parts. Sometimes, I take a taxi and show him shortcuts he did not know about. I learned so much about administrative stuff: tricks and weaknesses. How does the Tunisian administration function? Why do specific projects succeed and others get blocked/postponed? I learned a lot about politics behind the scenes. Before joining the municipality, I knew little about the relationship between administrations and how they communicate.” (Female, 36, Sidi Hassine)

When confronted with the difficulties of their work, the initial idealism was gone as they encountered many challenges. Nevertheless, when asked to assess their performance and assign a grade, all three perceived this experience as a successful and valuable learning opportunity.

“I will give it 9 out of 10. Despite all the obstacles, I learned so much from this experience. In terms of achievement, we only did some of what we planned to do. The problems that we faced were way more significant than we thought. In the midst of it all, we achieved some things. We avoided the creation of another garbage dump. I worked on an important project encouraging youth to participate in local governance. These are the two things that will have a long-term impact on the community.” (Female, 36, Sidi Hassine)

“I don’t consider my experience in the municipality as a failure. I think it was successful. The fact that I resisted and almost completed my mandate. I continued going to meetings and expressing my opinions. I won’t give myself a zero, and I won’t give myself a 10 either because my ideas were not taken into consideration. I would give myself a six. I feel satisfied with my work.” (Female, 36, Kairouan)

Empowered or Sidelined? Challenges Facing Women in Local Municipal Councils

Power imbalance

As of 2022, more than 10%, precisely 37 out of the 350 municipal councils elected in Tunisia, have been dissolved.²¹ The mechanism of dissolution through resignations was not a problem on its own. However, when it started happening in many municipalities, it was crucial to understand the reasons behind it. We asked the two ex-councilors who resigned to know more about the challenges they faced during their

21 Legal agenda, Municipal Council Dissolution in Tunisia: Fears and Flaws, June 2022, available at <https://english.legal-agenda.com/municipal-council-dissolution-in-tunisia-fears-and-flaws/> (Legal agenda, Municipal Council Dissolution)

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time at the municipality. Tensions, whether between the mayor and the councilors or among the council members themselves, were a pivotal factor that rendered the working environment unbearable.

In Sidi Hassine, the former councilor voiced her discontent with the mayor's performance, emphasizing his lack of commitment to the municipality as he continued to hold his regular job alongside his municipal responsibilities.

"The mayor was a businessman. He had a factory. They even sent him papers to sign at his factory rather than at the municipality. He was not serious. Add to that the issue of the garbage dump. I'm not usually the type to make problems. I tried to be very professional." (Female, 36, Sidi Hassine)

In 2018, many candidates submitted their applications to head the electoral lists prior to the adoption of Article 6 in the Local Collectivities Code, which stipulated that the head of the municipal council must commit to full-time duties.²² Candidates running for municipal elections did not know what legal framework to comply with, as the code was only passed by parliament 10 days before the municipal elections. Still, mayors kept their regular jobs and received an allowance for their municipal role, unlike the municipal council members who served voluntarily. In some cases, they had to quit their jobs to stay on top of their municipal work.

"For five years, many members were frustrated because they were volunteers. They cannot give their whole time. There is no motivation to keep going. On the surface, it looks like we are the decision-makers, but our powers are limited." (Female, 36, Kairouan)

"I quit my job to be able to devote myself to municipal work, especially since I was the head of a committee. We had meetings every day. It's like a marathon." (Female, 36, Sidi Hassine)

In Kairouan, the ex-councilor had a friendly relationship with the mayor. They were "distant relatives" and "belonged to the same political party." The situation changed when she started disagreeing with his decisions. She described the shift as "the start of a war". The mayor wanted to impose his choices without considering the input of the other council members. He even used his close relationship with the administration as a way to keep information from the members.

"Before each meeting, we were supposed to receive documentation to understand the context of a particular project. Yet, we received documents at the last minute and after many requests. It was only logical to make decisions

when you had the time to understand the situation. Also, many things went unnoticed if you did not have a good relationship with the administration. As a municipal council member, I could not directly ask for information from the administration. The municipality president was the mediator between us. He was the one who was supposed to share the information with us." (Female, 36, Kairouan)

The issues with the mayors have impacted the relationship between the council members, whether in Sidi Hassine or Kairouan, as some of them sided with the mayor to protect their interests.

"My main issue was not only with the mayor. It was even with other councilors who were protective of him. He created a group that supported him so we could not kick him out." (Female, 36, Sidi Hassine)

"Some members did not even know what was being discussed [in the meeting] and said: "We agree with what the Municipality president will decide" " (Female, 36, Kairouan)

The internal tension within the municipal council had a detrimental effect on the municipality's performance and public image, leading the public to scrutinize the councilors and question their integrity. This, in turn, generated a sense of disillusionment among the interviewed ex-councilors.

"I resigned because I worked a lot and did not achieve much. We reached a point where the municipality was badly perceived. Many thought that the Municipal Council was only there to serve the councilors. It had no added value [...] I gave up so many things in my personal life. I quit my job. My kids grew up before my eyes without me even noticing. I did all of this to see an impact. What is the point of doing all of this?" (Female, 36, Sidi Hassine)

Gender discrimination

Much like how gender played a role in shaping the political campaigns of councilors,²³ it was also seen as an influential variable in the work of the three ex-councilors we had the opportunity to interview. In 2021, every female councilor (except one in Foussana) interviewed in the project's first edition observed that older male councilors exhibit certain behaviors aimed at undermining them during meetings²⁴. We interviewed again the mayor²⁵ who confirmed that these behaviors have remained and had to work hard to earn credibility inside the council.

"They make comments, especially in the municipal council. You feel a lack of confidence. I give them something to do;

22 Nawaat, Municipalités: Le Travail À Plein Temps, Principal Motif Des Démissions Des Maires, December 2019, available at <https://nawaat.org/2019/12/18/municipalites-le-travail-a-plein-temps-principal-motif-des-demissions-des-maires/>

23 (Malek Lakhal, Youth Political Participation in post-2011 Tunisia)

24 (Malek Lakhal, Youth Political Participation in post-2011 Tunisia)

25 She was interviewed during the first phase of the project in 2021.

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they think that it will fail. They are waiting for you to make mistakes.”(Female, 32, Chebika)

“However, after, they start appreciating your work and say, “Good job!” and “You did what men could not achieve in the past.” The male gaze remains [...]” (Female,32, Chebika)

Several male colleagues found it difficult to be led by a woman and let alone by a younger woman. Sidi Hassine’s ex-councilor had to assert her authority both as a young woman and as the head of the children, youth, and sports committee while working with local organizations who did not take her seriously.

“To some extent, yes. They always try to exclude the younger generation, but I wanted to impose myself. I was responsible for the children, youth, and sports committee. When you say sports in Sidi Hassine, you say sports organizations like karate and kickboxing. They are male-dominated organizations. Most of the heads of the organizations are men. I had to impose myself and the authority given to me by the municipality. They were harsh and soft at the same time. On the surface, they were lenient, but at the same time, they were very harsh. You feel uncomfortable. (Female,36, Sidi Hassine)”

Kairouan ex-councilor received sexist remarks at different occasions from the mayor and in front of other male colleagues, as a way to belittle her and undermine her ideas.

“Women still need to be noticed in Tunisia. Within the context of Kairouan, men’s decisions and ideas are more accepted than women’s. Men tend to support each other to see you fail. I felt it especially when the municipality president told me to get married and that my place was in my family home, not the municipality.” (Female, 36, Kairouan)

She has been able to create a network with other female councillors to support each other in the face of sexist treatment faced in their work.

“I am the founder of Municipal Women’s Elected Network. We created this support system for each other against verbal violence and harassment. We should all refuse to accept such behavior. However, not everyone supports women. (Female, 36, Kairouan)”

Generational differences

Age difference was also recognized as another factor that added to the tension inside the municipal council. Initially, newly elected young councilors lacked experience compared to their older counterparts, who were reluctant to provide guidance and share their knowledge, exacerbating the sense of exclusion.

“ I will stick to age. When I started at 30, I was not that young in their eyes. However, they want to take advantage

of your lack of experience. There were many situations where you feel that the person in front of you did not take you seriously, maybe because of age or gender. I do not know if you want to talk in detail.” (Female, 36, Sidi Hassine)

Once they overcame the experience gap, the young councilors grew more self-assured in voicing their opinions. Hence, the growing tension between the younger and older councilors. However, the influence of younger ones remained limited, as decision-making authority often rested with the mayor, who, in most cases, did not take into considerations their ideas and feedback.

“Age has an influence. They should put an age limit for the municipality president. In our case, he was an older man at the end of his career. He wanted to force his decisions. Many young members left because they were frustrated with the head of the municipality.”(Female, 36, Kairouan)

“[...] Youth are impatient. They want to see change quickly. This is why I insisted that the Head of the municipality should be young because the older generation tends to kill ambition. Youth always want more.”(Female,36, Sidi Hassine)

The weak communication was not just inside the municipal council. The municipality also failed to engage youth effectively especially as an institution that was physically and politically closer to their reality on the ground.

“Youth have a very negative view of the municipality. The municipality needs to communicate better with them. It does not provide services for them. It does not facilitate projects for them. The absence of the president of the municipality impacted the image of how youth perceived the municipality.”(Female,36, Sidi Hassine)

“I don’t see [any changes for youth]! Please give me something that was done for the youth. I have colleagues working in municipalities who have returned to their regular jobs. I have other young colleagues who graduated and are now unemployed at home. Where are the youth?” (Female,32, Chebika)

Back To the Old Ways after the 25 July Power Grab

Following Saied’s power grab, municipal councils endured his autocratic rule until he announced their dissolution in March 2023. This period saw several changes, notably the dissolution of the Ministry of Local Affairs, with its functions being relocated to the Ministry of Interior—and the return of the governor’s oversight. Various interpretations emerged regarding why municipal councils initially escaped Saied’s “restructuring” unlike the government and parliament. One perspective suggested that municipalities were still in a pilot

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phase, making it difficult for Saied to portray them as failures or assign them significant political responsibility compared to the government or parliament.²⁶

During the interviews, we asked the ex-councilors and ex-mayor if their municipalities witnessed significant changes after the 25th of July. The mayor confirmed the close monitoring of the Governor and his interference in her work.

“Decentralization is successful when the president of the Municipality has the power to work. Now, you receive orders from the Governor. Lately, we have had two recruitment contests postponed. (Female, 32, Chebika)

Other cases started to reveal the intervention of the Executive Authority in local matters. One example was when the Mayor of Bizerte was fired by the Presidential Order of 28 November 2022. The exemption is the culmination of a tense relationship between the Mayor and the Governor, which began more than a year ago.²⁷

Before 2018, the power of oversight was translated into a priori approval of the governor of all decisions made by municipalities, or by regional councils. He acted as both the representative of the state and the president of the regional council. He reported directly to the Ministry of Interior (MOI). His authority was heavy-handed. After 2018, the governors lost power as the Local Collectivities Code eliminated all a priori control by the central government over the decisions made by local or regional authorities.²⁸ After 25 July, the governors started to regain the power they lost. And, now after the dissolution of the municipal council, the secretary general of the municipalities is leading, under the oversight of the governor. We are witnessing a shift from decentralization to a return to the old model of local authority led by a centralized, executive-led government.²⁹

Another thing the mayor mentioned was the change of mood inside the municipalities as more and more people became afraid to speak their minds or be critical of what was happening. If they did so, they were accused of being “against Kais Saied.”

“Yes, things changed after the 25th of July. If you disagree with someone, they tell you: “You are against el massar [how Saied’s supporters call the power grab]” The problem is not just the president but the people who represent him on the ground. You are against the governor, and you are

against el Massar. By experience, I was under observation because I met someone who had a problem with the governor.” (female, 32, Chebika)

To Leave or Not To leave? What’s next for Young People in Politics

During the first edition of the project, it was observed that the youth quota system seemed to effectively involve young individuals in institutional politics, leading a majority of the interviewed councilors to consider more political engagement, such as running for legislative elections.³⁰ Given the prevailing political environment, we asked the ex-councilors about their prospects in politics in the foreseeable future. Regrettably, they all said they are not interested in politics as the country has clearly taken a downward spiral over the past two years.

“If you asked me this question before 2021, I would say yes. Now, I’m not interested in politics. Our daily situation is not comfortable to be able to participate in politics. You cannot be free in a non-democratic country. A lot of restrictions are being put in place.” (Female, 36, Kairouan)

“Politics exists to serve the people. However, in reality, it is the opposite. I don’t think I will continue to be part of it. But sometimes, I think if the right conditions were available, I know I could be more helpful than somebody else. But now, being in politics is out of the question.” (Female, 36, Sidi Hassine)

As for the professional future, the Kairouan ex-councilor called her generation a “cursed generation, “one that must choose between better economic conditions or democracy but never able to have both. She is tired of wasting time in Tunisia as her financial situation has not improved since graduation. She is actively looking for opportunities abroad. The same goes for the interviewed mayor, who is arranging her departure from the country by the end of the year to join her husband in Europe.

“My professional future is stuck. I lost money because of the pandemic. I was not able to get any compensation. I graduated, and I could not find a job with my degree. I kept working for short-term contracts until I opened my own business. I lost so much during the pandemic. I lost five years working for the municipality. I indeed learned a lot. However, I was not making money. Now, I’m looking for an opportunity abroad. I found one in France, but the visa was denied. The EU needs to ease its visa restrictions. Now, I’m looking for a contract in Canada. A couple of years ago, I did an interview with you or someone else. I said that I would never leave Tunisia. Since the revolution, this generation has been wasting their time. We feel cursed to have a good economic situation or democracy but never both.” (Female, 36, Kairouan).

26 See Meshkal, Decentralization or Local Power: In conversation with Chaima Bouhlel, June 2023, available at <https://meshkal.org/decentralization-or-local-power-in-conversation-with-chaima-bouhlel/> (Meshkal, Decentralization or Local Power)

27 Nawaat, From Order 117 To Dissolve Municipal Councils: Stages Of Demolition Of Local Authority In Tunisia, March 2023, available at <https://shorturl.at/ahiH9>

28 (Marwa Shalaby, The Dynamics of Decentralization)

29 (Meshkal, Decentralization or Local Power)

30 Malek Lakhal, Youth Political Participation in post-2011 Tunisia

4. Quotas Alone Are Not Enough: Lessons for the Future

While youth quota has undoubtedly helped young individuals win seats in municipal elections, it fell short of protecting candidates in the face of emerging obstacles upon their entry into institutional politics. Alone, quotas cannot ensure keeping local councilors engaged and satisfied in the long run, as demonstrated by the two interviewed local councilors who resigned before the end of their mandate. Generational differences, dysfunctional communication, power imbalance, and gender and age-based discrimination are among the factors rendering the experience challenging. Young female local councilors and the mayor faced a culture of superiority dominated by male members of the municipal council as many of them were involved in politics or worked in public institutions during Ben Ali regime, taking advantage of their experiences to intimidate young female councilors.³¹ Indeed, their perspectives were not always afforded equal significance. They saw their ideas being pushed to the side at the expense of their male counterparts, who resorted to sexist comments to belittle them. Asking them to “get married” or “stay at their family house” perpetuates the societal narrative of young women as “unfit” for politics, which eventually leads to a negative self-perception. As mentioned by the mayor and other LCs, they felt a lack of confidence and discouragement due to the comments made about them and their work. Young women entered an uneven playing field and tried to prove their worth in an environment unresponsive to their needs and demands. They felt stuck on a “hamster wheel,” putting in relentless effort without getting paid and without seeing the results as the final decision-making was in the hands of the mayor. They tried to seek support through solidarity. In

the case of the Kairouan local councilor, who was able to create the “*Municipal Women’s Elected Network*,” representing a support system and a networking opportunity to help her and other local councilors deal with gender discrimination.

Based on our findings, the gains achieved due to youth quotas are fragile. Specific elements of the young local councilors’ experiences can be interpreted as warning signs. Young actors need further support when being introduced to institutional politics. Aside from the more structural or institutional recommendations, changing the dominant political culture is necessary. Part of this shift is that middle-aged and senior politicians should stop practices such as belittling youth, viewing them as less qualified because of their lack of political experience, and taking their concerns and requests more seriously. Youth representation in political parties remains very low compared to their demographic weight. Supporting and consolidating youth wings inside political parties can be a strong force for pushing young candidacies; they help socialize youth into politics and play an essential role in recruiting candidates and preparing them for various roles.³² Increased civic education in schools and universities can increase youths’ political interest and knowledge, and help them acquire the necessary personal and professional experience and network connections necessary in the political realm.

The interviews were an opportunity to grasp the highs and lows of the former young local councilors’ journey for the past five years. Although their first mandate was interrupted, and their experiences were not flawless, youth quotas are one of the essential gains achieved during the democratic transition that has been lost. Now, as there has been a noticeable lack of advancement in engaging young people in the official political processes, it is essential to create the space to speak about youth challenges and achievements in institutional politics, which can be helpful in a future scenario when the civic and political space reopens in Tunisia.

31 (Malek Lakhal, Youth political participation in post-2011 Tunisia)

32 Daniel Stockemer and Aksel Sundström, *Youth without Representation: The Absence of Young Adults in Parliaments, Cabinets, and Candidacies*, University of Michigan Press, 2022.

About the Arab Reform Initiative

The Arab Reform Initiative is an independent Arab think tank working with expert partners in the Middle East and North Africa and beyond to articulate a home-grown agenda for democratic change and social justice. It conducts research and policy analysis and provides a platform for inspirational voices based on the principles of diversity, impartiality, and gender equality.



contact@arab-reform.net
Paris - Beirut - Tunis